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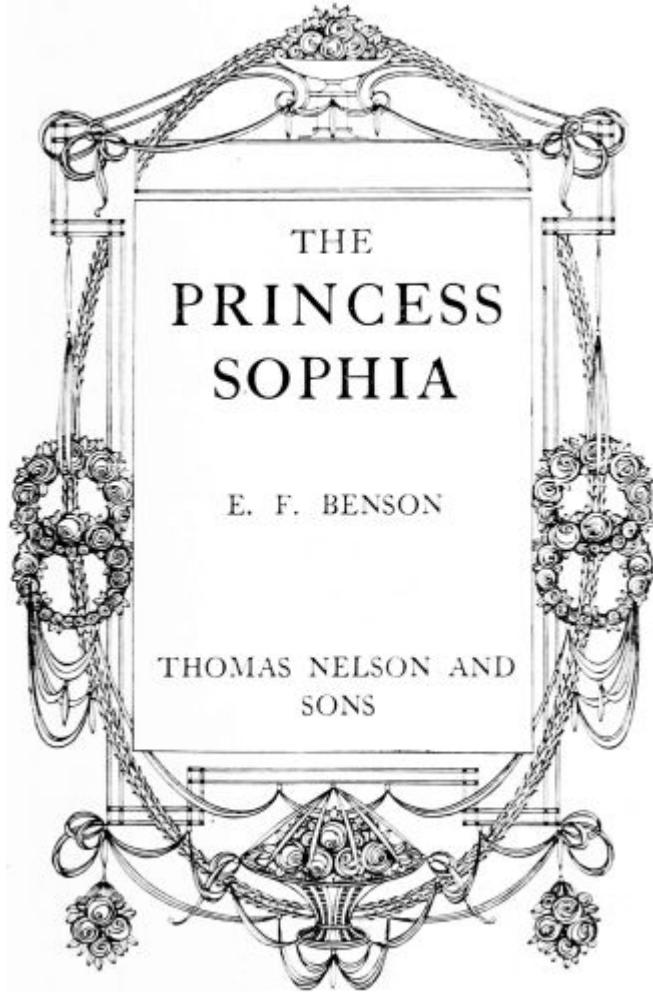
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The princess swept by him with an air of ineffable disdain.



THE
PRINCESS
SOPHIA

E. F. BENSON

THOMAS NELSON AND
SONS

**T H E
P R I N C E S S
S O P H I A**

E. F. BENSON

THOMAS NELSON AND
SONS

TO

MY DEAR FRIEND

CRITIC, SISTER

I AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATE

THIS BOOK

E. F. BENSON

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THE PRINCESS SOPHIA.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE independent principality of Rhodopé lies, as everyone knows, on the wooded coast-line of Albania. Its territory, no greater than the area of the English counties palatine, is triangular in shape, the base of the triangle (a line some twenty miles long if measured as the crow flies, but more like a hundred if we follow the indentations and promontories of that superbly fertile land), being washed by the waters of the Adriatic. It is bounded on the south by the kingdom of Greece, and up to its northern border extends the benign rule of that most pitiful and Christian monarch the Sultan of Turkey.

Rhodopé preserved during the Græco-Turkish War of 1897 (I am almost ashamed to remind my readers of events so recent) a strict neutrality, though the offers made it by both one side and the other might well have been enough to turn a less level head than that of Prince Leonard, the ruling sovereign. For an Imperial Iradé, with promise of a definite Hatt (I think I have the terms correctly), arrived from the most Christian monarch, prospectively granting the cession of Corfu to the Prince, when Greece lay crushed beneath the heel of the Sultan, if only his beloved brother (so the Sultan was pleased to say) would join the cause of the imminently victorious Turks; while from the other side a cleverly worded sketch pictured the immense advantage it would be to Rhodopé if by an extension of its territory it was so arranged that the Upper Valley of the river Strypos—the Golden River, as it is not inaptly named—a plain of surpassing fertility, and odorous with the finest growths of tobacco, should pour its revenues into the coffers of the Prince.

Indeed, Prince Leonard, when these two propositions, which arrived almost simultaneously, were under his consideration, must have had a strong head not to have been overcome by the intoxication of one or the other prospect. He knew—and sober and bald politicians tell me that he did not overestimate the importance of his position (a malady most incident to autocrats)—that the balance of power, inevitably determining the result of the war, as he sided with Turkey or Greece,

was in his hands; also he would have the singular pleasure of perhaps playing the deuce with that wonderfully harmonious comic opera the Concert of the Powers. A scribbled word from him would—and he was not too sanguine in so believing—give him Corfu if the envelope of his reply was addressed to Yildiz Kiosk, or, if to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Athens, the nicotic valley of the Upper Strypos.

A glance at the map is sufficient to show that the key of the crisis was assuredly his. If he allied himself with Greece, in a few hours his artillery could be coolly shelling the fortress of Janina, the slow, inevitable advance of the Turkish army down the defiles of the Melouna Pass would be checked, and their overwhelming superiority of numbers against a vastly inferior force would be neutralized. They could not possibly advance into Greek territory leaving so important a town as Janina in the hands of their enemy's ally, and, indeed, the Sultan, with his world-famous frankness, had confessed as much in his letter. His Imperial Majesty might advance, if he pleased, through Thessaly; meantime Prince Leonard, with his very adequate force of Albanians, men of the mountain and the sea, and the best-drilled soldiers in the world, would be quietly eating their way eastward, and at the end the Turks would infallibly find themselves cut off in the enemy's country. If, on the other hand, the Sultan directed his first advance against Rhodopé, the Greeks would stream through the eastern passes, attacking instead of defending, and again take him in the rear. Besides, to advance into Rhodopé much resembled an attempt to take a hornets' nest by daylight. For a score of years Prince Leonard had lavished the revenues of the country on its army and navy; English and German officers had drilled his men into a perfect machine of war; the steel of the great workshops of the world had been perched in the mountainous and almost impregnable passes into the principality; French engineers had exalted his valleys, and brought low his hills, flinging down military roads east, west, north, and south—the whole kingdom, a man might say, had been forged into one cannon. Nor had the Prince neglected the defence of the sea-board, though from the Turk there was little to fear in this regard. The only two ports on that rocky coast—Mavromáti and Búlteck—have long been the admiration of nautical Europe, and Gibraltar itself might learn a lesson from the concealed galleries which defend these fire-belching jaws of death.

On the other hand, supposing he allied himself with Constantinople, the conclusion of the war, as it actually took place, was much easier of demonstration, and quite as inevitable as the *Pons Asinorum*. Greece had not the sinews to check the Turkish advance from the north-east. What, then, would be her plight if Prince Leonard's armed cruisers battered Patras, and landed troops in the Peloponnese? A nut in a hinge, a shuttlecock between two battledores, were in a more enviable position.

But, as we have seen, Prince Leonard held entirely aloof. He was an autocrat, his will was subject to no controlling House, and he possessed not only absolute authority over his principality, but commanded—which is even better worth having—their complete devotion. What seemed right in his never seemed otherwise than right in theirs; it was through his glasses (the Prince is a little short-sighted) that his ministers regarded the political outlook; and when it was known that he had decided not to move in the matter, and his decision was communicated to his Government, they were lost in admiration at this unique example of princely prudence displayed in his resolve to remain neutral, just as they would have seen a splendid flash of the old crusading spirit if he had determined to side with the Greeks, or nodded their heads in silent approval of his marvellous insight into practical politics if he had joined the cause of the Crescent. The leader in the principal paper of Rhodopé—though not an official organ—printed in large type, commended in terms of the most extravagant praise the wisdom of their great Prince, who saw what so many less divinely-gifted rulers have failed to observe, that a nation's first duty is to itself, and would not lightly plunge his people into the horrors of war. Yet, even as the first edition was cried through the streets, the staff of composers were cheerfully making pie of another leading article, prematurely set up, which compared Prince Leonard to Cœur-de-Lion, and singled him out from the whole of apathetic Europe as the champion who embraced the cause of Christianity, as the only being to whom his religion was a reality, and who would not suffer the accursed race to make havoc of Greece.

This premature leader sufficiently indicated the reputed bias—if so well-balanced a mind can properly be said to have a bias—of the Prince. His private sympathies, it is true, were entirely on the side of

the Greeks; he was twice related by marriage to their Royal Family, and he loved the people who were so largely of the same blood as his own inimitable Albanians—yet he would not take up the sword for them. The *Rhodopé Courier* had hit the nail on the head in its second leader: he did not wish to plunge his people into a war which must be expensive and might cost many lives, while, considered as a practical question, his acute mind, with the aid of a Blue-book, a few jotted figures, a meditative cigarette, soon revealed to him the fact that the Upper Valley of the Strypos would not nearly repay him for the inevitable outlay of a war. Moreover, the acquisition of this delightful piece of country was not without its drawbacks. It would, he saw, have to be garrisoned and fortified, for it lay open to any attack that might be made (though strictly against the Sultan's orders, as the Armenian massacres had been) from Turkey. Just now he had but little money to spend in such large operations, for a reason that will appear, and though the *Rhodopé Courier* knew nothing of this reason, the main lines of its second leader were correct enough; war would be expensive both in lives and money, and there was no sufficient interest at stake.

The Prince's reasons against espousing the cause of Turkey are easily and succinctly stated. He hated the Turks as warmly as he hated the devil, regarding the two as synonymous; and he looked on them and their deeds, their natures and their names with that quivering disgust with which a tired man about to get into bed sees some poisonous reptile coldly coiled in the sheets. He would as soon have allied himself with a tribe of cobras. And so Rhodopé remained neutral.

This short disquisition about the Græco-Turkish War may, I am afraid, appear out of place to those who follow me to the end of this historical tale; but it seems not so to me. In the first place, it will be found to have introduced the indulgent reader to the principality of Rhodopé, and the character of its eminent Prince, now in his middle age; in the second, it has rubbed up his memory about the Prince's attitude with regard to the war, and given the true reason for a course of conduct which was so widely discussed and even so freely blamed; for it is true that the Prince was hurt, though not in his resolve, by the comments of the English Liberal press with which a news-cutting agency in the Strand has for years supplied him, and especially by a

paper signed by a large majority of Liberal Members of Parliament. In the third place, it has led up to the one little sore place in his life, which contributed to his decision not to join his arms with those of Greece, indicated in his communication to the House under the question of expense. For three months before the war broke out, *i.e.*, in December, 1896, he had paid at great sacrifice an enormous sum of money to his mother, the Princess Sophia, and temporarily, at least, the resources of his country were crippled. The Government had strongly approved his action in so doing, and sent him a message of affectionate sympathy and condolence when the reason was privately made known to them. For his mother's debts were inexcusable; her jointure was ample to enable her to live as befitted her station, had it not been for the one life-long weakness of that enchanting woman: she was a gambler, hardened and inveterate.

It is difficult to estimate the value of a factor like this in its effect on any life, and when it has played so important a part in a career as it played in the case of Prince Leonard of Rhodopé, almost impossible. Certain it is that now in his middle age he sees little of his mother, for by his orders, when he ascended the throne on her abdication a score of years ago, she was forbidden ever again to set foot in Rhodopé, and the cares of State are so numerous and exigent to so conscientious a Prince that he leaves his country at the outside for a short month in the year, and sometimes not at all. Some ten days of this little holiday, it is true, he makes a rule of spending with his mother, the Princess Sophia, in her charming villa on the olive-clad hills above Monte Carlo; but one would think there could be no great intimacy between so diverse-minded a pair. But of this the reader will judge later. For the present it may be said that the Princess's time is largely spent at the tables, while the Prince, on ascending the throne of Rhodopé, suppressed once and for all the gambling which at one time threatened to undermine the very foundations of the State. Never has reformer started on so Herculean a task, and, indeed, the work of building up was less arduous than the work of pulling down, for it was easier for him to make a nation of warriors out of his Albanians than it was to turn a medley of gamblers into sober-minded citizens, and disprove to them that lying creed which says that in chance alone do we find the charm and the lord of life. Some say he went too far in this hunting out of the

worship of the false and fickle goddess of luck, and in the destruction of her groves or gambling-houses. Even the comparatively unexciting game of knuckle-bones, the lineal descendant, or you might say the living incarnation, of the old Greek astragali (and thus of archæological interest), he sternly suppressed. For this, however, there was another sufficient though somewhat quaint reason, since the son of one of the small farmers near Mavromáti, an idiot in all other respects, was so consummate a genius at the game that he had won the greater part of the copper currency of Rhodopé at it, and there was literally a penny famine. Here his idiocy came in, for his mental deficiency, backed by his native Albanian obstinacy or firmness, caused him to refuse to part with any of his copper, even though offered 10 per cent. extra on the franc. The Prince dealt with the question with his accustomed acumen. He allowed the poor boy to keep his copper, but made the game of knuckle-bones illegal. This acted in the way he had foreseen it would. The hoard of copper, a bulky sackful, could no longer grow; the charm of amassing was gone, and before long the idiot was obliging enough to take gold and silver in exchange.

But such radical measures, if they erred at all, erred on the right side. The abuse was radical; the cure must be radical too. Step by step the gambling-houses were put down, one by one the gamblers were induced to turn to a pursuit in which they could enrich themselves without impoverishing others; the love of gain which is so deeply enrooted in the peasant races of East Europe found a less sensational fruition, and Rhodopé was knit together into the principality it now is—a cannon, and yet a garden of the Lord.

When I think of its smiling valleys and multitude of renovating rivers, it often seems to me that Prince Leonard was certainly right in refusing to go to war even against the unspeakable Turk. Nature has printed in her boldest capitals her dictate to that happy kingdom not to concern itself with the quarrels of its neighbours, else why did she build those great ramparts of rocks on every side but one, where she has placed a rocky and hungry shore, a stern ‘Trespassers will be prosecuted’ against any who should dare attempt to violate this mountain sanctuary? It cannot have been by a blind and purposeless stir of forces that she ranged north and south of Rhodopé those spear-heads of stone on which even the aspiring pine can fix no anchorage,

and from which in winter the snow slips like a fallen coverlet down to the less violent slopes below. Surely some lesson was meant to be drawn from her disposition. And, indeed, Prince Leonard had set the seal on her policy of isolation, and it were an infirmity of purpose to go back on it; forts and batteries endorsed those impregnable rocks and guarded the passes, and it would be a regiment of steel who could win through. Nature's lesson, too, is no less clearly inscribed on the fertile plains which the mountains guard, for the country is amply self-supporting. Broad pastures line the brimming rivers, and the alluvial soil yields its sixty-fold and hundred-fold in tobacco fields, and higher up in terraced vineyards of volcanic earth. The very cigarette you are smoking was born, I will be bold to say, in the fields of Prince Leonard, and only bears the stamp of Cairo to show where it was cut and enveloped and probably adulterated. Again, if you have never drunk the Château Vryssi of 1893, yellow seal, there is as yet no excuse for you to label this a sour world. A man might search for a month in Rhodopé, yet never find a beggar, nor even one to whom old age brought indigence. Conscription obliges every male to serve in the army for five years, and after that he can retire on a pension large enough to keep want from the door and till his fields, and he must live extravagantly or very idly who does not save his pension. Nor are the dwellers on the coast less fortunate; mullet and sole are legion in that sea, and in ten fathoms of water grow the sponges with which the faces of half Europe are daily made comparatively clean.

The towns are few in number; Mavromáti and Búlteck are the only ports, and, in consequence, the only places of consideration on the coast, Amandos, the capital, lying twelve miles inland, the only other city numbering ten thousand souls. For the rest the valleys are peopled with villages, each more clean and more like a box of toys than the last; and I have often, when travelling there, sitting in the little *place* of some such hamlet, with its church, its meeting-place, its barracks and its white-washed houses, momentarily expected that some paste-board door would open, and out would pour an operatic chorus of genuine shepherds and shepherdesses.

It was not always so. Twenty years ago each village would boast a score of gaming-houses, its hundred rich folk, and its five hundred poor ones. Even then few were beggars, owing to the immeasurable

fertility of the land; but many were labourers on another's ground who should have been lords of their own. And it is the events by which Prince Leonard came to the throne, and was enabled to rescue his kingdom from its imminent dissolution in the lifetime of his mother, the reigning Princess Sophia of Rhodopé, that this story tells.

CHAPTER I.

THE GIRL IS MOTHER TO THE WOMAN.

PRINCESS SOPHIA's father, the reigning Prince Leonard's grandfather, was a man extraordinarily truculent in disposition, with a hand of iron under no velvet glove, and a temper frankly diabolical. His wife, the Grand Duchess Fedora, had died in giving birth to his only child, the Princess Sophia; and so long as the girl grew up strong and healthy, he had no thoughts of attempting to take to himself another partner. In this he acted contrarily to the bias of mankind, who would see in the education of a daughter the need of a mother's hand. Not so thought Prince Demetrius. Had Sophia died, there would then be an undeniable necessity for marrying again, and so continuing his line, and disappointing the hopes of the cousin who stood next the throne, a man abhorrent to him; but as long as she lived, such a course appeared to him to be altogether outside the region of the vaguest consideration. Indeed, his first venture—though the word is scarcely apt for so chill a piece of business—had not been altogether fortunate. The Princess Fedora had been a mild and ailing woman, with weak and swimming blue eyes, of an uncertain manner, and of notable mediocrity, and the secret satisfaction which her husband at first used to feel in making her jump soon lost its edge when he saw how easily, how unintentionally even, the thing could be done. A voice raised ever so little, one raucous and guttural exclamation, though half stifled, was enough to make that poor lady skip or swoon. In fine, he got tired of her swoonings, and was in danger, when she died, of losing the keenness of his overbearing and furious temper from mere contact with one so grossly meek and of so contemptible a spirit, even as a sword that has often to cut cotton-wool is soon blunted.

But before long Sophia made him feel his own man again. She grew up with the foot of the roe-deer and the eye of the hawk, and her imperative craving for excitement in some form or other kept her father on incessant tenterhooks as to what she might choose to do next. By no means the earliest of her escapades was at the age of ten, when he found her sitting with the grooms in the stable-yard, cross-legged

on the horse-block, and smoking a cigarette. Her current governess, an estimable and incompetent Frenchwoman, who could play more scales in a minute and speak more words in five different languages with absolute correctness of accent than any governess yet known to exist on this imperfect earth, was bedewing the corner of the yard with impotent tears while Her Royal Highness smoked, and indulged between the whiffs in shocking slang expressions to the English groom. At this prodigious moment her father came in from his ride, saw the governess cowering and wringing her hands in the corner, and the Hope of Rhodopé flicking the ash off her cigarette with the apparent mastery of habit. His face expressed no surprise, though he cast one furious glance at Mademoiselle Fifine, and dismounting from his horse, he walked to where his daughter was sitting. She had not seen him till he had well turned the corner into the yard, and knew that he must have observed her employment; and convinced of this, she had not resorted to what would have been the ordinary young lady's pitiful subterfuge on such an extreme occasion, and either dropped her cigarette, or handed it behind her back to the groom. She was far too defiant and proud for such paltriness of conduct, and she smoked quietly on, a slight patter of fear in her heart, but outwardly calm.

Her father approached in silence, and as he drew near Sophia respectfully got up. Still in silence he sat down on the horse-block, and Sophia stood beside him. If he had only boxed her ears and called her a 'dirty, vulgar little cat,' she would have drawn a sigh of relief, but this silence was intolerably ominous. She was the first to break it.

'I am smoking a cigarette, papa,' she said frankly, 'and I find it excellent.'

He did not look at her, but only took out his own cigarette-case and laid it by his side.

'So I see,' he said; 'and when you have finished that, you shall have another. These, too, are excellent cigarettes; I have plenty of them.'

'Thanks; you are very kind, but I think one will be enough,' remarked Sophia.

'It may be, but you will have another if it is not.' Then turning to the stablemen: 'Stop where you are, all of you,' he said. 'I wish you to see the Princess Sophia smoking till she has had enough.'

Sophia understood, and her small spirit was up in indignant revolt. Already she had had nearly enough, and the cigarette was yet only half consumed. Each puff became a more palpable pang. Meantime Mademoiselle Fifine had approached.

‘Oh, sir,’ she said tremulously, ‘Princess Sophia has been very naughty, and I could not stop her. But make her stop; perhaps she will obey you. If she smokes any more, she will die of it, for already she is growing very pale.’

The Prince turned to the distressed governess with a malign light in his eye.

‘As you say, you could not stop her,’ he said. ‘You had better get home and pack your boxes. I do not choose to retain the services of one who cannot govern my daughter. You a governess!’ he cried, his voice rising suddenly to a tone that the late Princess Fedora well knew. ‘Great and merciful God!’

Sophia turned to her father.

‘Papa,’ she said, ‘I must go; I do not feel very well.’

‘You shall stop exactly where you are,’ he replied. ‘If you choose to disgrace yourself, you shall do so in the way that I, and not you, prefer.’

‘If I stop here as you order me,’ she said, ‘will you promise not to send mademoiselle away? For indeed she did her best to stop me, but I have a stronger will than she.’

‘I shall send her away anyhow,’ he replied, ‘and as surely you shall stop here.’

The end was approaching; a paleness gathered on her cheek, and the meanness of the impending calamity appalled her.

‘Before all the stablemen?’ she pleaded. ‘Bob will laugh at me so.’

‘Most probably,’ said her father dryly; ‘and the others too. I shall not blame them.’

He sat tapping his boot with his riding-whip, not dreaming that he would be disobeyed, and Sophia suddenly saw her chance. Throwing away the end of her cigarette, she bolted round the corner of the stable like a ferreted rabbit, and plunged into the thick bushes which lined the road. Her father started up with an astonished oath, but he was too late,

and he turned a gorgon face to the group of stablemen whom he had told to wait.

‘You set of idiotic deformities!’ he cried in a voice that would have made Fedora tremble for a fortnight. ‘How dare you stand there gaping! Get to your work, all of you! Never have I seen such a bandy-legged crew!’

Sophia meanwhile crouched, quivering with a sickly feeling of nausea, among the bushes. She was half afraid, half exultant at what she had done. What the consequence might be she scarcely dared to think; lifelong imprisonment in a dungeon seemed terribly possible. But she had revolted; she had asserted her independence, and gloried in the deed, like an early Christian martyr.

At the age of fourteen she proposed to her English tutor that he should elope with her, and that they should together seek an appointment in a circus. Failing his acceptance, she got him to teach her *écarté*. She was quickly fascinated with the game and its subtly compounded mixture of luck and skill. She insisted that he play her for counters, and her exultation at winning a hundred of these off him in the course of an hour expressed itself, as it subsequently appeared, prophetically.

‘When I grow up, Mr. Buckhurst,’ she said, ‘I shall be a gambler.’

And Mr. Buckhurst, counting out ten red and five white, thought it extremely probable that she would.

But the games of *écarté* came to the ears of the Prince, and after a thunderous dismissal of Mr. Buckhurst, he sent for his daughter.

‘I hear you are in the habit of playing *écarté*,’ he said. ‘To-night you shall play with me. But I do not play for counters, like Mr. Buckhurst; I play for francs.’

‘That will be even more delightful!’ exclaimed Sophia excitedly. ‘Mr. Buckhurst would not play me for francs. He said that gambling was not a proper employment for children. I am so glad you disagree with him. How delightful it will be to play for real money!’

‘You shall see. Perhaps losing is not so pleasant as winning.’

‘But it will surely be exciting,’ said Sophia.

The Prince dined at six, and after dinner he sent for his daughter.

‘I have twenty francs, and some pennies,’ she said, turning out her purse. ‘That will last a long time. I have been saving up, which is slow work; but perhaps in this way I shall soon get twenty more.’

‘Perhaps,’ said her father. ‘What were you saving up for?’

Sophia flushed a little.

‘A Christmas present for Bob,’ she said.

Prince Demetrius found no reply handy, and he cut for deal.

Now, the Prince was one of the first *écarté* players in Europe, and he had resolved to teach his daughter a lesson on the same lines as the lesson he had proposed to teach her in the stable-yard. He meant to go on playing till Sophia was shorn of all her twenty francs, and after that of all her pennies as well.

Sophia marked the king in the first hand, and turned it up in the second, securing the odd trick on each occasion. On the third deal her father held five small trumps, but only made the odd, Sophia holding knave and ten. On the fourth deal Sophia won the odd trick, and no king was marked, and her father pushed across to her four francs. The second game was but a repetition of the first, only Prince Demetrius in this case failed even to secure the odd. He growled out an oath as he gave Sophia five francs, and that observant young person recorded a silent vow that she personally would take her losses with the same calm demeanour as she certainly intended to cultivate when she was so fortunate as to win. But it was terribly exciting work to play for whole silver francs, and every fibre and nerve in that wholesome little body was stretched to play her best. The third game she also won, and remarked consolingly to the Prince:

‘You have had the worst of the cards, sir,’ a phrase she had picked up from the retired Buckhurst.

An hour later this strange pair were still at the game. The lesson Prince Demetrius had determined to give his daughter was still unlearned, for by her on the table glittered three gold napoleons, and some seventeen francs in silver. She had enjoyed a most surprising run

of luck, and what was still more surprising to her father, she had played throughout a safe and sober game, the very essence and spirit of scientific success. Several times she had elected to play on a hand which, as he saw when she played it, justified itself clearly indeed to the adept, but held dazzling improbabilities to the beginner, with a change of two cards, or perhaps one. At other times her bolder front had reason to back it. Once, for instance, the Prince turned up the king, and proposed for cards. She, with a moderate hand, refused, since the odd trick would give him the game, and her chance of saving it lay in that. As luck would have it, he had on this occasion held four small clubs and one diamond, the same being trumps. She had held two diamonds, a fair hand of hearts, and won all the tricks. The consequence of all this was that at the end of an hour the thought of the lesson he should give her had yielded place in the Prince's mind to an increased feeling of respect for his daughter, so proficient was her play, though only a beginner, and to the adept's joy in the game considered as a game and unconcerned with moralities.

Nine o'clock came, and an hour after the Princess's bedtime. But when a raw-boned governess appeared at the door, and stood patiently waiting, the Prince presently answered her with so tigerish a snarl, and so strong an expression of his feelings toward her—Sophia had just marked the king—that that lady retired to her bedroom in precipitate confusion, and remembered him in her prayers. The pile by the Princess had grown to a matter of eighty francs; the Prince had made more than one bad mistake, and instead of teaching his daughter a lesson, he had caused an unfounded suspicion to arise in her mind that he was only a player of the second order.

Alas for the moral cause! That evening, which he had designed to be so salutary a piece of education, was in reality the direct ancestor of the profuse gaming-tables in the State of Rhodopé, and the threatener of its entire ruin as a nation. Not only did Sophia become convinced that games at cards were more entrancing than any other adventure, even than trying to elope with a reluctant English tutor, but several times during the game her father had exclaimed: 'You have the luck of the devil, Sophia!' and such an opinion from so expert a judge could not fail to produce a deep impression on her, and fill her with wild hopes. Indeed, the truth of it, to give the devil his due, was blatantly

obvious. Doubtful cards prospered in her hand, good cards exacted the full tale of their merit, and what seemed impossible winners sometimes leaped in at the end, established and trick-winning. Even Prince Demetrius, who knew more than most men of the favours of the fickle jade, was impressed by the decisions of Fortune. It seemed idle to struggle, and when on the stroke of midnight he rose from the table, leaving Sophia with a balance of a hundred and seventeen francs, he almost regretted that they had not played for larger stakes, for the winner ever commanded his respect. His daughter gathered up her money with carefully assumed carelessness, but inward exultation.

‘You had the worst of the cards throughout, papa,’ she observed again.

‘I had,’ he said, then paused, and the gambler within him leaped to the surface. ‘Oh, Sophia,’ he said, ‘with such a run of luck, and, to do you justice, your own intuition, translated into terms of roulette, you would in a year make a fortune at Monte Carlo sufficient to buy the Ionian Isles.’

Her face lit up as the face of some village genius might light up one receipt of a favourable opinion from a publisher about his manuscript poems.

‘Oh, papa,’ she cried, ‘how splendid! Will you take me there?’

And thus the moral lesson fled shrieking from the room.

It was not only at the cards that a sort of spell seemed to shower blessings on the girl; in that crisp and invigorating air she grew up to tall and stately development, and the breezes of the mountains and the perfume of flowers lent her their beauty. Other cosmetics she had none, and when her maid pressed on her curlers for the hair, and washes for the face, and dentrifices for her milk-white teeth, she threw the obnoxious aids behind the grate. The superlative mildness of her mother seemed to have cancelled with the ferocious temper of her father, and to have produced in their daughter a winning yet imperial graciousness that touched the heart of the people. It was her joy to scamper over the country on her Hungarian horse, or to divide the waters of the Adriatic with a plunge as of some quick-diving bird from the rocks, or in the harvesttime she would wield a scythe in the fields, and laugh to see how the other girls, daughters of the farmers, and

inured to toil, would vainly strive to keep pace with her fallen swathes. Yet it was with a wonderful dignity that she received her father's guests, and she was royal to her finger-tips.

But most of all she loved the hour when the lamps were lit, and the curtains drawn, and she and her father, or she and some visitor to the Court, sat down and played *écarté* or picquet. Sometimes a baccarat-table would be made up, and that was even more enchanting, for she loved the decision of pure chance, and bowed to it with the unwavering devotion of the thoroughbred and single-hearted gambler. They were no longer simple francs which were pushed across the table; bright gold pieces scurried to and fro in breathless alternation, and she loved to think of the miner who delved sweating in the earth, and the gold-dust carried in boxes oversea, to supply the sinews of her amusement.

The fame of her beauty and the charm of the girl, without which beauty is a mask and a cipher, had gone out widely into the world, and already, while she was not yet seventeen, royal blood and more than regal dulness were kneeling at her feet. It was the frankness of her refusal, her sheer astonishment at the unsuccessful, that kept others aloof. To marry seemed to her an inconceivable thing. She had not yet met her match either in the gallop or in rubicon bezique, a game which occupied her greatly for a year or two; and to pass a lifetime with a man who could not keep up with her in a scamper across country, or who would be a mere whipped puppy in her ruthless hands at the cards, was outside the bounds of possibility. Some of these unfortunate suitors were strangely, almost comically, below the mark. They fell off their horses in the afternoon, and were perpetually plunged in the swollen waters of the rubicon in the evening. To pretend even to wear the guise of sympathy for their inane misfortunes was a histrionic feat of which she was hopelessly incapable.

English travellers who have visited Rhodopé have always found themselves greatly at home there, for the character of the two nations is marvellously alike. To those of Rhodopé no less than to us has been given a sublime self-sufficiency, moved only to a smiling and wondering tolerance at the screams of France or the telegrams of incomprehensible Emperors. The insular position of England accounts for this trait in our case, and the walls of mountains round Rhodopé—

as inviolable as the sea—in the other. Both nations are profoundly tenacious rather than assertive, both have a certain habit of stalking along to fulfil an immutable destiny, an attitude which is characteristic of the races of the North and shrewdly aggravating to those of the South. The inhabitants of Rhodopé are neither to be driven nor to be led: they go their own way with an almost sublime consciousness of the futility of every other way, or, when they choose, stand as still as trees planted by the waterside. It is unnecessary to remind the reader how closely their royal line is related to our own, and thus it has come about from community of blood no less than of nature that many of the Court appointments are held by English-speaking folk, English also is the language of diplomacy there, a unique phenomenon.

From her seventeenth to her twentieth year Sophia lived much in the society of the English, and her greatest friend at this time was Lady Blanche Amesbury, only daughter of the Marquis of Abbotsworthy, who held the post of English Minister at the Court of Prince Demetrius. The two were in many ways much alike: both loved to be in the saddle or the sea all day, and community of tastes brought about a real friendship. It was to Blanche that the Princess confided the deficiencies of the Grand Duke Nicholas, a youth of about twenty-three, who was then being put through his pre-matrimonial paces at Amandos. He was hopelessly in love with his cousin Sophia, and the latter was prepared to give him a fair trial. Indeed, the wooing of the Princess Sophia was not unlike the fairy stories in which princesses sit at the top of hills of glass calmly ready to wed whoever can ride a horse up to their side.

‘I do not require much,’ said this candid young lady to Blanche, as they sat waiting for Nicholas to go out riding with them. ‘The man who marries me must be passably good-looking. My cousin Nicholas is more than that—indeed, I suppose he might be called handsome—and he must do one or two things well. He must either ride very well, or talk very well, or play cards very well, or if he only plays roulette and games of that kind, he must lose very well. *Voilà tout!*’

Blanche considered a moment.

‘We shall see about his riding this afternoon,’ she said. ‘As far as his talking goes, I am afraid he will not do on that count. And this

evening, no doubt, you will see how he plays. But there are other things—he is very rich; that is a good thing.'

'How can you think me so mercenary!' cried the Princess. 'Besides, I have the luck of the devil—papa has told me so more than once—and so I shall win enough at cards to keep my head above water. Here he is! Really he looks quite distinguished!'

The riding question was soon settled, for the Grand Duke put his toes out and his heels in, and sawed the autumn air with a sharp elbow. And Sophia shook her head to Blanche as they came in.

'There is but one more chance,' she said.

She and her cousin played rubicon bezique that night, and at first Sophia thought that after all he might do. He played quickly, and marked treble bezique in the first game, which raised him in her estimation. But, oh Heaven! the humiliation which followed! He showed a miser's greed for his tale of tens and aces; he haggled over mere francs, refusing to toss double or quits in napoleons; he preferred to make certain of a small score rather than risk a large one; he let out incidentally that he could not swim ('Without any sense of shame, my dear Blanche, without any sense of shame,' said the Princess next day); and finally, after four games, he said he was sure she was tired of bezique (meaning that he was), kissed her hand, offered her his own, coupled with his heart.

His visit was curtailed, and he left two days afterwards. Prince Demetrius gloomily threatened his daughter with the prospect of being an old maid all her life, but she only put her pretty nose in the air, and said 'Hoots!'—a word she had picked up from Blanche, and thought very expressive of certain shades of feeling.

CHAPTER II.

A FOOL COMES TO RHODOPÉ.

TILL the time she was twenty-one Princess Sophia lived quietly enough at Amandos, paying visits occasionally abroad, but passing a full ten months of the year in Rhodopé. Though she was often bored, she was usually employed, for Prince Demetrius' health had now for a year or two been failing, and many of the lesser cares of state devolved on his daughter. It must be confessed that during her father's lifetime she discharged these duties admirably, and has not always had the credit for this, for the complete neglect of all her duties when she herself was on the throne has effaced the memory of these earlier years. She presided over the National Assembly—except on the comparatively few occasions when her father was present—with a wonderful great dignity and grace, and while listening to their debates and considering their resolutions with all the care that they deserved, she never let the autocratic power wielded by the Crown seem to pass from her control or grow effete. More than once she used her power of veto, more than once she insisted on a measure thrown out only by a narrow number of votes being put into effect. But never—and in this she showed the true and right understanding of autocratic government—did she reverse the decision of a substantial majority.

But what the poor girl went through, what agonies of boredom, what screaming tortures of ennui, what clenching of jaws which ached for a yawn, what twitching of limbs which longed for the saddle, that august body never guessed. The language of Rhodopé contains no such expression as ‘local jurisdiction’ or ‘county council,’ and all questions which can be thought to bear in the minutest way upon the interests of the country are solemnly brought before the House.

‘My dear Blanche,’ she cried in despair, after a five hours’ sitting one afternoon, ‘unless I die of it, I shall go stark mad. I have had today to give a casting-vote as to whether the second book of Euclid shall be included in the third standard of schools. What do I know of third standards? And, indeed, I know as little of Euclid. On the top of that it appeared that Yanni Tsimovak wished to grow vines on his

twopenny estate instead of tobacco. To this, too, I had to give my serious consideration. It would be a bad precedent, said one, and would seem to point to the fact that the cultivation of tobacco was going out. This would be deplorable, for it yields higher profits than the growth of vines. "Then why does Yanni Tsimovak prefer vines?"—I asked them that, they did not know. Nor did I know, nor do I care. And who under the sun is Yanni Tsimovak—he sounds like a patent medicine—and what is his tobacco to me? Yes, tea, please, and three lumps of sugar.'

'Not three, Sophy,' objected the other. 'You are getting stout, or you soon will.'

'Blanche, another word, and I eat the whole contents of the sugar-basin, lump by lump. And Prince Petros comes this evening!'

'He won a fortune at Homburg last year,' remarked Blanche.

'Fortunate man! Why can't I go to Homburg, and win a fortune, instead of including the second book of Euclid in the third standard? Why should he play roulette, and I wrestle with the Assembly over the affairs of a patent medicine? I hate medicine.'

'"Uneasy lies the head——"' began Blanche.

'But I don't wear a crown,' cried Sophia, upsetting her tea; 'and if you bore me with any more of your odious quotations from your absurd Shakespeare, I shall scream.'

She rang the bell for another cup, as her own was broken. 'And tomorrow, what a programme!' she sighed. 'There is a review in the morning. Well, I don't mind that; but afterwards I have to open the new town-hall, and go to the mayor's lunch afterwards, which will last hours, when I be on the hills. An inconceivable man, Blanche—like a wet toad; and his wife beggars the imagination. She will wear a velvet dress like a sofa-cover, and a string of coral, rather short of beads, on black elastic round her neck. Her face will grow red and shiny during lunch, she will eat till a proper person would burst, and she will confide in me afterwards that she, too, is a descendant of princes. She may be a descendant of the four major prophets for all I care! And then—oh, I know so well—I shall feel it laid upon me to tell her that Methuselah is my lineal grandfather, and she will say, "Indeed, your Royal Highness!" and not see that I am making fun of her. She won't

see it—she will never see anything as long as she lives; and I shall want to shake her till her coral necklace bursts and runs all over the floor. Give me a bun with sugar on the top.'

Now, Prince Petros, who was the second son of the reigning Duke of Herzegovina, and was expected at Amandos that night, was a young man altogether unlike the most of those who had tried and failed to touch the Princess's heart or win her hand. He came of a strangely mixed race, which it would be kind to call cosmopolitan, and cruel to call mongrel, one grandmother being a Jewess, another a Greek, while his mother was English and of obscure origin. But Princess Sophia, as she had told Mr. Buckhurst when she tried to induce him to elope with her, had enough pedigree for two. Furthermore, he had ridden his own horse to the winning-post in the Austrian Derby, and won a fortune at Homburg, and was universally allowed to be excellent company. Indeed, the Princess on the hill of glass could hear the thunderings of the horse-hoofs growing nearer. The world also knew of him as a very ambitious man, and the world's opinion, as so often happens, was entirely true. He was quite prepared to fall in love with the Princess Sophia, and he was equally determined to marry her. The husband of the reigning Princess of Rhodopé, so he thought, had the right to be considered a very enviable man, and provided he was moderately clever, and as ambitious as himself, should bid fair to hold the theatre of the world intent on a piece which it was in his power to produce. The piece should be heroic and magnificent, and should have all the characters but one left out, but that one was to play the title-rôle. The name he had not certainly decided on, but 'The Emperor of the East' gave an idea of its scope. From this it will be seen that Prince Petros, with all his horsemanship, and ambition and luck at the cards, had also all the makings of an exceedingly foolish man.

Dinner that night passed off pleasantly enough. Prince Petros sat next Sophia; the English Minister, Lady Blanche, and Madame Amygdale, a celebrated French singer of the variety stage, who steered between propriety and riskiness with a skill worthy the helmsman of a racing yacht, were the only other guests besides the ladies and gentlemen in waiting. The Amygdale devoted herself to the entertainment of Prince Demetrius with such success that he laughed seven times during dinner, and did not swear once. Prince Petros was

an essentially conceited man; but as his conceit took the subtle form of self-depreciation, it passed unchallenged for the time. He told them that the man who had ridden second to him at Vienna was a far better horseman than himself, and that he was only a beginner at bezique, but was most anxious to learn more of the game under the tutelage of Princess Sophia.

For a beginner, so it appeared after dinner, he was certainly a very notable performer. At any period of the game he could have told you without hesitation or error not only how many kings, aces, queens, and knaves were still left in, but how many small trumps, an important factor at the close of the game, as beginners are apt to discover. He tossed for napoleons, and lost every time; he acquiesced in and welcomed any raising of the stakes, saying that he was about to propose it himself. Before the first game was over, Princess Sophia knew she had met her match—at the cards, at least.

‘You are far better than I,’ she said, with her habitual frankness. ‘With ordinary luck, I could scarcely give you a decently fought game. Cut, please.’

‘I am a beginner merely,’ murmured the Prince, thereby betraying his foolishness, for he had said that often enough for mere modesty.

The second game showed his quality still better. Trumps were most unkindly against him, and about the middle of the game he threw them to the winds, and escaped the rubicon by a continual scorning of kings and aces.

‘I could not have got sequence, as it turned out,’ he said apologetically at the end. ‘You had already shown me three queens, and the fourth you took in two tricks later.’

‘Tell me how you knew that,’ asked Sophia.

‘It was the only card you could have had any reason for holding up,’ he said. ‘Any other card you might safely have shown me, but this you held till the end of the game.’

Princess Sophia beamed at him.

‘I will play with you till it shall be you who says you have had enough. Oh, I love the cards!’ she cried in a sort of ecstasy, gathering up her hand.

‘The sun shall first be quenched,’ said Petros.

It was the month of June, and the earliest daylight stealing into the room about four of the morning saw a quaint sight. In an armchair sat Princess Sophia’s lady-in-waiting, fast asleep with mouth wide open, and snoring stertorously, and on a divan near the window lay Prince Petros’s gentleman-in-waiting, with his face on his hand, sleeping like a tired child. The candles on the table by which the two played had already once been replenished, and as the light of morning grew clearer they were again burned to their sockets. A large silver ash-tray by the Prince’s side was heaped with a pyramid of ends of cigarettes, two empty siphons stood on the floor, and two trays with the débris of supper stood on a side-table. It had been a hot night, and the curtains were undrawn over the open windows. Every now and then a footman in scarlet livery, with eyelids, like La Giaconda’s, a little weary, looked in through the open door and stole away again. Outside, the garden was still dreaming under its blanket of dew-laden gossamer webs; a hundred feet below slept the red roofs of the town; and the birds had not yet begun to tune their voices for the day.

Just before the sun rose, Prince Petros cut to Sophia.

‘Shall I extinguish the candles?’ he asked; ‘it is already light enough to play without. How delicious the morning air is!’

‘If you will be so kind,’ said Sophia, dealing. ‘For the twenty-first time you have cut exactly eighteen cards.’

An hour later it was broad day; the birds were awake, and the footman was asleep. The Prince still looked fresh enough, but his chin (he had arrived too late to shave before dinner) was dark with his twenty-four hours’ beard; but Sophia looked as fresh and brilliant as a child glowing from its morning bath. A little excitement burned in her beautiful eyes, and her breath came slightly quicker than its wont. But the risen sun, still cool and invigorating, shone searchingly on the smooth white skin of her half-turned face as if to find some ravage wrought by this unnatural night, and confessed its impotence. She was radiant, an embodiment of the goddess of the morning, and, looking up, Prince Petros was fairly blinded with her. He hesitated—it was towards the end of the game—failed to count the remaining tricks, and she put down in turn the three and the four beziques.

‘Admirable,’ he said; ‘I made a bad mistake. I have paid for it. Yes, you rubicon me as well. Yet, believe me, I have not played so rotten a card for years.’

‘You are very modest,’ said she, ‘for you said you were only a beginner. Yet I like modesty in a man.’

‘I am more fortunate than I deserve,’ said he.

Once or twice during the next game he passed his hand over his chin, and frowned. At last he could bear it no more, and at the end of the game, ‘If you will excuse me,’ he said, ‘for ten minutes—it shall not be more, I swear to you—I will get shaved, if my idle scoundrel of a valet has not gone to bed, then I will return to you. I am no sight for the morning. But you—you look like morning itself,’ and again he gazed at her.

She met his eye, then dropped her own, and played with the cards a moment. Then she rose, and breaking out into a laugh:

‘I am beaten,’ she said, ‘and I retract my words. Oh, Prince, I would play with you till the crack of Judgment; but if I stop for ten minutes I shall be asleep. Let us make a bargain; you want to stop for ten minutes, and for me that is impossible. We will yield to each other, and thus there is no yielding. Let us both agree to stop.’

‘I have no wish but yours,’ said he. ‘And indeed an hour or two of sleep would be refreshing. I travelled all yesterday.’

Sophia stretched herself gracefully, like a fawn that is stiff with lying down. Then she looked round the room, and broke into a little suppressed bubble of laughter.

‘Look, oh, look!’ she whispered. ‘There is your gentleman and there is my lady. Let us go quietly, ever so quietly, to our rooms, and what will be their embarrassment and dismay when they awake! We ride at ten to see the review. Will you join us? It would interest you, I think. You will see some fine horses and some fine horsemen.’

‘And you—you will be there?’ he asked.

‘Surely. Now come away on tiptoe.’

The party in the house met again at ten to ride to the review on the occasion of the Prince Demetrius’s birthday. The gentleman of Prince Petros and the lady of Princess Sophia seemed strangely ill at ease

with each other, for they had awoke simultaneously; but the two bezique players, riding one on each side of the Prince, were in the best of spirits. Never, so it seemed to Sophia, had a night involved so little waste of time; for, being a sound and lengthy sleeper by nature, each morning presented her with a dismaying expenditure of eight and a half blank and unfruitful hours. Never, so thought her father, had she shown so charming a gaiety, and the cause of it, so he concluded, rode on his right hand. As for Prince Petros, he saw ambition already nearly ripe for the attempted plucking; and to do him justice, it was at this moment Sophia herself, the charm and delicious freshness of her, the wit and happy gaiety of her, that he coveted, and not her kingdom.

To right and left of them stretched fields of tobacco in full flower, and vineyards promising a marvellous harvest. By the side of the road was a grassy ride, and the three cantered gently past the far-famed plots. To their right, steeply terraced up to prevent a grain of that soil of gold slipping away in the autumn rains, rose the enclosure of the Château Vryssi—land as valuable as the streets of the City of London. On the left, a liberal ten acres of ground, stood the volcanic patch which nurtured the vines of the Clos Royal grape, brought, so it was said, by the first Albanian emigrants from the vineyard of Omar. Further down the hill the vineyards gave place to the culture of tobacco; and the Prince pointed out in turn to his admiring guest the birthplace and nursery of the *Eastern Gem*, the *Joy of the Harem*, and the darker-leaved *Prince Seracour*. The last of these stretched down to the river-bank, and from there a noble stone bridge rose in a stately span across the foaming water, and gave them access to the level parade-ground.

Prince Petros had been prepared to find a large body of fine and well-drilled men; but schooled as he was to the surprises of the tables, he could scarce his exclamations of delight as regiment after regiment wheeled, saluted, and passed. Not a man of the 1st Infantry was under six feet in height, and not one but would have done credit to the crack regiment of any nation. With what a crisp ripple the ranks of firm-footed men, fit, weather-tanned, moving mechanically, yet individually, swung past! And this array, it must be remembered, was then but a half of the tale Rhodopé could to-day put into the field; yet how great a multiple of those who would have appeared on parade ten

years later, had there been a parade at such a time! Like the Queen of Sheba, Prince Petros had no spirit left in him at the end; he was enchanted at what he had seen, and with Sophia, intoxicated.

Thereafter followed the opening of the new town-hall, and the luncheon by the mayor. Prince Demetrius did not propose to attend either of these functions; and, turning to ride home, he inquired of Prince Petros whether he would come with him or go to the town-hall and the tedious lunch with Sophia. The town-hall, he reminded him, was like every other town-hall, only newer, and the mayor's luncheon would be similar, only perhaps a shade more so.

But the ring of his *cri du cœur*—‘Oh, let me go with her!’—pleased the old man, and he rode home satisfied.

Indeed, of late Sophia's future had been something of an anxiety to him. In each individual case, it is true, he had so sympathized with the girl in her rejection of men who were superlatively eligible, except as husbands, that he had not had the conviction to ‘preach down her heart’; nor, he was aware, would his preaching have had the slightest effect. But he himself, as he guessed, was suffering from an incurable malady, of which the end, he hoped, would not be far distant; and it would have pleased him more than anything in the world which had power to please, to see Sophia married to some suitable husband, who was neither cad nor nincompoop. Prince Petros did not appear to him to be within measurable distance of either, and he was gratified to see that the rhadamanthine attitude which Sophia usually adopted to her wooers was here absent.

The two returned about five in the afternoon, after a reckless scamper over the rough country. The embarrassed lady and gentleman had been left far behind, unless, indeed, they had been wise, and returned home soberly by the road; but neither gave them even a passing thought. Sophia, with experiment in her mind, had mounted Prince Petros on a vicious cross-grained brute, and she knew that the horse's seeming amenity that afternoon could not be natural to it. Petros had a seat; he had hands. In Sophia's eyes there were few gifts of God more ennobling than these. The last mile up to the stable gates she had challenged him to race, following an old grass-grown track, intersected with hedges and fences; and Sophia, to her soul's delight,

had won. She had dismounted by the time he came up, and sitting on the horse-block, where she had made her first experiment in cigarettes ten years ago, breathless and triumphant at having beaten the jockey of the Austrian winner. He dismounted at the stable gate, and came up to her. A great braid of her black hair had escaped, and hung gloriously on the shoulder of her riding jacket; her face was flushed. She was divinely beautiful; and in a sudden spasm of admiration:

‘Ah, you are enchanting!’ he cried, and the discreet groom led their horses away.

Sophia no longer doubted that she had found the companion of her life. The Prince had thundered up the hill of glass, and all the lore of fairy-tales made him hers. Personally she was attracted by him, by his slim, straight person, his dark, animated face, the languor of indolence and movement which cloaked his athleticism, his apt and ready conversation, and, above all—for she was something of an observer—by a certain indulgence of expression, habitual to him, which she did not wholly understand, but which suggested that the pursuits at which he so excelled were no more than toys to him. Moreover, it is charming to charm; the charmer usually feels kindly—out of her generosity—to the enslaved, and his involuntary cry, ‘Ah, you are enchanting!’ was delicious to her.

After dinner this pretty game of love-making had to yield place to the sterner and more serious duties of life, and the cards again occupied their undivided attention. Prince Petros acknowledged to an acquaintance with the rules of *vingt-et-un*, and all the varieties of that charming game, which he said he had sometimes played at home with his sisters. The betting was high, the guests of the evening were amusing, and disposed to be well amused; the Guards’ band in the gallery of the ballroom next door was playing delightfully, and Luck was in her most capricious mood. Later on the Prince gave a dance, and Sophia was only waiting for the announcement of the arrival of the first guests to leave the table and perform the much less congenial duty of receiving them.

Eleven struck, and a footman came to tell her that the first carriage was already coming up to the portico. Sophia was just at the end of her deal; the Prince was sitting on her right. He had lost once and gained

once at *rouge et noir*. She held the pack ready to give him his third and last card.

‘For the last, Prince, and then I must go,’ she said. ‘No limit to the stake, if you wish.’

‘I stake all I possess and am on *noir*,’ said he gravely.

‘You have lost,’ said Sophia, laughing. ‘It is a heart.’

‘Then have I won?’ he said in a low voice, looking at her.

She stood still a moment (the others had heard his stake, though not his last reply), and a faint flush spread over her face.

‘I was but jesting, and I will not beggar you,’ she said. ‘Now, alas! I must go. Oh for half an hour more! But, Prince, I think there will be time for one short game at bezique when the ball is over.’

‘But I was not jesting—I never jest when I am playing cards,’ he said. ‘Yes, let us play one game after the ball.’

The two danced with each other more than once during the evening, but for the most part Prince Petros was a model of sedulous gallantry to the official ladies of Rhodopé. The wife of the mayor, a stout, immovable lady, entirely lost her heart to him. Twice had he waltzed with her, or, rather, twice had he skipped round and round her, as a child may skip round a firmly-rooted tree. She, like the tree which is planted in the whirling earth, seemed to do little more than revolve on her axis once in twenty-four hours; but she enjoyed dancing, she said, very much, and it certainly made her very hot. Nor was he wanting here; he poured ices and exhilarating drinks down her capacious throat, as if to quench some wild internal conflagration, and the mayoress, so he told Sophia afterwards, had confided to him that she, too, was of princely line.

With the younger ladies he was no less successful. He was never tired of dancing, his steering was of so fine an order that it seemed an exhibition of luck, and the step of each of his partners he gaily asserted—as, indeed, he had shamelessly declared to the mayoress—suited his own exactly. He admired everything, and he flattered everybody, yet so adroitly that his partners only thought that they themselves were exceptionally enchanting that night. He told a young, aesthetically-dressed woman, the wife of the Prince’s aide-de-camp, that she reminded him of Whistler’s symphony in green, a title which his ready

invention had coined on the spur of the moment, but which earned him a life-long gratitude, for Madame Elsprach had been secretly afraid that she had rather overdone it. In a word, when the ball was over, he felt that he had earned his game at bezique, and he got it.

Next morning he asked an audience of Prince Demetrius, and this was granted him. Armed with a permission from him, he inquired for Sophia, for they were soon to ride together. He found her in the garden, dressed for the ride, and alone.

‘Princess,’ he said, ‘I have come to pay you my stake. Will you accept it? Sophia, will you accept it?’

‘Yes, Petros,’ she replied.

CHAPTER III.

MARRIAGE-BELLS AND SYSTEMS.

PRINCE PETROS scarcely seemed to have overrated—though it was ever his habit to take a sufficiently rosy view of the verdict of the world on himself—the favourable impression he had made in those two days at Amandos. The officers whom he had met at the review admired his fine horsemanship no less than his amiability, for no man could be more agreeable without any suspicion of condescension than he. The ladies of the Court were entranced by the charm of his manners and the grace of his dancing. Sophia, as has been seen, was captive to the mastery of his bezique, and Prince Demetrius, a testimonial to the full as striking as any of these, had never snarled at him once. The fact of their betrothal was made known before the lapse of many days, and the news evoked bells, fireworks and universal approval.

Sophia's acceptance of him delighted her father, and he would certainly have made himself odious had she refused him. He had no wish to see his daughter a second Queen Elizabeth, and the romance of such a figure in his eyes bore no comparison with the desired consummation of his hopes to see her a matron with a lusty and numerous progeny. His cousins he frankly looked upon in the light of obscene birds of prey, ready to batten on his own extinct line. Already, so it seemed to him, they were hopping hungrily about the steps of the throne of Rhodopé, but the news of Sophia's betrothal scared them hurriedly away, and from afar they sent long congratulatory telegrams. Prince Demetrius smiled to himself when he thought how bitter must those honeyed words have been to their royal authors. The Grand Duke Nicholas, so he thought, alone acted in a self-respecting manner, for he sent no word.

As for the affianced husband, he was in a stupor of content. Thanks to his native amiability, to horsemanship nearly as native—for the Princes of Herzegovina were men almost born in the saddle—and to his carefully acquired skill at the cards, already the first and most difficult act of his 'Empire of the East' was finished. Had he been, in

common with most gamblers, a victim to superstition, he might almost have been frightened at the ease of these first steps, and have taken such extreme favours of fortune with caution. But his own common-sense lulled him to security, and he played the assiduous suitor to perfection, and, indeed, it was no part he played.

Princess Sophia alone, and she hardly consciously, was a little afraid of what she had done. During the days that followed, and especially when the Prince had departed on a hurried visit home, and she was left alone with her reflections, the thought that she was so soon to marry him, to be indissolubly his, came to her with a shock as if of sudden awakening. Two days' intercourse, followed by a single word, had changed the whole course of her life; and though she had always taken it as a matter of certainty that she would some time marry, yet the imminence of it, the particulars of it and the ease with which the Fates had woven for her, hit her like a douche of chilly water. An attractive person, a fine horseman, a good card-player, these had been her formulated requirements exhaustively stated, and they were fully satisfied; the measure had been pressed down, and it ran over. He was all these superlatively, and though she had never been of the make to indulge in maidens' fancies, in daydreams of tenor voices and faultless coiffures, yet she wondered if there was not something missing. Her rank necessarily limited the number of eligible suitors; in this she acquiesced fully, for she accepted the disabilities of being royal, and assuredly none so eligible as Petros had yet presented himself. But the illimitable choice of suitable helpmeets granted to the middle classes seemed to her in this month before her wedding to have something in its favour. Not that she repented her decision: she would have accepted him again and yet again, and yet a little inward voice said to her, 'Is this all?'

The wedding was to be hurried on, and its celebration was fixed for the first possible day of July. Prince Petros had an ample fortune for himself, and it was not to be thought of that anyone but her father should make settlement on the Princess of Rhodopé. All that the old man wished was that there should be no delay.

'I have been an unconscionable time living,' he said one day to his daughter, 'and I do not intend to be an unconscionable time dying. Besides, it is much easier when one is not in very good health to die

than to live, and I have always wished to save myself trouble. So I propose to die pretty soon. I should like to see a grandson, Sophia, but that is all I want.'

Sophia started.

'A grandson!' she said. 'That will make me a mother. How very ridiculous!'

'Well, if you choose to look at it like that, I hope you will be ridiculous as soon as possible, and more than once. I think you have got a good husband; he is not a fool or a cad. That means a great deal. Nothing really matters besides that.'

'I do not care for fools and cads,' remarked Sophia.

'I knew that, and that is why I was afraid you would not marry at all; for it is a sad truth that most men are one or the other, and many both. Your poor dear mother was a fool, Sophia,' he added, with a touch of what might be called tenderness.

There was silence for a moment, and then Prince Demetrius went on:

'Petros will save you a great deal of troublesome detail,' he said, 'just as you have of late saved it me. He loves to be popular, and I think he likes a parade of power. Let him have his fill of it. There is a great deal of tiresome business in the working of the state of Rhodopé, about school boards and potatoes—you well know the kind of thing. He will take all that off your hands, and at the same time win golden opinions for himself, and enjoy his little triumphs. In fact, it will add to the absurd veneration—for it is absurd—in which we are held by the people if you make yourself, when you are on the throne, rather more scarce than I have done. Let your appearances be something to be remembered; do not let the people get used to you.'

Sophia looked up.

'Yes, I never thought of that; that will be a great advantage. Petros can constantly take my place in the Assembly, and I hope he will enjoy it more than I have done. He can see to the tobacco and potato bills during the day, and play cards in the evening. He likes detail—he told me so. He says it is only by great attention to details that anyone arrives at great results.'

‘Oh, he said that, did he?’ remarked her father, and then rejected the idea that had leaped unbidden into his mind, as out of the question. He little knew how nearly true Prince Petros’s words would prove.

Within a month from their betrothal the wedding was celebrated. Royal personages flocked from all countries to Rhodopé, and the ports of Mavromáti and Búlteck were gay with the flags of all nations. The palace at Amandos, as well as the shooting-boxes on the hills above, were filled with guests, and the odour of the wedding bake-meats was in the air. Prince Demetrius was a miracle of courtesy to his visitors, thereby doing a violence to his normal nature. But he was so uncommonly pleased at the event, that this subversion of his habits may be forgiven him. Prince Petros played his part—if indeed such a term can be applied to a gratification so sincere—to admiration, and the more open-minded of those whom Prince Demetrius had alluded to as birds of prey confessed that so amiable a paragon had no more than his deserts.

The entertainment, both of the visitors of the Prince and of the native populace, endorsed the reputation for hospitality which Rhodopé has always enjoyed. Down the sides of the square in which stood the cathedral where the wedding was to be celebrated ran immense tables at which all comers were feasted. Oxen were roasted whole in the market-place, and the cellars of the Prince poured out, like the opened sluices of a river in flood, the garnered sunshine of summers long past. Magnificent, too, were the presents of the bride and bridegroom. There were ropes of pearls, some like misty moons, some pink, some black, and of extraordinary lustre; two diamond tiaras, in the centre of one of which blazed the famous ‘Blue Wonder,’ a stone from Golconda of priceless worth; a necklace of opals set in diamonds; a ruby brooch of unmatched depth of colour, each stone being of the true pigeon’s blood; eighteen gold shoe-horns, on each of which was the Princess’s monogram and a crown in diamonds; a bezique-box of chrysoprase, with hinges and lock of gold (this was from the bridegroom to the bride); four beautiful bicycles; eight complete Louis Seize tea services, with cups of royal blue Sèvres; five gold-fitted tea-baskets for four people; and a perfect grove of gold-handled umbrellas, among which lay gold-mounted dressing-cases, like boulders in a pine-wood, and enough antique candlesticks to

illuminate the whole kingdom. More curious still was a roulette-board, of which the marble was a sapphire, and all the numbers set in precious stones, and (for the folk of Rhodopé knew their beloved Princess's tastes, and were anxious to give her presents which would certainly be useful to her) two thousand packs of picquet cards, a gift from the Board-school children of Amandos.

The cathedral—that small but exquisite building, built, it is said, on the designs of Prince Djem—was not sufficient to seat more than the invited guests of Prince Demetrius and the chief officials of the State; but outside tiers and tiers of benches had been erected in the streets, and immense wedge-shaped stands on the flat roofs of the municipal buildings which line the square. The enthusiasm was prodigious; long before the head of the procession reached the square, the shouting from the folk who lined the route from the Palace was like the roar of the sea, and when the Guards and the first of the royal carriages appeared, the people rose like one man, and every throat was loud with the Rhodopé National Anthem. Never had Prince Petros worn a more engaging smile than when, from his fine black charger, he acknowledged right and left the thunder of their welcome; never had Sophia looked more graciously magnificent than when she bowed from the carriage containing her and Prince Demetrius. The maddening music of the shouts touched her heart, and the bet that she had made with the Princess Charlotte of Roumania, that they would not reach the square under an hour from the time they left the Palace, was, even though she had won, completely effaced from her mind, and Princess Charlotte never paid.

The two left Amandos the evening after the wedding for their honeymoon, which they were to spend on Prince Demetrius's yacht, cruising in the Mediterranean. The twelve miles of road down to Mavromáti was illuminated with Oriental gorgeousness, and a continuous torchlight procession of runners, picturesquely clothed in the national costume, accompanied them down to the sea. Every half-mile there was a fresh relay of a hundred, who ran with them their appointed course, and then, throwing their torches in the air by way of salute, gave way to the next. The port was one blaze of coloured light, and the yacht *Felatrune* a ship from Fairyland. Sophia, warm-hearted and impulsive, was greatly affected by the enthusiasm of the people; it

was for her they had made the darkness many-coloured; it was the wishes for her happiness that turned the wonted silence of night into a chorus of sound. Once during the drive down she had touched Petros on the arm.

‘It is for me they have done this, these dear folk,’ she said.

‘Yes, darling, for us,’ said Petros; and Sophia thought, but without resentment, that there was just a touch of correction in his voice.

‘Yes, for us,’ she repeated; and her emotion almost made her feel she loved him, for the inward voice which had queried ‘Is this all?’ was answered by, ‘Is this not enough?’

The yacht put off as soon as they were on board, and after waiting on deck—Danae to the golden showers of fireworks—till the shore had faded to a blur of light, they went below. Supper was prepared for them, and on another table were candles and the bezique packs, put there by some thoughtful servant.

Sophia saw them, and her eyes grew bright and dim.

‘How kind they all are!’ she said. ‘They think of everything.’

Prince Petros had also seen.

‘Yes, a game of bezique would be pleasant after supper,’ he said; but Sophia, womanlike and unreasonable, felt a touch chilled.

In halcyon weather they hastened a south-westerly course, and the second day saw them gliding, under the cloud-cowled head of Etna, through the Straits of Messina. They made the straits by three in the afternoon, and dusk showed them the beacon of Stromboli lit on the starboard bow. It had been almost tacitly agreed that they were to go straight to Monte Carlo, or, as Sophia put it, that very pleasant place, somewhere on the Riviera, where you could play for small stakes without a raid from the police.

But soon after they had got free of the Straits, it became evident that the halcyon days were over, for a stiff gale was blowing, and as the yacht threw the knots over its quarter, the sea, which on leaving the Straits was choppy, grew frankly rough, and they pitched considerably to the head sea, even the bowsprit now and then dipping, and raising itself again with a little whiff of spray. They were sitting on the aft

deck, and Sophia was feeling exhilarated by the leap and shock of the encountered waves.

‘Oh, Petros!’ she exclaimed, ‘is it not wild and splendid? I love the sea! And here we are, you and I only.’

She stopped suddenly, for Petros had left her; only a dark figure was scudding sideways to the companion ladder.

That evening her husband had a little soup in the privacy of his cabin, for the sea continued boisterous, and Sophia dined alone. It was exceedingly rough; the fiddles were on the table, and she had to make swoops and dashes at her food, and peck, as it were, at her glass. But though she ate with an excellent appetite (for the sea air always made her hungry), she had a clouded brow. She was sorry for Petros’ indisposition, but she felt not the slightest inclination to sit by his bedside, read to him, or remind him that his was only a transient agony. In fact, it was ridiculous that a man should be sea-sick, as ridiculous as that a man should not be able to ride; and as a matter so superficial as a man’s seat on a horse had been among the factors which attracted her to him, so she found that a matter so superficial as this failure of his internal mechanism to stand a rough sea was a factor on the other side. The whole affair, however, was so infinitesimal that she soon dismissed it from a mind that never indulged in that melancholy diversion self-analysis, and she played several games of Russian patience by herself, and obtained fresh light on the subject of the maliciousness of inanimate things.

The yacht arrived at ‘that very pleasant place on the Riviera’ two days after, and the newly-married pair spent a very interesting fortnight there. One thing alone troubled Sophia, and that was the discovery that her husband played on a finely elaborated and seemingly successful system, involving all sorts of abstruse sums in multiplication. Now, this to her was a shock, for she was of the type of gambler which, for want of a better word, we may call the romantic. Primarily she played for the sake of the play, and it was not the winning of money which she enjoyed so much as the winning in the abstract. The whole charm of the thing to her lay in that rolling marble the momentum of which no one knew, not even the croupier who set it going. She backed her luck, another unknown agent, against the immutable and incalculable

laws of gravity and friction, and though she had all the gambler's fine superstitions, and would back a run of luck, and never lay a sou on No. 13, it was the utter uncertainty of the thing which fascinated her.

She almost felt that Petros ought to have made a clean breast of it before he married her, classing it among those confessions which many men may have to make before they take a girl to share their lives, and she was a little hurt he had not done so. Eventually she decided one day to talk the matter over with him.

'Yes; I was surprised, and—shall I say it?—a little disappointed, dear,' she said, 'when I found out that you had a system. Why did you not tell me? Well, never mind. When a game depends on its uncertainty, any subtraction from that surely subtracts from its charm. Suppose anyone invented an infallible system——'

Petros frowned, for he was just multiplying one hundred and seventy-three by fourteen, and dividing it by seventeen, a calculation often incidental to the system in question.

'Mine is infallible,' he interrupted rather sharply.

'Yet you lost heavily all the morning, did you not?'

'I shall win heavily all the evening, you will see;' and he made a note of some figures.

'Oh, Petros, leave the calculation alone a minute,' she said, 'and listen to me. I don't think of roulette as a means of livelihood.'

Petros laughed.

'That is just as well, dear Sophia,' he said, 'for you would not exactly have paid your way since you have been here.'

'Oh, hear me out,' she replied. 'It is the excitement I love it for. I do not think of Monte Carlo as a sort of Stock Exchange, where the acute make money and the stupid lose it. A system reduces it to just that—a sort of Stock Exchange without any bulls and bears, whatever they are.'

'I prefer to win,' said Petros.

'Yes; so do I, but I would not promise never to go to the tables if the croupier gave me an annuity to keep away.'

'It depends on the size of the annuity.'

‘Ah, then, that is exactly where we differ,’ said she, rising. ‘I should be no happier for an annuity, nor, indeed, would you, but I am a great deal happier for a little excitement. It is a lovely afternoon. What a wonderful colour the sea is! Let us go to the tables.’

Petros won largely that afternoon, and the system justified itself as far as it is possible for a system to be justified. But the charm of him considered merely as a gambler, as a man who had made a fortune at Homburg, had terribly faded in Sophia’s eyes; indeed, to win money at the tables on a system seemed to her slightly sordid, a kind of trade, and the money thus won, she imagined, would have a kind of stuffy smell about it. The feeling she knew was unreasonable, and she did not defend it; but she never fell into the error of reasoning about a conviction, and concluding that she was made so and her husband otherwise, she dismissed the matter as far as possible from her mind.

She herself on the last day that they were there had one of those runs of luck which occur once in a lifetime. Four times she staked a hundred napoleons on one number, and twice out of the four times, incredible to state, won. Then she played on the colour for half an hour, and lost scarcely once out of ten times, and, to crown all, backed the bank for the last hour and cleared as much again. Petros was aghast; he himself would never have backed one number, and to do so four times seemed to him either imbecile or criminal, and he could not say to himself that Sophia was imbecile. It materially added to his annoyance to see her win twice, while the sordid and infallible system was losing on an average fifty francs an hour—a monotonous and inglorious form of adventure. He felt warmly on the subject, and as they were rowed across to the yacht that night addressed a remark to Sophia which keenly resented.

‘I would as soon think of backing one number,’ he said, ‘as of robbing my father.’

‘And I would as soon think of playing on a system’ returned Sophia, with spirit, ‘as of sea-sick.’

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST DAYS OF PRINCE DEMETRIUS.

PRINCE DEMETRIUS was not destined to see the fulfilment of his remoter hope, and to take a grandchild on his knee. In the September of this year, directly after the return of Sophia and her husband, he underwent an operation for tumour, and in November it was found that there was a recrudescence of the malady. A portion of the growth was removed by the forceps and sent for examination to Professor Virchow at Berlin, who reported unfavourably on it. The growth, it appeared on examination, was malignant, and the professor feared that there was no doubt that it was cancerous. He wrote at length to the Prince's medical adviser, stating that life might perhaps be prolonged by a second operation, but that the reappearance of the disease so short a time after the first operation indicated that the knife could not effect a permanent cure. It was advisable, so he thought, to acquaint Princess Sophia with the true state of the case, and let the patient decide whether he would undergo a second operation or not. To one in his state of health this would be risky, if not positively dangerous—in fact, the case was exactly one of those when it was right that the patient should decide.

The Prince's doctor did as the pathologist suggested, and consulted Princess Sophia. She was perfectly clear that it was better to tell her father, and then leave the decision with him. Stricken as she was, for she had a strong personal affection for her father independent of the natural tie of relationship, she offered to tell him herself of the professor's report, and the doctor gladly accepted her proposal.

It was one of the Prince's good days on which she went to acquaint him with his condition, and the exceeding pain which he had suffered for more than a week was sensibly less. For a great part of this period he had been kept as far as possible under the dulling influence of morphia; but he had slept a natural sleep the night before, and had awoke his own man.

Outside the day was typically autumnal; the great groves of chestnuts, which stretched down from the lawn to the river, were in the short blaze of their gaudy liveries, and a coolness ineffably brisk and

bracing was in the air. There had been a slight frost during the night, already the more brilliant of the leaves were falling, and the sweet odour of cleanliness came in through the open windows. The Princess, as she walked slowly from the room where she had breakfasted to her father's bedroom, was touched in a way that hitherto had been unknown to her, with the terrible thoughtlessness of inanimate things. This shedding of the russet foliage was but a simulated tragedy; next spring the trees would again be green and luxuriant as if no winter had ever interrupted their perennial vigour; winter to them was but a time for sleep, a renovation of their life, while to the puny sons of men no spring restored the ravages of time past. She looked out over the inimitable freshness of the land as she waited to know if her father could receive her, and the sense of contrast between the infinitesimal limits of humanity and its infinite possibilities caused her eyes to fill with tears. How momentous and trivial a thing was life!

Yes, he would see her at once; and she entered.

Prince Demetrius was in a humour at which imagination might boggle. He had enjoyed a good night; his pain was relieved, and he had reverted to his own diabolical temper.

Sophia stood for a moment in the doorway, hidden from the bed where her father lay by a screen, her nerves shrinking from that which lay before her, and steeling herself to go in. A voice from the bed, with an extraordinary degree of acidity in it, helped her to make the effort needed.

'I should have thought *à priori*,' remarked Prince Demetrius, 'that a door must either be shut or open, but you, Sophia, seem to have grasped the subtlety of touch which is necessary to the leaving of it neither one nor the other. Please decide which you intend to do, and for God's sake do it.'

She drew a long breath, shut the door, and came to the bedside.

'Good-morning, father,' she said. 'They told me you had a very good night. I am so glad;' and she kissed him on the forehead.

'The worst of a good night,' remarked her father, 'is that you do not know it is good until it is over. The pleasure of it is as unreal as the pain of a regret. Personally I never regret anything. Fools regret, and even a knave can repent.'

Sophia stood there silent; the burden of what she had to say took from her the power of initiating trivialities; but her father went on, rasping like a file.

‘When a thing is done, it is done, and things for the most part do not produce any consequences at all, though people who have addled their brains with trivial thinking tell us that they do. Moralists and philosophers are the most shallow people in the world, for argument is ever less sound than conviction. This morning, Sophia, you look as if you were inclined to argue. Please don’t do that, or, if you must argue—I know it may happen to any of us—please go and argue in the passage, where I can’t hear you.’

Sophia sat down by the bedside.

‘I am not come to argue,’ she said; ‘but, father, I am come to talk. I am come to tell you something.’

‘Tell it, then,’ said Demetrius, with the composure of a tree.

‘It is this: I have a report from Berlin, and a question to ask you —’ and she stopped.

‘The message first, the question afterwards,’ said Prince Demetrius, and his composure seemed quite unshaken.

‘Professor Virchow has sent a most unfavourable report; your malady is malignant——’ and she stopped again.

‘Why the devil not say cancer, and have done with it?’ asked that man of iron.

‘You are right. And the question I have to ask you is whether you will have another operation or not. They say it is for you to decide. It will be dangerous, but it will, if successful, prolong your life a little.’

Prince Demetrius turned slightly in bed to look at Sophia, for her voice was unsteady.

‘Then it is the silliest question I ever heard,’ he said. ‘Of course I shall have nothing of the sort done. Blow your nose, Sophia, and don’t cry. If you allude to the subject again, I shall send you out of the room. Tell the doctors this only, that if ever they ask me anything so absurd again, I shall dispense with their services. The matter is closed. And now, if you have nothing to do, we will play *écarté*, please. Napoleon points, and a hundred francs on the game. Do you remember playing

with me for the first time when you were a little girl? You played well even then; now you are nearly as good as I am.'

From that day the Prince grew rapidly worse, and he suffered much. For many hours in the day he was under morphia, but a small interval only would elapse between the passing off of the narcotic and the return of pain. But in these intervals he was powerfully lucid and incisive.

'It is this,' he said once—'this mockery of life which the medical fools thought I might wish to be prolonged. A man must have a singularly low opinion of consciousness if he thinks this is worth having. It is a bore, an awful bore, Sophia, and reminds me of waiting at a station for one's train, which is the most inglorious way I know of passing the time.'

'Would you care that I should read you the news?' Sophia would ask sometimes.

'Certainly not,' he answered. 'At last I feel irresponsible. Nobody can do anything which concerns me, except to leave the door open when I prefer it shut. Really, if one has to be somewhere, to be on a death-bed is one of the very best places. Nothing can touch one; it is like getting out of a tunnel full of jarring noises.'

He raised himself in bed a little.

'I wish I had been your child, Sophia,' he said, 'and that is really all I want. I have lived quite long enough on my own account. There, don't cry. I shall have another half-hour, I suppose, before the disgusting pain returns, so let us play picquet. We shall have time for one *partie*, and then I shall send you away.'

But death was merciful, and came quicker than the doctors had anticipated, and on the first of January the Princess Sophia was proclaimed hereditary monarch of the realm of Rhodopé.

CHAPTER V.

ENTER THE CENTIPEDE.

ONE morning in the July of the next year Sophia and Petros were sitting at their half-past-twelve breakfast in the broad north veranda of the palace at Amandos. A big Persian rug was spread under the table, but otherwise the black-and-white marble floor was uncarpeted for coolness. To the west the awnings were down, but the whole long of the gallery towards the north was open to the breeze which pleasantly tempered the extreme warmth of the day. Over the town hung a blue haze of trembling heat, but the air was dry and invigorating, and though the thermometer registered a hundred degrees, not oppressive.

Coffee had just been served, and as the servants withdrew Sophia lit a cigarette.

‘About August, Petros,’ she said. ‘I want very much to go away the first week at latest, and I really see no reason why I should not.’

‘The House will not rise till September,’ said he.

‘Oh, the House, the House!’ cried she. ‘What does it matter what the House does? Let it fall down if it chooses! I have signed my name so often during the last month that if I go on I shall get writer’s cramp. What is writer’s cramp, by the way? And what do all my signatures amount to? Somebody has a concession for vine-growing, somebody is put in prison for a year, a firm is given leave to supply smokeless powder instead of Eley’s. I am sick of it all! I should like to turn Rhodopé into a limited company, and have it run by Durand, or Spiers and Pond, and pay one of their barmaids so much a year to impersonate me. I want to go away for a month or two as soon as possible, and what is more, Petros, I am going.’

‘If you have settled that, why argue about the matter,’ said he, ‘or trouble to consult me?’

‘Well, I wanted to know your opinion as to whether it is really advisable for me to stop. At the same time, if I had thought you would really disagree with me, I should not have asked you. But the thing is done now. What do you think about it?’

Petros was silent a moment. He had a plan in his head, and he wished to play his cards to advantage.

'Well, here is my opinion,' he said at length, 'You have asked for it, and you shall have it, though, as a rule, you don't like being advised, and I don't care about advising. You are reigning Princess of this country, and that delightful position——'

Sophia laughed.

'I would sooner be a milkmaid,' she said, 'but such a thing is not possible.'

'And that delightful position,' continued Petros, with the irritating manner of a man unaware of an interruption, 'has certain responsibilities attached to it. You cannot get rid of them except by sheer gross neglect of your duties, but to tell you the truth, they are not very onerous. One of them is that you should preserve the form, at any rate, of attending to the business of the House. I do not think you need really fear writer's cramp from signing their resolutions, whatever writer's cramp may be; I suppose it is the result of writing. But you must perform your simple duties——'

'I have seen that in copper-plate hand in the copy-books I used to do when I was a child,' remarked Sophia.

'That is where I got it from. It seems to me very true, though a little stale. I do not interfere with you, as you very well know, and I am, of course, powerless to prevent you going away when you wish. But I think you will make a very great mistake if you go away now.'

'*Tant pis*,' said she. 'Let us start on the last day of this month. And oh, Petros, there is a little place on the Riviera——'

Petros rose and walked about in seeming agitation for a moment or two. He was managing his cards beautifully. Then he turned sharply to her.

'Go, then, Sophia,' he said; 'but I shall not come with you.'

Sophia stared.

'Why not?' she asked. 'I promise never to refer to your system. And the sea is usually calm at this time of year.'

'That is not the reason.'

'What is it, then?' she asked.

‘Because the mischief which your absence during a sitting of the House will entail will be sensibly lessened—I do not wish to overrate my position—if I remain here, and have the air of attending very sedulously to the affairs of the State. There are certain businesses of the kind which you have allowed me to transact for you before—the less important Bills, in fact; with your permission, I will attend to them again. We want a fresh strain of blood in the trooper’s horses, for instance; at any rate, I can go carefully into the expenses and business incidental to that. I know a little about horse-breeding; I may even be useful on that question. The Bill will come before the House in the second week in August. I can, at least, serve on a committee. Later, when the House rises, I will join you. How does my plan strike you?’

Sophia was touched.

‘It is good of you to suggest that, Petros,’ she said. ‘It would be absurd for me to refuse your offer. You will not be very dull here? No? And it won’t look odd, will it, if I go and you stop here? I have a horror of doing things that look odd.’

‘Not so odd, at any rate, as if we both went away,’ said Petros.

‘And much less odd than if I stopped here all August,’ remarked Sophia in self-defence. ‘It would be an imbecility.’

Sophia got up from the table, and went indoors to the nursery to see the adorable Leonard, the four-months-old baby. Petros’s arrangement seemed to her to be in every way admirable. Apart from the convenience of getting away when she wanted, it gave her the opportunity of getting away alone. She was fond of her husband, but constantly irritated by him. She had no idea of letting herself be schooled by him into dependence, to be taught the duty of royalty by him, and she never forgot that she was Princess of Rhodopé, and he her husband. More than once had he attempted to point out to her his idea of what a wife’s attitude should be to her husband, and what a monarch’s attitude towards the people, and her retort had been not far to seek. She was autocrat of Rhodopé, and she was not going to be taught by anybody.

Petros, she found, was not only master of the subtleties of bezique, he knew also the most refined secrets of irritating conversation. With all his varied gifts, he had the misfortune to be a pedant, a

schoolmaster in private life, and, what is worse, to be quite unconscious of his pedantry. Sophia resented with every fibre in her nature his attempts to instruct her, to develop her mind, and, indeed, the chief result of his schooling had been to develop her impatience of him. Living with him was like living in a stuffy room with only high-backed chairs. He was for ever wanting her to sit up straight, and listen to improving conversation, whereas she wanted to lounge imperially by an open window. Something of the blood of generations of irresponsible rulers ran in her veins; the unbridled license of Eastern tyrants had mingled with the refinement of the student line of Florence to compound a subtle temperament. He had once alluded to some wise act of the Czar, wishing her to draw a lesson from it, but in a moment her nose was in the air.

‘The Romanoffs were feeding pigs when we were kings,’ she had said.

Her education, so to speak, had been the work of generations of ancestors, accomplished prenatally, and she owed more to them than to her tutors. It was Tamburlaine who had smoked a cigarette on the horse-block, and Lorenzo, more than her masters, who had given her that quick artistic perception that made the great singers of Europe love to sing to her accompaniment. The blood of the great Catherine was hers, too, and hers by inheritance the intolerance of rulers. ‘*C'est mon plaisir*’ was reason enough with her. Indeed, she needed a clever husband and a loyal people. The former she had got in a way, but his cleverness was more akin to cunning than to wisdom or broadness of vision. To trace the process of thought was to him as valuable as the conception itself, and it pleased him more to make an infinitesimal deduction correctly than to blunder splendidly. She was headstrong, and would never be small; he was a master of finesse, but could never be big. She was royal to her finger-tips, he was only the cadet of a family that happened to be reigning. Her second need—a large loyalty from her people—was more completely hers than he guessed. What she did was right, and how firmly the people of Rhodopé held that creed he was to learn. The spirit preached from Potsdam had possession of their hearts.

Petros sat still on the veranda after she had left him, and smoked contentedly. If Sophia found him irritating, he at any rate bore the

knowledge with equanimity. He had not looked for domestic bliss in his marriage; for he did not aim at domesticity, and he did not believe in bliss. But every day found him more thankful that he had married her, for he believed in ambition, especially when it was his own. Rhodopé seemed to him more enviable than ever, and he fully intended to make a bid for it. Rhodopé, he said to himself with sublime self-sufficiency as he was shaving, wanted a master; and he looked at his image in the glass. The very fact that Sophia had chosen to marry him amounted to a guarantee of his excellent qualities in the minds of her subjects; and he was quick enough to see how popular he was, and complacently shallow enough not to guess at the grand reason for his popularity. He was eminently possessed of the power to please, and when he found himself pleasing he not unnaturally referred it to his own power.

A further cause for gratification this morning lay in the fact that Sophia had been so willing to leave to deal with the affairs of the kingdom alone. She had closed with his offer as soon as it had been made, and, as this was the first real step that he had taken since his marriage in the prosecution of his aims, he was pleased that it should have gone forward without a stumble. He intended to use her absence to take several more steps in the same direction.

The Assembly of Rhodopé is peculiarly constituted. In all it numbers sixty members, of whom two-thirds enjoy hereditary seats, and one-third are elected by vote every three years. But there was in those days no sharp division into parties; no socialism as yet masqueraded in the streets under the very penetrable disguise of philanthropy; and those who had only small estates of their own had not yet begun to initiate Bills whereby larger holders should be deprived of their lands. On the other hand, even the hereditary voters were not all of blindly Conservative disposition, and the general tendency of politics was to be mildly progressive. The Prime Minister, elected by the House, was the President, and represented the monarch in his absence; but when the hereditary Prince or Princess was present, he took his seat in the body of the House. The Crown, however, possessed the power of deposing the Prime Minister and appointing a one at discretion. This prerogative had not since the great political crisis of 1793, and generally considered obsolete. But it had never

been repealed, and nothing stood in the way of its being exercised should the Sovereign decide to do so.

Princess Sophia left on the first of August in the royal yacht *Felatrune*. Her departure had been made somewhat hurriedly, and she had given but scanty attention to the discussion of the management of the affairs of State in her absence. Prince Petros, however, insisted that he should be given some clear notion of how far he was to be considered Regent, and how far he was to telegraph for her instructions. He had made a copy on a sheet of foolscap of the Bills which would come before the House before it broke up in September, and she ran her eye quickly over them.

‘Tobacco, potatoes—potatoes, tobacco,’ she said; ‘there is nothing there that I cannot leave completely to you. I will write a short address to the House, if I have time, in which I nominate you as my Regent, and Malakopf will read it out to them. Here, I will do it now; give me a bit of paper.’

Sophia scribbled some half-dozen lines, signed them, and addressed the envelope to the Prime Minister, Malakopf.

‘I understand that I am to take your place in every way,’ said Petros, to whom she had not shown the note.

‘Yes, I have said that,’ said Sophia. ‘Don’t introduce a Bill for deposing me, you know; and if there is any unexpected crisis, let me know by telegraph. Of course there won’t be, for crises never happen in Rhodopé, and the unexpected never happens anywhere. I have complete confidence in you, Petros. And don’t be terribly conscientious; if possible, let me not hear a word of these three-halfpenny concerns till you join me. I want an entire holiday.’

‘A holiday will do you good, dear Sophia,’ said he; ‘I am afraid the heat has tired you. In turn, let me ask you not to make the State bankrupt at Monte Carlo.’

‘It wants a man with a system to do that,’ laughed Sophia.

Petros and Leonard, an amazingly sunny infant, went down to Mavromáti to see the Princess off, and returned together to Amandos about six o’clock. Petros did not care for children, and the unconscious Leonard merely roused in him a sense of futile envy at the thought that the boy would some day be Prince of Rhodopé, not merely the

husband of its Princess. The Assembly met at three o'clock next day, and he spent a solitary but arduous evening going over very carefully a scheme he had in his mind. He was naturally a cautious man—a man with a system, as Sophia had said, but occasionally he would embark in a risky concern. His investments of all kinds, whether of money or brains, were either very safe or paid an enormous percentage.

The Prime Minister at this time was a man named Malakopf, originally no doubt of Russian birth, whose family had been settled in Rhodopé for many generations. Russian he might or might not be; Jew he certainly was, and he had all the financial sagacity of that remarkable race. His probity, however, stood in great need of demonstration; and he was known to have been mixed up in a very lucrative but more than questionable transaction, some ten years before, on the Vienna Bourse. There had been a most unpleasant scene on this occasion between him and Prince Demetrius, who spoke his mind with singular frankness, and Malakopf's affection for the reigning House of Rhodopé was supposed to be of the most tepid temperature.

Sophia detested the man; with her habitual force of expression, she had said that to be in the room with him was like having tea with a centipede: one never knew where it would be next, and the prevalent impression was that it was crawling up one's back. But Petros from the first had made much of him; he had often told his wife that so acute a financier was a goose who laid golden eggs for the State. It would be of the nature of suicide to strangle anything so intimately connected with the well-being of the principality. He might be like a centipede, socially speaking, if she would have it so; politically he was invaluable. Besides, he was a man with power; he could be a dangerous enemy, and it was always well to make friends with people who might be dangerous enemies.

Sophia's nose had gone in the air at this.

'My family is not accustomed to make friends with centipedes,' she had said. 'But, of course, you can do as you please, Petros.'

To-day Prince Petros sought him in his private room off one of the lobbies of the House. He was a bent, withered little man, but nimble in

movement, and there was a shifty brightness in his eye. He got up at the Prince's entry, and bowed low to him.

'An unexpected pleasure, your Highness,' he said. 'Indeed, I was told that Princess Sophia left Mavromáti yesterday, and I had supposed you had not yet returned. I am shamefully ill-posted in the news of our Court, but I have some transactions of great moment on hand, which must be my excuse.'

Now Malakopf knew that Petros had returned to Rhodopé, and Petros knew that he knew it. Thus comment was needless.

'My wife left yesterday,' said he, 'but, as you see, I am already back again. The Princess was in need of a holiday. State affairs'—he spoke with slow emphasis, and looked Malakopf full in the face—'State affairs have tired her terribly this summer. She has been head over ears in work.'

No shadow of a smile came over the Prime Minister's face.

'Indeed, it must be so,' he answered. 'Never a moment's relaxation or amusement! An iron will!'

But Prince Petros was satisfied; he was sure Malakopf had completely understood him.

'I came to talk to you on an important matter,' said the Prince, taking a seat. 'Naturally, my wife and I could not both be absent during the sitting of the House, and she gave me to understand that she was sending you a document, which she wished to be communicated to the Assembly, conferring on me—so I took her meaning to be—powers which amount—which really amount—to a Regency during her absence.'

Malakopf, though he was not naturally slow, appeared to take some moments before he grasped what the Prince had said. He fixed his eye on the window so long, without stirring a muscle, that the Prince spoke again.

'No doubt you have seen the document,' he said, with a little nervousness. 'From the few words the Princess let fall to me on the subject, I gathered—wrongly perhaps—that such was the purport of it.' At last the Prime Minister turned briskly in his chair.

‘That, I think, we may consider to be the purport of it,’ he said.
‘And I don’t suppose that the Princess Sophia has ever taken a more prudent and far-sighted determination. Indeed, it might be even more far-sighted than she supposes.’

The Prince knew that he was, so to speak, skating on ice which might prove to be thin. Malakopf knew it equally well, and he applauded inwardly and derisively the other’s caution.

‘You flatter me,’ said the Prince; and Malakopf silently but sincerely agreed with him. But he let no palpable pause precede his answer.

‘Flattery,’ he said, ‘is the unwilling tribute of a wise man to his inferior, or a fool to his superior. Dear Prince, how can I flatter you? For you are our beloved Princess’s husband, and indeed I have glimmerings of sense. But let us approach the point with more particularity. We must consider—must we not?—what will be your proper place in the Assembly. You represent the Princess Sophia, and as her representative you take the chair whenever you are present. But here the legal point comes in: you have no seat—an anomaly as I have always felt—in the Assembly at all. How would it be, then, if you absented yourself to-day, and that I, after reading the Princess’s message, proposed a resolution that during her absence you should be, *ex officio*, a Member of the House? Then you would have a seat there, and your position after that, as her representative, would make you President.’ He paused a moment, and with a look amazingly frank, ‘We understand each other, do we not?’ he almost whispered, and he approached as near to a chuckle as his prudence allowed.

‘You are admirably lucid,’ said Petros, returning his gaze.

‘And you, too,’ thought Malakopf; but he did not say so, and ceased chuckling.

‘Let us, then, act thus,’ he continued: ‘this afternoon I will take the vote of the House on the matter. It is almost unnecessary for me to send you the report, for there can be only one conclusion. However, by six o’clock I will let you know what has happened, for the matter of form merely—an official communication, my dear Prince, an official communication. Things must be done in order.’

Prince Petros rose.

‘Pray let me ask you,’ he said, ‘to throw over your other engagements to-night, and dine with me alone. You shall tell me then how the House received the proposal.’

‘I am infinitely honoured,’ said Malakopf, bowing again; and the Prince took his departure.

Left alone, Malakopf lit a cigarette, but instead of attending to business, seemed lost in evil meditation. At length he drew some papers towards him, and gave one ghost of a laugh.

‘There is a depth of shallowness,’ he said, to himself, ‘about that man, which to my frail mind is unplumbable.’

Malakopf dined with the Prince that evening, and before they went in to dinner made the most favourable report on the way that his proposition had been received in the House.

‘I first read out the Princess Sophia’s communication,’ he said. ‘It was known that Her Royal Highness had left for Monte——had left for a few visits to her relations, and the House requested me to record to you their sympathy with the Princess’s reason for taking a holiday, and hoped that a few weeks’ relaxation would recuperate her.’

‘I will convey the sympathy of the House to her,’ murmured Prince Petros.

Malakopf bowed.

‘I next brought forward the proposal that you should be entitled to a seat in the House in the Princess’s absence. It was carried, of course, unanimously—I may say with acclamation. Indeed, I have never,’ said he, drawing his hand over his chin—‘I have never seen so great an enthusiasm in our House.’

‘I will do my best to merit the honour you have conferred on me,’ said the Prince, checking his exultation.

The two dined alone, but with great state and magnificence. Both men wore their orders; on the sideboard was displayed the gold plate belonging to the Sovereign, and during dinner the royal band played a selection of ravishing airs from the gallery. The Prime Minister, Petros knew, liked magnificence, but what he did not know was that on this occasion he saw through it. Malakopf was something of a *gourmand* and much of a *gourmet*. He ate somewhat largely and very

intelligently. The turtle soup was excellent, the *chaudfroid* of quails a marvel of art (he would have liked to congratulate the chef), and he nearly wept with joy over the haunch of roe-deer braised *à la Savarin*. Finally the bottle of Château Vryssi (1832) which he drank with his dessert was almost an awe to him. He was near to feeling a sense of unworthiness, but so far overcame it as to be able to drink a second bottle.

Petros knew well the Prime Minister's weakness for fine food, and thought that if a good dinner would not earn the man's gratitude, and so indirectly his help, nothing would. In this he was right. Had it been possible for Malakopf to feel himself under an obligation to anybody, he would have been disposed to fall in with the wishes of a man who had fed him well. But the ore of his nature, if milled, would have been found to contain not the smallest assay of gratitude. Not only had Nature not compounded him with a grain of it, but in the mixing she had used a clean spoon, one which had never had gratitude measured in it; he was wholly incapable of such a feeling. All he knew was that he would certainly dine with the Prince as often as he was invited—even indicate, ever so lightly, that he was ready to come again.

Dinner over, the two sat in the south veranda, where they drank coffee and smoked. Malakopf, habitually cautious, was perhaps moved to an unwonted boldness by that noble grape of which he had drunk so freely; but after he had unloosed his tongue to speak the first words on the subject which was in the minds of both of them, he knew he had done right, and that the Prince would be a tool in his hands.

'It is a thousand pities,' he said, 'that the Princess is so delicate. With all my loyalty, all my unwavering devotion to our royal line, of which I need not remind you, I have sometimes nearly caught myself wishing that Prince Demetrius had had a son, a man of iron like himself, who was equal to the strain and stress of State affairs. The Princess—God bless her!—has often reminded me of that fable of the sword which was worn out by use—she will not abide in the scabbard. Indeed, how you persuaded her to take this little holiday, my dear Prince Petros, I cannot conceive—a miracle of successful diplomacy.'

'We must encourage her to be put in the scabbard sometimes,' said the Prince; 'and, indeed, she felt herself tired out; it required but little

persuasion on my part to make her go. Her weakness, not my strength, was the giver of my little victory.'

Malakopf shook his head.

'You underrate your powers, Prince Petros,' he said. 'It was always the same with the Princess; she is all zeal for whatever she has in hand. I have even seen her once or twice here in the palace playing some trivial game at the cards with the ardour—all the ardour, so I thought—with which she follows our debates. And with what act! You would have thought she really cared for the romances of the little pasteboard pieces in which her guests of less sterling fibre found their amusement. She plays still, I believe?'

Prince Petros had not the patience to continue this elaborate farce. Malakopf had fully intended that the first step of importance should be taken by the other, and the wraith of a smile hovered round his mouth as Petros spoke again.

'She plays still, as you say,' he replied; 'and, as you know, she has gone to Monte Carlo, and her royal relations are the tables. The affairs of the State, as you also know, are nothing to her. I fully believe, though, that if she had stopped here she would have suffered in health through pure boredom. But that which is so insignificant to her is very dear to me. I want to see Rhodopé a great power, and no buffer State. I want—'

He stopped abruptly, got out of his seat, and began walking up and down.

'Your Highness wants——?' suggested Malakopf, insinuatingly, and as softly as a thought.

'I want Rhodopé to be a nation,' broke out the Prince. 'Look at our material!' ('Already he says "our,"' thought Malakopf.) 'Did you ever see finer men than these troops? Look at our coast, and show me the fleet that could effect a landing. Have you seen Gibraltar? You have seen Búlteck, and that is two Gibralters! Look at our boundaries! Whose is the army that could invade Rhodopé? England herself is not more definitely marked out by Nature to be a great power than we. We are of one race with the Albanian, the flower of the Greek as well as the Turkish troops—completely careless of death, and with no thought but their country. Once set me in a great position here, and you shall

see what I will make of Rhodopé'. If I were the humblest Member of the Chamber I could act, but now I am bound with chains of lead. My hands are tied; I can do nothing; and my wife spends her money and her time and her thoughts at Monte Carlo. I am no more than the lacquey who stands in her ante-chamber—less even, for he is useful in his way; I alone am a cipher. Oh, Malakopf, it is pitiable, man—it is pitiable!'

The Prince stood before him, his hands opened out by his side, his handsome mobile face suffused with excitement. Malakopf put one leg over the other, and suppressed a sigh of content. He had not dared to hope for speaking so plain as this. There was no need for any more diplomatic dancing.

'Yet you have obtained one step to-day,' he said; 'you have a seat in the House. That may well be considered—how do you say it?—the thin end of the wedge.'

'Yes, and when my wife returns out comes the wedge,' replied the Prince. 'And out come I. Oh, Lord!'

'Not necessarily,' said the Prime Minister.

The Prince sat down.

'Explain yourself; I do not understand,' he said. Malakopf flicked the ash off his cigar. He was so completely master of the situation, that he did not intend to be hurried.

'It is true that your seat is only temporary at present,' he said; 'but one way and another, dear Prince Petros, I have managed to become a somewhat influential person in the State——'

'So I always tell my wife,' said the Prince with extraordinary unwisdom, thinking to please the centipede.

'I am infinitely grateful for your good word,' replied the other. 'But I did not mean that I had any influence in the eyes of the Princess—and, to speak to you with a frankness that will nearly equal your own, I do not care to have. But with my considerable wealth, and the extent of my estate, not to mention a certain personal influence I have with a large party in the Assembly—an influence which it would be false modesty in me to underrate, I could, I think, manage to secure you a permanent seat.'

‘Take another cigar,’ said the Prince. ‘Will you do this for me?’

Malakopf smiled. The juxtaposition of the offer of a cigar and this request suggested, fantastically enough, a bribe.

‘I do not say it would be easy to manage,’ he replied. ‘It might be a troublesome affair, and, to speak plainly’—here he laid his hand on the Prince’s knee, and looked him suddenly in the face—‘what am I to get by it?’

‘Yet you said this afternoon that my not having a seat in the Senate was an anomaly.’

‘I endorse what I said. But is it expedient for me personally to attempt to do away with that anomaly?’

‘I will make it worth your while,’ said the Prince in a low voice.

‘That is enough, my dear Prince,’ he said.

‘Here is a light for you,’ said Prince Petros; and his hand shook as he held the match in the windless air.

CHAPTER VI.

THE NEW MEMBER.

WHEN Malakopf went home that night, he came near to being a victim of exultation. That delightful emotion he always eschewed, for he considered it a dangerous feeling, one that blunts the perception, deadens acumen, and has no practical significance. Indeed, the greatest extravagance in this way that he usually allowed himself on the conclusion of some very successful bargain was a pleased contempt at the contemplation of wits inferior to his own, and a disdainful indifference, amounting sometimes to dislike, to those who had been his tools or his unfortunate adversaries. But to-night he was strangely moved; perhaps he was even a little dazzled at the greatness of the stake for which he was playing, perhaps he was only much pleased and surprised at the aptness of the tool which Providence—he made no doubt it was Providence, which always looks after those who look after themselves—had so kindly put in his hand. Like the Prince himself, he too was writing a private little drama of much the same nature, the chief difference being that while the Prince's play was entitled 'The Emperor of the East,' Malakopf's was more modestly called 'The President of the Republic.' Another variation between the two is perhaps worth recording: in the Prince's production there was a minor character, a sort of gentleman-in-waiting, called Malakopf (Count Malakopf, perhaps), whereas in his 'President of the Republic' no mention was made of any Petros, Prince or otherwise.

But as a tool Petros seemed admirable; he was sharp, and could be thrown away when done with. His relation to the Princess would put him, in the minds of all loyal people—and Malakopf valued loyalty in others—beyond the reach of suspicion. For what could be more suitable, or more gratifying to the folk of Rhodopé, than to see the husband of their beloved Princess, that accomplished rider, that finished squire of dames, so identifying himself with the affairs of the kingdom? Furthermore, there was a vast deal of underground work which would probably have to be done, and if there was one thing more than another in which the busy brain of Malakopf delighted, it

was to make himself a mole, a delver in the dark, and spring his castles on the foolish grazing cattle where they were least suspected. The Château Vryssi (1832) was sweet, though dryer, than the vintage of his thoughts.

Prince Petros was, in a way, wise to trust the plan and execution of his conspiracy—for so we may already call it—to Malakopf. He himself, at any rate, had neither the courage, the caution, nor the constructive ability which could warrant any decent chance of success. He was cunning, no more, and cunning is but a pin-point to go a-fighting with. On the other hand, he was irredeemably foolish to trust Malakopf further than he could see him, and he could not see far. Thus, he was like to fall between two stools, an inexcusable and an undignified position, which ends on the floor.

As for Malakopf, that astute politician had as usual several strings to his bow. His scheme, as he had planned it, could scarcely fail altogether of success. The target at which he aimed was a long and hazardous shot, being, indeed, no less than the overthrow of the dynasty, the establishment of a republic in Rhodopé, and the establishment of himself as President of the same. He had, as he had told Prince Petros, a considerable influence in the State. For some years past, under different names, he had invested immense sums in Government stock, and if at any moment he chose to throw his shares on the market, he could not only discredit the National Bank in the eyes of Europe, but he would also seriously cripple the State itself. Again, under an alias, he had driven a flourishing money-lending trade in Amandos, and many of the Members of the Assembly were seriously in his debt. Thirdly, his vast estates in the country gave employment to a large body of the electorate, and he could, so he supposed, command when necessary a great number of votes.

But it was characteristic of the man that he was preparing at first to use a slower and more devilish method of magnifying himself to the detriment of the reigning family. He had on the tip of his poisonous tongue all the clap-trap of socialism, and he had, what is almost as important, a real acquaintance with the spirit of their demands. The scheme proposed by the absurd catchword of ‘three acres and a cow’ contained its residuum of truth, and if so enticing a phrase was not sufficient, he could justify it to willing ears. Princess Sophia was, as he

knew, an unrivalled Aunt Sally for such random weapons; her extravagance, her Parisian toilettes, her magnificent jewels, her nights spent in ruinous card-playing, were all texts ready for the ranter. He did not intend to do the ranting himself, that should be for those whom he controlled; he, the Prime Minister, with quivering lip, but firm of purpose, would sit in his exalted place on the Assembly and find himself unable to answer such damnation of criticism. The Budget was the instrument on which he greatly relied. A little judicious arrangement, the money spent in outdoor relief prominently contrasted with the civil list of the Princess, could not fail to tell.

These were the methods by which he had long planned to make an attack on the reigning house, and they still seemed to him trustworthy. But he realized that this new ally, in the shape of the Prince, might open to him other and directer roads. In any case, it was a sound policy to put this man of straw in the place which the Princess Sophia, who was undeniably flesh and blood, occupied in the Assembly. If once he could be completely installed there, it was comparatively easy to turn him out, leaving, so he hoped, a vacancy in the President's chair. But such a delectable conclusion, he realized, must be largely a matter of luck. He was merely prepared to take a chance, if it came in his way.

But the man, with all his burning audacity, was yet cautious. Personally, supposing no great stroke of luck occurred and he had to follow his slower methods, he gave the dynasty four years; by that time his unholy leaven would have worked. He would instruct the ignorant in the ways of Court life, he would water their growing knowledge with disgust, he would evolve a strongly socialistic class of ignorant content. Then, and not till then, would he clench the matter by the withdrawal of his stock, threatening letters to his debtors, and plain speaking to the electorate which he commanded.

Prince Petros's scheme was far different, and infinitely less sagacious. He would get his permanent in the Assembly; he would, during one of Sophia's absences, get himself trusted by the anti-dynastic party which it should be Malakopf's business to form. He would be a model of sedulous industry in his attendances at the House, reaping a harvest of golden opinions from the legislators, and at the end down would come in full spate from the mountains of moral indignation his torrent of broken-hearted eloquence. The revenues of

the State had been squandered for years past—he admitted and deplored it; their Sovereign was at Monte Carlo—the time was come when these things could not be borne in silence—wasting her moneys there. Her child—his child—had been initiated by her into the mysteries of a game which he was told was called baccarat. He was here to tell them that he resigned his seat in the Assembly, for he was in a false position. He did not represent one whom he was nominally there to represent; he represented plain living and high thinking, his position was therefore false, and to be in a false position was more than he could bear. Overcome by his emotion, torn by conflicting affection, he would sit down; a murmur, carefully prepared by his poor friend the Prime Minister, would swell up round him. Then, recovering himself with an effort, he would get up to leave the House; the House would rise to their feet; a voice would say, ‘Stay, do not go’; the chorus would be taken up; and next day he would write a polite letter to Sophia, saying that he had been elected Prince of Rhodopé by the Assembly, while she had become the Princess Sophia, wife of the Prince of Rhodopé.

Such was the roughly-sketched outline of their schemes as conceived by the two conspirators. The working of the plot, as has been mentioned, was entrusted to Malakopf, the Prince’s part being confined to an industrious attendance on public business until their sowing had ripened. Up to this point, at any rate, the plans of each pulled with the other; at that point they parted. Malakopf had no intention of letting the Prince make his pathetic speech in the House, or of himself organizing any sympathetic murmurs, and the Prince had no intention of any official but himself supreme in Rhodopé. The throne was to be for him and his children after him. He was unwise enough to give Malakopf a sketch of what he had designed the progress of affairs to be, and the other had smilingly acquiesced, saying it was singular how completely identical the Prince’s forecast was with his own. And Petros turned aside, and thought to himself, ‘Poor dear old Malakopf!’

The business of securing the Prince a permanent seat in the Assembly was carried through the next week, but not without some little opposition. The suggestion of the Princess that her husband should take her place in her absence had been received with

unanimous cordiality as coming from her, but this further step was not understood to have been initiated where the first had been, and there were those who opposed. But this opposition fully suited Malakopf's hand; he did not wish Prince Petros to think that the matter was easily accomplished. The more he felt himself indebted to the Prime Minister, the better; he would be thus less likely to take incautious steps on his own initiative, for Malakopf was fully alive to the danger of Petros making a false move, and thus involving the plans of both in ruin.

But the thing was carried through, and Prince Petros, who had gracefully absented himself from the sitting in which it was to come under discussion, was informed of the success of the motion in a letter from the Prime Minister, who was again to dine with him that evening. Malakopf suggested that he should at once tell Sophia what had happened, since it was always wise to be frank about matters which it was impossible to conceal, and that he should take his seat next day or as soon as he received a favourable reply from her.

The Prince at once telegraphed in private cipher to his wife, and was pleased to get the following answer before Malakopf arrived that evening:

‘Am charmed to hear it. You can take a great deal off my hands, and I am sure you will do the work well.
Shall stay at Monte Carlo till further notice, since there is no longer any need of me at Rhodopé. Have lost heaps of money.—SOPHIA.’

This was entirely satisfactory, and Malakopf, to whom he read the telegram, thought so too. The clause ‘Since there is no longer any need of me at Rhodopé’ seemed to both a word of good omen. The last sentence also quite delighted the Prime Minister.

‘From what you know of the Princess,’ he said, ‘do you imagine that her losses will tend to make her come away the sooner?’

‘It will be a reason the more, if reason was wanted,’ said Petros, ‘for making her remain. Oh, I know her as I know my gloves.’

‘So I hoped. And if she loses more—if she loses all the money she has in hand, would she borrow?’

‘Of whom?’

Malakopf paused. He was not sure that he was not talking with a risk. But he decided to chance it, as he had the highest opinion of the idiocy of his fellow-conspirator.

‘Of me, for choice,’ he said at length.

Prince Petros flushed; he did not quite like this.

‘Her Royal Highness would probably apply to her husband,’ he said stiffly, ‘if she was in want of money.’

‘And would you lend it her?’

‘Certainly not. I should request her to come home.’

‘Then you would be acting unwisely,’ said Malakopf, knowing he had done right to open this point. ‘Do you not see that the more hopelessly she beggars herself, and the more deeply she gets into debt to someone, you or another, by so much the more are our plans advanced? If we are to overthrow the dynasty—dethrone the Princess Sophia, I mean—she must meet us half-way; she must run to meet her ruin.’

‘I am sure she would not apply to you for money,’ said Petros—‘not directly, at least.’

‘Indirectly, perhaps,’ suggested Malakopf.

‘You mean through me?’

‘This is what I mean,’ said the Prime Minister, bridling his irritation at the comparative slowness of the man: ‘How would it be if, when she applied to you for money, you borrowed it of me? Does not the idea strike you as sound? You would in the Assembly acknowledge your indebtedness to me, but, as you so finely sketched, in pathetic degrees it would be drawn from you how the debt was incurred, to shield whom from European exposure. For, indeed, not even the loyalty of Rhodopé would stand their Princess being notorious for not paying her gambling debts. My suggestion seems to me a double-edged weapon. It would cut against the Princess; it would move pity and compassion for you.’

‘I think you are right,’ said the Prince reluctantly.

‘And I know I am right,’ thought Malakopf, who saw in this little scheme a hold not so much over Sophia—she would be easily

managed—but over Prince Petros.

The Prince was formally installed in the Assembly next day. As Regent he occupied Sophia's place, but his permanent seat when taking part in the debates was with the other Ministers in the body of the House. He was well received, even, he thought, enthusiastically—for applause sounds loud in the ears of its recipient—and he made a speech which he thought excellently telling, as it would sound loyal to the loyal, and to any who might not be blind to his wife's edifying absences from the Assembly a hint that even her husband deplored her conduct.

'It has been my lot during the last fortnight,' he said, 'to have received two very great honours at the hand of this august Assembly. Last week only I was admitted to the House to act as Regent for Her Royal Highness my beloved wife. That moment was very sweet to me, for it showed me in how loyal an esteem you held her, in adopting her suggestion that I should during her absence do my very humble best to fill her place. I am unable to tell you how unworthy I felt myself, how incapable of following her steps, of acquainting myself with the infinite details of procedure which she knows so well, but I do not think that any man can ever have made a stronger determination to do all that in him lies than I. To-day the honour you have done me is more personal. My lords and gentlemen, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for it. I am comparatively a stranger among you, but you have treated me as a friend. You have made me one of yourselves, and I too, with you, have my part in the glorious responsibility of furthering the interests of this realm of Rhodopé. The Princess Sophia has telegraphed to me her warm approval of this step. She will thus be able, she said, to take a few more weeks of that holiday she so much needs. Gentlemen, I thank you—I thank you; I can say no more.' And the Prince's voice choked with emotion, and he sat down.

For the next week he was a pattern of sedulous attention to public affairs. He spoke on the Criminal Law Amendment Act with marked ability, and the *Rhodopé Courier* referred to his speech as a *locus classicus* on the psychology of crime. His short contribution to the debate on the Hares and Woodcock Bill was masterly. In this he espoused the cause of the landlord against the tenant. What was not put into the ground by the tenant clearly belonged to the landlord, and to

repeal any portions of the Game Laws of 1852, as had been suggested, was surely a short-sighted policy. To abolish the close time, to abolish the necessity for licenses to kill game, was to exterminate it. What had been the result of the repeal in Greece, a country once as rich in game as theirs? Was not the whole of the Peloponnese desert of wild animals? On the question of tobacco-growing he showed himself equally conversant with the salient points of the dispute. He had naturally a fine delivery, and his voice was a marvel of tone and clearness. He never hesitated for a word; he never hurried. He was in his seat at the opening of the debates; he never left until the end. He was always courteous, obliging, and encouraging, and, like the speeches of all great statesmen, his remarks were distinguished by a keen grasp of the obvious.

Malakopf watched his entry into this public life with amusement and satisfaction. No tool could have been more apt, and the work he turned out was excellent. At present the growing popularity of the Prince was exactly what he wished to see. The more he shone in State matters, the dimmer would become the light of the Princess. When the one had reached its necessary brilliance, and the other suitably declined, he would again intervene. In the meantime, the Prince gave him impeccable dinners, priceless wines, and conversation that was positively interesting owing to its extreme naïveté.

Princess Sophia, while the moles were at work under the feet of her throne, had much enjoyed herself at Monte Carlo. During the early days there she had been the victim of a run of extreme ill-luck, but the second half of August saw her more than quits. She had begun her little outing with unwonted soberness, never staking on one number, often backing a dozen, and occasionally even so far demeaning herself as to bet by the hour on the colour. On this ignoble plan she had lost with great regularity, and, as her stakes were usually high, with fair rapidity. She became disgusted, almost bored, and returned with ardour to her more hazardous procedure. The fickle goddess was charmed at the recantation of the heresies which could never have been permanent, and had looked on her with peculiar favour, and thus it came about that in the third week in September, even before the House, which the fine example of Petros had rendered even more

conscientious and industrious than usual, had risen, she announced by telegram her earlier return, and the return of forty thousand napoleons.

Petros went down to Mavromáti to meet the *Felatrune*, and she seemed pleased and a little surprised to see him.

‘I should have thought your duties in the Assembly would not have allowed you leisure to come,’ she said. Then, suddenly laying her hand on his shoulder, ‘How you have grown, Petros!’ she said; and it seemed to Petros that she was in the mood to be amused, for she laughed at her own remark, which seemed to him so void of point that he did not even remember to repeat it to Malakopf, who would probably not have been amused at all.

CHAPTER VII.

THE PRINCESS'S CLUB.

PRINCESS SOPHIA, on her return to Amandos, found the affairs of State more irksome, if possible, than ever. The innumerable petty businesses to which she had to give her attention seemed more than usually futile to her, and there was no table handy where, after a day of unutterably wearisome routine, she could forget the Mayor and the wife of the Mayor, and the potatoes and tobacco, in the enchanting uncertainties of roulette. Prince Petros, at her request, relieved her during the day of a large part of her duties; but in the evening, when she would have been glad to get a game of bezique even with him—for his card-playing had strangely gone off of late—there was often some committee at which, so he assured her, the presence of one of them necessary.

It had more than once seemed to her that this recurrence of committees waxing more frequent than under her father, and she noted the circumstance as a curious one. There seemed, now that the House had risen, an interminable deal of business to be transacted, and it was more often than not that Malakopf was closeted with the Prince for an hour or two after dinner. Again and again it happened that she and her husband would have just sat down to a game, when it was announced that the Prime Minister was below, and wished to consult the Princess on a matter of urgent importance. On such occasions she always asked Petros to represent her, since she really could not face Malakopf, and he obeyed with cheerful alacrity.

It was during one of these interviews—a tiresome after-dinner interruption—when the Princess was left yawning to herself in the drawing-room, that an idea occurred to her, so simple in itself, and so easy of execution, that she was lost in astonishment at her own stupidity that she had not thought of it before. What could be more obvious than that the remedy for these terrible days and interrupted evenings was in the establishment of a casino at Amandos, where she could play not this tiresome bezique, but the real unapproachable roulette? And she rose from her chair, and fairly danced round the

room at the thought. She would send for Pierre—the inimitable Pierre—the most discreet and attentive of croupiers. He should manage the tables for her, and receive a magnificent salary. Oh, heavens! what a relief it would be to slip out of the House for a recuperative hour in the casino—to forget for a little the unrivalled tedium of State affairs! The casino should be built on Crown land, close to the Palace garden, and there should be a quiet entrance through a private gate into the place, to save going round the garden walls. There should be a little red room, like that in which she had played so often at Monte Carlo, and which of late the obsequious manager had reserved for her when there was a party with her, where Pierre, urbane and infallible, should set the little ball spinning, with his thrilling plain-song chant, '*Faites vos jeux, messieurs et mesdames—faites vos jeux!*'

The entrance of Petros interrupted her rosy visions, and before he was well inside the room:

‘Oh, Petros, I have such an idea!’ she cried. ‘I shall start a nice little casino here at Amandos, and while you, you dear industrious old thing, are having your endless interviews with centipede Malakopf, I shall run across and just take ten minutes at roulette—a breath of fresh air. It shall be built on that piece of land, just outside the garden, where you wanted to have an asylum for decayed and idiotic old gentlemen, and Pierre shall be the manager.’

Now, though Malakopf often groaned under the slowness of the Prince, Petros was not altogether without wits. Perhaps his late interview with Malakopf had sharpened them—indeed, he seemed to Sophia to have acquired a certain quickness lately, though not at cards; but, at any rate, he saw at once that Sophia was coming to meet their schemes half-way, as Malakopf had wished she should. A reigning Princess, winning and losing money from her loyal subjects, could not be construed into an edifying spectacle, and he made no doubt that the people of Rhodopé would agree with him. She could not, so he thought, have hit on a more simple and direct method of dividing the folk into two parties—one for her (a small one, he hoped), and one (consequently a large one) against her. Truly she was sowing the seed of a revolution broadcast, and it would grow up armed men against herself. His face was a miracle of delighted sympathy.

‘Oh, Sophia,’ he cried, ‘how great an idiot you must think me for never having suggested that! Oh, if I had only had the idea, the casino should have been ready when you returned! It should have been built in a day, like a fairy-palace, to pleasure you. And Pierre, Pierre is just the man—sober and steady, and full of the divine fire. I remember his laying his hand on his heart one night after one of those evenings, those dear evenings, we spent together at Monte Carlo, and saying: “I adore the Princess! None plays so finely as she!”’

Sophia was charmed with his readiness to take her idea up.

‘At last, and at last!’ she cried. ‘Oh, Petros, my soul is sick for roulette!’

‘Poor dear Sophia,’ said he, ‘and I am afraid you find me grown very dull. But it is true you have every reason to find me dull; I am so taken up with these public affairs, that the work has become a passion to me. In my little way, I have tried to fulfil these duties; at first, I allow, with distaste, but the performance of them has brought its own reward.’

‘Ah, copy-books—copy-books!’ cried Sophia, laying her hands laughingly on his shoulder.

‘Copy-books—even so, Sophia,’ he said. ‘The proper study of mankind is man, and it is better to be useful than to be clever. I am full of such thoughts. And it is dull for you. Would that I could do more, however.’

‘You are a dear, good man, Petros,’ she said, ‘and I am delighted with you.’

‘I have done my best,’ he said, with a quiet dignity and an extreme sincerity of manner.

He glanced for a moment at a bundle of papers he held in his hand.

‘No, no,’ cried Sophia; ‘you shall not attend to any more business to-night. What are those papers? Throw them into the grate, and talk to me about the casino.’

The man had his part at the finger-tips.

‘The latter with pleasure, the former I must refuse to do,’ he said. ‘How would you greet me, Sophia, if I came to you next week and said your Civil List had not been paid, or that a deputation insisted on

waiting on you? What is the time? Just eleven. Well, we will sit and talk, and soon I must go back to work. No, no,' he cried, as she would laughingly have taken the papers from him; 'it is for dull old people like me to do this sort of work. You shall not see any of them, Sophia;' and with a quick motion he folded them up and put them in his pocket.

But he had had a rather awkward moment. It was quite true that they were not for Sophia to see, since among them was a note from Malakopf containing urgent advice to him not to be in too great a hurry, and quoting Napoleon to that effect.

So—for there was no law in Rhodopé against gambling, and not likely to be while Sophia lived—the Princess's casino rose apace. The marble quarries belonging to the Crown grew loud with the chisel, and unceasingly poured forth their translucent treasures to pleasure the Princess; for the hangings of her rooms the silk-worms toiled and span, and for their colouring the purple shells of Tyre worked their miracles; for her the looms of the Orient clashed and wove, and the red roses on Arab stuffs grew thicker than the stars at night.

By spring the walls had risen to their full stately height, and Duvelleroys, of Paris, who had contracted for the finishing and decorations of the establishment, were already sending out their artists and argosies. A flight of broad marble steps, balustraded in a grotesque flamboyant style, led up to the great terrace running along the west front, which overlooked the town of Amandos, and commanded a magnificent sea-view. In summer this would be an out-of-door dining-room, where the player would cool his fevered brain by the contemplation of the infinite sea, and the sight of the sun setting in amber clouds behind the northern cape of Corfu. Double doors gave entrance to a marble flagged hall, from which opened the various cardrooms; on the left was the largest public-room, for roulette only, and a cabinet off this, with scarlet satin walls, was called the Princess's room. Straight in front of the entrance were the rooms for baccarat, and on the right was what Sophia called the nursery, a room devoted to the innocent, if somewhat lugubrious, pursuit of 'little horses' and the 'train'; but, as she said, a finished gambler was made, not born, and the young needed education. A smoking-room, containing a bar and a white marble statue of Luck, from the chisel of Augier, blindfold and smiling on one side of the mouth, completed the square.

On the first floor were the dining-room and the various drawing-rooms, where the less orthodox games of whist, picquet, and bezique might be played; while the downstairs rooms of the club—so Sophia named it—were devoted to the truer forms of play. Thus, as she acutely observed, extremes could be seen meeting, for in her club, as in all other clubs, whist was only allowed in certain rooms.

Upstairs, again, over the dining and drawing-rooms, were some twenty bedrooms, so that the most thorough devotees—those, in fact, who were purged of all other desires—need not leave the club night or day, and the goddess of their worship might directly watch, if so she felt disposed, over their slumbers, and send them dreams full of the true religion.

Malakopf saw the building go up with mixed feelings. At first he had been quite of the same mind as Prince Petros, agreeing that the Princess was playing most directly into their hands and forwarding their schemes. But the reception of the prospectus by the people, and the avidity with which the shares in the undertaking were snatched up—for the Princess had floated a company—was somewhat puzzling to him. Hitherto gambling had been almost unknown in Rhodopé, always excepting in the precincts of the palace, but the idea of gaining rouleaux of gold by merely sitting in an admirably comfortable arm-chair in a beautiful room seemed to have taken strong hold on the public imagination. The shares were divided into £60,000 of ordinary shares, and £40,000 of debenture stock, which were to pay 5 per cent. The Princess had herself invested £10,000 in the ordinary shares, and Prince Petros, with characteristic caution, £5,000 in debenture stock; but within three hours of the subscription being opened, every share was taken up. The stock was issued at par, but before the week was out it was already quoted at 115, and before the building was complete it reached 120, and Prince Petros was strongly inclined to sell out, though the fear of his wife's scorn prevented him.

Here, too, Malakopf had acted with Semitic prudence. Supposing by any chance the Princess should, in some unforeseen way, frustrate the scheme of himself and Petros, and she and her gambling continue to throne it over Rhodopé, it would be well to have a foot in her camp, and while investing only £1,000 under his own name, he telegraphed

from Vienna in the name of a large banking firm there to secure £10,000 of ordinary shares, or as many as might be allotted.

But these three were the only large investors, and for the most part the money was made up by small speculators, on the strength, so it seemed, of the Princess's name. Ten fishermen from Mavromáti, for instance, who, so to speak, did not know red from black, clubbed together and purchased a £100 ordinary share; a wild-eyed shepherd-boy came in from the remote hills, and asked for twenty francs worth of the new club; and the head of the Education Department put a question in the Assembly as to whether it was permissible to invest the surplus of the Government grant in the Princess's company.

Now, Malakopf, astute politician as he was, and unrivalled astronomer of the financial heaven, could not with certainty interpret these signs of the times. The readiness with which the subscription was taken up seemed to augur either a greater popularity of the Princess than he had bargained for, or a love of gambling in her subjects hitherto void of fruition. If either of these interpretations was correct—and he did not see a loophole for a third—it argued not well for the success of the anti-dynastic conspiracy. He had hoped that there would be some outburst of popular feeling against the scheme, or an unfriendly reference to it in the Assembly. It is true there had been some great outburst of popular feeling, but that had been in favour of it; and as for the unfriendly reference in the Assembly, that was still unspoken. For himself, he dared not allude to it in a hostile spirit (Prince Petros's tongue was also tied), for he had openly invested £1,000 in the company, and he would without doubt be called ugly names if, after that, he showed public disapproval of it. More than that, supposing he organized a successful opposition to it, he stood fair to lose that much larger sum which he had covertly put into it. Of his two possible interpretations for the success of the subscription, he much preferred to attribute it to the popularity of the Princess, for if a latent love of gambling was innate in the hearts of the Rhodopians, he had to face the fact that before long she would be doubly endeared to her subjects, since, considering her merely as a gambler, she was unique and magnificent—even Petros, with his system, allowed that—and there were no two words to the question.

Prince Petros meantime watched the rising walls with a daily accession of disgust and misgiving. He was a skilful card-player, but he was not a gambler. His daydream of seeing Sophia go evening after evening to empty and depopulated rooms, to find Pierre mournfully yawning behind his hand, and regretting the gay stir and bustle of Monte Carlo, was replaced by a vision which showed him Sophia crowned and honoured queen of the gamblers. He was both more sanguine and more easily cast down than his acuter colleague. He had foreseen a complete and immediate success when the idea of a club was put to him by his wife, where Malakopf had only seen a possible factor of success; and similarly now, while Malakopf was dubious, the Prince was frankly despondent.

‘There is no hope here,’ he said to the Prime Minister one day, ‘where I had hoped so much. She is more popular than ever, and the gold burns in the people’s pockets while they wait for the club to be opened. They are gamblers—born gamblers—I am sure of it, and she is the finest of them all. You can take my word for it, there is no one in the world with so fine a style. They will worship her method of play, they will adopt it universally, so far as their more timorous natures permit, and she will pile success on success. Half Rhodopé will think of nothing but doubling their winnings, the other half of repairing their losses. I almost wish I had never come to this damnable country. Rhodopé will become a roulette-board, and I of infinitely less moment than the marble which the croupier sets spinning.’

Malakopf moved impatiently in his chair. He no longer treated the Prince in private with the least form of ceremony.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, do not be so fretful and childish!’ he said. ‘If I, who am as cunning as the devil and as wise as the original serpent, cannot yet make up my mind how this experiment of your wife’s will turn out, how is it possible for you to see the issues with such clearness? You do not grasp the situation. This new club is a new factor in our scheme; it is quite likely that it is a factor against us. On the other hand, it may indirectly give us an opportunity. We have to wait, so let us do so like reasonable men. I have no patience with prophets—there is no such thing as prophecy; the whole world is one calculation. You have not calculated; you only prophesy. I never prophesy; but I am not without a mathematical gift.’

‘You are not tied by the ankle to the steps of a throne,’ retorted Petros. ‘You do not know Sophia as I know her, and, what is more, you have only a thousand pounds in this precious club.’

Malakopf had not told, and did not intend to tell, Petros about his further investment, and he replied:

‘You are wholly wrong, my dear Prince. Because you drink tea with Princess Sophia, and see her in her stays, you think you know her better than I. Perhaps you know the people better also. I, at any rate, know that she is capable of almost anything—certainly of any piece of extravagant folly, but also, I am afraid, of a consummate stroke of Statecraft. If I were to take to prophesying in your spirit, an uneasy man would be standing in your shoes. You don’t see a quarter of the possible risks we may have to run, but you see no more of our possible opportunities. But observe, I never prophesy, and I have not yet enough data to tell how this affair will turn out. Be good enough to wait; nothing was ever done in a hurry, though things may be done fast.’

Pierre, obedient to the commands of his adored Princess, arrived in the month of April, and expressed himself charmed with all the arrangements, and more than gratified with his salary. The Princess gave him audience at the Palace on the day of his arrival, talked to him for an hour with great vivacity, and would have liked to ask him to dinner, if it were only to see Petros’ face when she told him who her guest was. But she refrained, and Pierre, who would have been greatly embarrassed by the honour, was allowed to take his departure in peace.

The club was formally opened on the first of May, so breathless had been the speed with which the Princess’s plans were put into execution, and she herself performed the ceremony in full state. Levée dress with orders was worn, and the gardens of the Casino presented the most brilliant appearance. Only those who had paid their subscriptions and become members of the club were allowed in the spacious grounds, but it really seemed as if all Rhodopé were members. The Princess had arranged quite an imposing little ceremony, resembling the enthronement of a bishop. Followed by Petros and her ministers, she walked up the steps of the south veranda, and in breathless silence tapped at the closed doors leading into the

great hall. From inside Pierre's voice asked, 'Who is there?' The Princess thereupon replied: 'I, Sophia, hereditary Princess of Rhodopé,' on which Pierre threw the doors open, and, bowing low, preceded her to the big public room, while the Guards' band in the gallery trumpeted out the Rhodopé anthem. Arrived at the large roulette room, she, Prince Petros, Malakopf, the Mayor of Amandos, the Minister of the Interior, the first Lord of the Admiralty, the Commander-in-Chief, the Lord Chancellor, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and the Chairman of Council, took their places round the table, and Pierre seated himself in the croupier's place. Sophia had also asked the Bishop of Amandos to take his place with them, adding, however, that as scruples might stand in his lordship's way, this was to be considered as an invitation and not a command, and as an invitation he had refused it. Everyone then staked twenty-seven napoleons (the same number being the years of the Princess) on a half-dozen of numbers, and Pierre set the momentous ball spinning. Round and round it went, slowed down, wavered, and finally lurched into zero, the number backed by the bank.

Princess Sophia sprang up and clapped her hands.

'An omen!' she cried—'a magnificent omen! Success to the club of Amandos! Pierre, I wish my stake had been a hundredfold what it was!'

Then, recollecting ceremony, she bowed to the crowds which had followed them into the room, and stood there while the table was opened.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' she said, with a wonderful dignity of manner, 'I declare this room formally opened. There is no need for me to remind you how ancient and venerable is the practice of gambling. Cultivate, let me beg you, a calm demeanour at the tables, and bow your heads cheerfully and obediently to the decision of pure chance. Long may the club supply to you a little pleasurable excitement, and may Luck ever favour the deserving!'

Again bowing, amid a tumult of applause, she and the high officials who had attended her left the room, and no sooner were they out than there was a positive scramble for the places. Members of the Assembly, fishermen from the coast, tradesmen of the town, wild

shepherdfolk from the hills, jostled and pushed together to secure a place.

Sophia, in the hall outside, heard the noise with rapture.

‘This will be a success, gentlemen,’ she said; ‘let us congratulate ourselves.’

The Royal Party took a hasty luncheon, without speeches, on the terrace outside, and as soon as she had drunk her coffee Sophia visited each of the rooms in turn, all of which were crowded with eager gamblers. In each she had seen that there was a chair on the croupier’s right with a crown, and her initial embroidered on it, and in each room she now took her seat and played a few stakes. She was watched with eager and admiring eyes, for, as usual, she played with a splendid recklessness and the most imperturbable demeanour, doubling and redoubling her stake after she had lost, and placing it here, there, anywhere that took her fancy. Her luck was extraordinarily good, and her dash and boldness were suitably rewarded. The people, in whose nature, as Malakopf had suspected, there lurked an innate love of gambling, were charmed and lost in wonder. She had given them a characteristic style, and until some twenty years ago, when the casino at Amandos was turned into an asylum for decayed and idiotic old gentlemen, there was nowhere in the world where you could see such glorious ventures and such desperate punting as in the building that Princess Sophia opened on this sunny first of May.

The gambling instinct spread like some medieval plague over the country. Shepherds coming to Amandos with their sheep for market would rush from their careful bargainings to the reckless chances of the table. A whole column of the *Amandos Herald* was devoted to the record of the same (just as in the *Times* we have a column of Money Market), analyzing a run of luck, or giving the total sum a man would have gained who had continued to back a certain six numbers from 10.30 to 11.30.

The manufacture of roulette-boards, which Sophia, with a far-reaching prudence, had made a Government monopoly, bid fair to become a valuable revenue. They were plain, but very well made, and the enormous quantities in which they were supplied enabled her to sell them at a price which put them within everybody’s reach. She also

instituted an Order of the Zero, the first grade of which was to be conferred only on European princes of blood royal; but the second was the reward of continuous and orthodox play, and was conferred on the recommendation of Pierre.

The restaurant accommodation in the casino was soon found to be totally inadequate, and the plot of ground immediately adjoining the club garden was bought at a fancy price by a native speculator, and on it was run up with breathless speed an immense hotel and restaurant. From foreign countries people flocked in shoals to the new Temple of Chance, at first from curiosity, but later from delight in its charms, and found that the fame of its magnificence, the beauty of the scenery, and the invigorating quality of the mountain air had been done scant justice to. Eminent physicians, who knew that the body is reached through the subtle gateways of the mind, no less than the mind through the subtle gateways of the body, and that for many bad health is the direct result of being bored, recommended, honestly and wisely, a month at Rhodopé for anæmic and nerve-ridden people. Success scarcely ever failed to attend on the cure when the case was properly diagnosed; for the air itself was a tonic of divine prescription, and the mind was not, as in so many of those unspeakable mountain resorts, left to rot and breed disease, but was intelligently entertained at the casino. The English people above all flocked to Amandos, for, as they said, the folk are not like foreigners, one would really take them for English; and when they of Albion take up this attitude, it is pretty certain that the place will be popular among their compatriots. Their insular aloofness fell from them like scales in Rhodopé—it was as good as being at home. And with the English came a Church of England chaplain, hip-baths, one most hazardous golf-links on the mountain side, and another on the sandy fore-shore of Mavromáti, and the ties were complete.

During these summer months the Prince and Malakopf met often, but they found long faces for each other. Their faces would have been longer still had they known how completely their little plans had miscarried, and that already the Princess was very tolerably acquainted with what was going on. The betrayal had happened in this wise.

It was on the occasion of the Queen of England's birthday, and Malakopf, with the other Ministers, dined officially at the British

Legation. The dinner was for men only, but after dinner Lord Abbotsworthy gave a reception. He was a widower, and the duty of receiving his guests fell on his daughter, Lady Blanche. The spacious marble-flagged terrace in front of the house was covered in with a Syrian tent, and the guests for the most part, after shaking hands with Lady Blanche, passed through the rooms and into the illuminated coolness of the covered terrace.

Now Malakopf, who for several weeks before this festivity had been somewhat fretted by the harshness and uncertainty of the events which followed on the opening of the Princess's club, and by the continued despondency of his colleague, had promised himself an evening free from restraint, and in two senses to give his tongue a treat. He proposed—for he of that odious class of voluptuary which fixes its debauches beforehand—to dine as his nature, or rather the unexceptionable chef of the Minister, prompted him, and to drink as copiously as the excellency of the vintage with which he was served suggested. Now, Lord Abbotsworthy, who was himself a great judge of grape-juice, had made out with some care the menu of the wines, and his choice was masterly. The consequence was that Malakopf, who had passed a really memorable hour in the dining-room, eating much and drinking the best and plenty of it, came upstairs in an unusually relaxed frame of mind. It would be entirely out of the question to have called him drunk, or anything like it, but the sunshine which lay upon the slopes of the champagne country in the comet year had stirred his imagination and unloosed his tongue. Naturally he was a silent man, but to-night he was prone to be talkative; a woman's wit did the rest.

Lady Blanche had been much interested in and somewhat distressed at the opening of the Princess's club. She was a young lady gifted with a great deal of intelligent curiosity; that is to say, the things she was curious about were always worth knowing, and she particularly wished to know how this extraordinary innovation struck the leading men of the State. She had heard with a glow of the heart the tremendous reception accorded to her dear friend Princess Sophia; but she intensely desired to learn how those in command took this new evidence of the Princess's popularity, whether, in fact—the same question had occurred to Malakopf—the greeting had been merely the

tribute of a loyal people to a popular Princess, or whether it implied an innate predisposition to the new amusement provided for them.

It was with this in her mind that, when the duty of reception was over, she walked slowly through the room, with one ear only open to the voice of her varying interlocutor, the other wide to catch the strident accents of the Prime Minister. At last she saw him, though only distantly, wide-mouthed, yellow-toothed, separated from her by a crowd of tedious folk; but as she looked in his direction, it so happened that he looked in hers, and their eyes met. Malakopf's eye was a shifty one at the best; but to-night's potations seemed to have given him a greater directness of gaze, and it was with no surprise that, in answer to her little smile of greeting, she saw him a moment afterwards move from his place and make his way through the crush towards her.

'Ah, Lady Blanche,' he said, 'but unless I push and squeeze I shall have no chance of getting a word with you. How is it that when we go to a friend's house we see the whole world, but not our friend?'

'And I, too, was despairing of getting a word with you,' replied Blanche. 'It is a delicious night: let us go on to the balcony; the rooms are so hot.'

Malakopf bowed and offered her his arm.

'You are too kind to an old man like me,' he said; 'but I am very greedy.'

This was quite true; and they sat down in a corner of the balcony, and Blanche went straight to the point.

'There are great changes in Rhodopé,' she said. 'Tell me how it all strikes you.'

Malakopf paused a moment; his instinct counselled caution; but his dinner had unloosened his tongue, and he longed to let himself go and talk freely to this beautiful and able woman.

'I don't really know how it strikes me; indeed, I confess myself puzzled,' he said. 'At any rate, I think the Princess is a cleverer woman than I had supposed. Do you follow that?'

Blanche nodded.

‘You mean, of course, that the success of the club has more than justified her starting it; that she knew or guessed—which is even cleverer—that there was a love of gambling in the people?’

Malakopf applauded gently with his finger-tips.

‘My dear lady,’ he said, ‘you have no idea what a joy it is to me to talk to people who find me intelligible, to whom I have not to translate. Now, Prince Petros——’ and he paused. ‘I think I shall advertise for a translator,’ he added, with a sigh.

‘Prince Petros has always seemed to me a man with all the charm of cleverness and the brains of a fool,’ remarked Blanche.

Malakopf considered.

‘Yes, you have hit him full,’ he said at length. ‘I have always known what you have just said, though I have never been able to formulate it. It is the charm of cleverness that makes one continually think one is dealing with a gifted man, and as continually one is brought up short. Oh, how many jars I have received!’

‘He works hard in the Assembly, does he not?’ asked Blanche.

‘He works, it has always struck me, like a convict. He removes a pile of shot from one place to another, and then back again. Thus, at the end of the day there is not much to show for the hours of toil. I have seen much of him lately, and he has a great power of amassing detail, which, when amassed, is useless to him. He collects his data, and draws no conclusion from them. Perhaps that is just as well; if he did draw conclusions, they would be certainly wrong ones.’

‘And he is ambitious, I should think,’ said Blanche quietly.

‘Ambitious! He is ambition. He is discontented in his present position, and, indeed, who would not be? He is a parody of a Prince, so he tells me. “Fancy being the husband of a reigning Princess!” he says.’

‘It is wise of him, then, to work hard at humbler duties, and get perhaps a power of another sort in the country.’

‘He has no power,’ snapped Malakopf, ‘and he never will have!’

Now, Lady Blanche had long entertained a vague curiosity about this new intimacy between Malakopf and the Prince. Sophia, she knew, detested the man, and that was a reason the more for surprise that

Petros should make him so close a companion. Day after day she had read in the *Rhodopé Herald* that Malakopf had a long interview with the Prince, that the Prince called on the Prime Minister in the morning and remained to luncheon, or that Malakopf remained at the Palace till midnight. Up to this point in her present conversation with him the talk been mainly random on her part, as one throws a fly over places indeed which may reasonably hold a fish, but in ignorance whether a fish is there. But at this moment, when he snapped the answer back at her, forgetting his manners, she recollects her curiosity in the friendship between the two, and to the point, and not witlessly, so that Malakopf could scarcely suspect, even if his mood was suspicious, that he was being plied with pertinent conversation.

‘No, as yet he has no power,’ she said; ‘but are you sure he never will have? Does not his sedulous attention to questions which in themselves can but interest him very slightly tend to make one think that he is determined not to be only a tame cat about the Court? He is wise, I should say, to wish to take an active part in affairs, and it seems to me that he is wise in burdening his own shoulders with the tedious and drearier side of politics. He won, I should say, golden opinions when he acted as Regent last year. Moreover, which is more important, the Princess is very grateful to him. She told me so the other day; and gratitude is better worth collecting than postage-stamps.’

Malakopf was interested, and showed it.

‘Ah, she said that to you, did she?’ he asked, leaning forward in his chair. ‘She spoke with gratitude, you say, and with confidence perhaps in the Prince?’

‘Surely. Why should she not?’ asked Blanche, with a disarming frankness.

‘Rumour had reached me,’ said Malakopf, ‘that she was not altogether pleased that the Prince should do so much, that she felt that she was a little thrust into the background. I hardly knew whether to credit it or not, and your information has relieved me indescribably. But if one looks closely, there was some colour for the idea. Indeed, I had supposed that some such desire to be as prominent as her husband had prompted her to take this very new step of making a casino in Amandos.’

Blanche detected a slight change of tone in his voice, and would have laid odds at that moment that he had just invented these rumours himself. But she answered without a pause:

‘It is very ingenious to connect the building of the casino with that, so ingenious that it certainly ought to be true. I cannot say; it never occurred to me before. About those rumours—surely more than that has reached you——’

Malakopf glanced round to see that no one was within hearing. He thought that he was getting valuable information out of Lady Blanche; she, on the other hand, was sure that she was getting it out of him.

‘Yes; I have heard more than that,’ he said, drawing his chair closer to hers.

Blanche nodded. She felt no touch of shame for what she was doing, for she was loyalty incarnate to Sophia and ruthless to any who were not.

‘You, too, have heard perhaps that in certain quarters it is thought that Prince Petros is standing on tiptoe to reach the throne?’ she asked. ‘You have heard that in certain quarters such an attempt is likely to be widely supported? What are we to make of such things? There cannot be any truth in them.’

‘You speak frankly,’ said Malakopf, ‘and I will follow your example. I have heard, it is true, bitter complaints against the Princess Sophia, and my loyalty has compelled me to listen to them, so as—so as to be on my guard; but it has often been hard work to control my indignation when I listened. I have heard her Civil List, and the way she spends it, bitterly contrasted with the money spent on education and on the poor. What is one to say to such things? I am all loyalty to our beloved Princess, yet put yourself in the place of those who say these things and be candid. Is there not a grain of truth in the accusation?’

Malakopf spoke eagerly, for he wanted to get out of Blanche what she had heard, and, forgetting his manners again, leaned forward and lit a cigarette at a candle standing close to her, enveloping her face in a cloud of smoke. Blanche observed this. The man was certainly in earnest about something.

‘You will have a whisky-and-soda, will you not?’ she said. ‘Touch that bell behind you.’

Malakopf resumed his seat, and the two talked of indifferent subjects till the footman had brought the Prime Minister his whisky; then she spoke again.

‘Who set these things in currency?’ she asked abruptly. ‘Do you—do you really suspect Prince Petros of disloyalty to the Princess, and, what is worse even, of disloyalty to his wife?’

‘No, I do not,’ said Malakopf; ‘but from what you tell me, from what I have myself heard, I gather there is much feeling against the Princess, and much sympathy with her husband. Petros—Prince Petros—I know feels his position acutely; more than that I could not say. But disloyalty—— Why, the man is as true as steel!’ and his voice rang as false as a cracked crockery plate.

The conversation was bearing much fruit, so thought Lady Blanche, and so also thought Malakopf. Lady Blanche felt convinced in her own mind that no rumours had reached Malakopf about the Princess’s growing unpopularity, but she had with some ingenuity led the other on to expand embellish his invention of them as he would have them be, and with complete success. The distrust she had ever felt of this cunning old man, the growing distrust with which she had seen his ripening intimacy with Petros, was suddenly struck with colour. She felt sure he was talking out of his own mouth. Malakopf, on the other hand, was entranced to find his airy inventions solidified and his own intuitions so flatteringly supported; it appeared that after all there did exist in the minds of the people that dissatisfaction with Sophia which it should be his work and Petros’ to foment. The seeds of revolution, it seemed, were already sown, and, to judge by the way in which Lady Blanche endorsed his tentative words, bid fair to flourish.

‘I am glad to hear you say he is so true,’ she said. ‘Personally I know little of him, but I have seen with so much interest the growing intimacy between you. Who should know him, if you do not?’

Malakopf’s exultation broke the bonds of his caution.

‘Know him!’ he cried. ‘I know him as I know the shape of the glove that covers my hand; indeed, he is very like the glove that covers my hand.’

Next moment it was as if another had spoken and the Prime Minister had heard. He got up abruptly as these imprudent words were conveyed to him, turned to Lady Blanche, whom for that one minute he had forgotten.

‘I will wish you good-night,’ he said; ‘I have a great quantity of work to get through before I go to bed.’

‘You go so early?’ asked Blanche. ‘Good-night, monsieur; I have so enjoyed our talk.’

When the other guests had gone she danced a *pas seul* all round the balcony.

CHAPTER VIII.

PLOTS AND COUNTER-PLOTS.

LADY BLANCHE had no desire to make a mountain out of a molehill, but even when she surveyed her interview with Malakopf with the coolness and sobriety of 9 a.m., she still thought that it was clearly her business to make the matter known to her whom it principally concerned. Accordingly she sent a note to Sophia asking her for an audience on an affair of some importance, and this being granted, poured into the Princess's amused and interested ear all that Malakopf had said. Blanche was a good narrator, with so admirable a memory that she had no call to draw on her imagination, and her account was both vivid and accurate, the rarest of combinations, and one for which we in vain look in the pages of histories.

Princess Sophia was far too well entertained by the farcical absurdity of the conspiracy to be really angry at present with her husband. Malakopf, however, less simple-witted and much older, was not so lightly dismissed. She knew the man to be cunning, and one whose investments might be considered safe, and she fumed at the idea of a centipede conspiring against her.

‘But there is one point which perplexes me,’ she said to Blanche. ‘Petros and that creature are in league together, that is certain, and Petros, poor dear, I have no doubt whatever, thrones himself prospectively over Rhodopé. Really, I married a fool after all, and one of my requirements was that my husband should not be that. I shall get quite indignant with him if he does not drop this nonsense. But then where does Malakopf come in? It is quite certain that it is not worth his while to overturn me in order to set up Petros. Without doubt he means to step in himself; but where? He has mounted as high in Rhodopé as a subject can; he would not take so much trouble if he was to be nothing more.’

‘You must remember you have ever treated him like an insect, Princess,’ said Blanche. ‘Would not it be sufficient reward for him to overturn you?’

‘No, I think not,’ said Sophia. ‘The man loathes me, of course, and no doubt revenge would be an incentive. But I doubt revenge being his goal. Perhaps there are wheels within wheels. Petros is to overturn me, and he is to overturn Petros. The House of Ægina is to be a set of ninepins for a centipede!’

‘The worst of it is that it is almost impossible to find out more,’ said Blanche. ‘It was a lapful of luck that we know at all.’

‘It was clever of you, Blanche,’ said Sophia, ‘and clever people are always lucky. About Petros—I shall give him one chance. I shall let fall a word which should be a warning to him, something very plain, yet meaningless to a good conscience, and then I shall have another talk with you, Blanche.’

Sophia glanced at the ormolu clock on the mantelpiece, which had just jarred as a warning of its striking.

‘Good gracious! it is nearly twelve,’ she said. ‘I shall take a stroll in the direction—in the direction of the club. Thank you again, Blanche; how earnestly you know. You have been instructive as well as amusing. Really, Petros is very impertinent, now I think it over. I shall ask you to come here again in a day or two—or, stay, I am dining at the Legation on Friday; we will talk then, after dinner.’

The opportunity of giving a word of warning to Petros occurred that very evening. They had dined alone, which was unusual; and after dinner, which was still more unusual, the Prince had proposed a game of bezique. Sophia had intended to go to the club, but she changed her mind, and counter-ordered her carriage; for during dinner her husband had interested her, and this proposal of his was now become remarkable.

Never in his life had the Prince been more desirous to please, but never in his life, had he known all, had his efforts been more wildly misdirected and futile, for during the day Sophia’s amusement had given place to anger. In a conversation he had held with Malakopf that morning, that sagacious Minister, conscious of a slight want of caution the night before, had laid great stress on two points.

‘I need not tell you, my dear Prince,’ he said, ‘how essential it is that the Princess should remain entirely unsuspecting. We have seen a great deal of each other lately, and I reluctantly propose that we do not

meet quite so often for the future. Our intimacy might put someone on the look-out, and if you throw a bomb where people are looking, they will run away. That is my first point. The second point contains good news. Already there is a widely-spread discontent in the State at the unedifying conduct of your wife, or so it seems to people, and a large sympathy with your untiring exertion in the Assembly. Also, I know for certain that at present Princess Sophia reposes entire confidence in you. Let it be your business to maintain that unabated—more, to increase it.'

'Who told you this?' asked Petros.

'One who knows her well—Lady Blanche Amesbury.'

'Lady Blanche said she put entire confidence in me?'

'I have the honour of telling you so,' said Malakopf with impatience.

'You seem to have had an intimate talk with Lady Blanche. She is a clever woman.'

'And I am not without wits,' said Malakopf, chuckling, 'and our talk was more intimate than she knew. Indeed, she gave me all I wanted to know with the charming naïveté of a child.'

Prince Petros was silent a moment; he did not feel entirely at ease about this interview, but his habit of obedience to Malakopf's orders would not let him speak. At length, dismissing the subject, 'Tell me how to maintain my wife's confidence,' he said.

'A little bezique in the evening would do wonders with her,' said Malakopf sententiously.

Thus it was that Prince Petros had proposed a game that evening, and Sophia accepted from curiosity. During dinner he had talked charmingly, and had related a number of amusing experiences shortly and with point. At each Sophia's contempt rose bitter as bile in her throat. Behind her back he planned a revolution; before her face he paid court to the amenities of social life, he behaved with a studied naturalness and kindness. Knowing all she knew, these miserable little attentions seemed to her the very acme of meanness, and it was the desire of studying him further which made her counter-order the carriage that should have taken her to the club. This argued a very strong desire.

They stood by the open window drinking their coffee, while the groom of the chambers put out the table and packs of cards, and when the man had left the room, Petros gently thrust his arm through hers.

‘It seems so long since we have spent an evening quietly together, Sophia,’ he said. ‘To me, at least, it seems long. Sometimes I almost wish you had been a poor girl, not the Princess of Rhodopé, that we had been able to live quietly together up in some little mountain home.’

Sophia for the moment was struck dumb. Surely there was never so immeasurable a hypocrite as this man! She could not answer, but since she wished him to continue, she gently pressed his arm with hers.

‘You have felt that too, dearest?’ he continued softly. ‘Sometimes, Sophia, I have thought you were a little weary of me. Now your sweet silence makes me know I was wrong; so forgive me, darling. Look at that lovely wash of moonlight over the town. It lies like a benediction over your land. It was just such a night—was it not?—when I first came here. I bless that day—I bless it every hour of my life.’

Sophia turned from him; the man produced in her a sense of physical sickness. She, who with all her faults had never lied—she, to whom falsehood was a dirty thing, as inconceivable as not washing, felt ill at his duplicity. She was angry at herself for letting him speak, and for a moment she was on the point of telling him she knew all. But her anger surged up again, she could not forgive him; he had chosen to act a crooked part, he must reap as he had sown. But she had promised herself to give him a word of warning; that he should have.

‘Come, Petros,’ she said at length, with an assumed lightness of manner, ‘bezique, bezique. Really, I don’t know that a cottage on the mountains would have suited me well, though it is charming of you to suggest it; you would not have loved to find me thumbing a dirty pack of cards when I should have been mending your stockings. There is a great deal to be said for the position of the Princess of Rhodopé.’

He took her hand with charming courtesy and kissed it.

‘And who can say enough for the position of her husband?’ he asked.

They played a hand or two with the luck fairly divided, and Petros, who seemed to Sophia to have recaptured his skill, was a considerable

winner at the end of an hour. But shortly after that he held a hand for which, as Sophia declared, the world was made. He had early in the game declared sequence six times, and then abandoned it; he had three beziques on the table and the fourth knave of diamonds. This card he drew in some eight tricks before the end, and still Sophia had not seen the corresponding queen. But Petros's heart failed him; he scored the three beziques again with his extra knave, and immediately afterwards drew in the missing queen.

Sophia was aghast.

'Four thousand five hundred gone to the dogs!' she exclaimed, with contempt. 'Really, Petros, you are beside yourself.'

'It was a fault of generalship, I admit,' said he.

Sophia looked at him very steadily. This was a good opening for what she had to say.

'Indeed, Petros, you are no Napoleon,' she said. 'You could never, never carve a kingdom for yourself.'

So Petros had his warning, and Sophia hardened her heart against him.

As Malakopf had suggested, the two conspirators saw somewhat less of each other for the next week or two, and more than once Sophia thought—and, to do her justice, hoped—that Petros must have taken her word of warning to heart. But his nauseating little tendernesses and solicitudes for her were not diminished, and she found him infinitely disgusting. He was acting a part, of that she was well assured, for he was not, she knew, a man to whom caresses are habitual, and their day had long since been over between them. What, then, could this recrudescence of an exhibition which had never been natural to him mean but that he wished to keep her ever surrounded with a tinsel counterfeit of love? And for what reason could he coin its tokens in such profusion, except that he wished her to rest assured of his unalterable devotion? The man was putrid.

Two days after this the Princess and her husband dined together at the English Legation. Lord Abbotsworthy, of course, took the Princess in, and on her other side sat Malakopf. As usual, he, figuratively speaking, licked the ground she trod on, and, as usual, she walked with her tip-tilted nose in the air, as if he had been a disagreeable smell. But

during the course of dinner she let fall a few words which interested him, though she spoke to the Minister, and not to him, but she intended the words for his ear, and he sucked them greedily in.

‘I shall not leave Rhodopé till October this year,’ so Malakopf heard her say, ‘but when I do go, I shall be away three months at the least. Petros is so admirable, he manages affairs much better than I do, and it really gives him something to do. Moreover, I have the completest confidence in him, and his speeches, I believe, are considered most sensible. I shall spend Christmas in England, I think, with my cousin. England is often delightful at Christmas, and I don’t suppose I shall be back here till half-way through January. The yacht? Oh yes; I love the sea, as you know. I shall go in the yacht. Poor Petros is sea-sick—think how absurd!’

Malakopf found much to interest him in this speech. The Princess’s long absence was ideal to his wishes; even to the most loyal of her subjects a three months’ sojourn abroad would appear protracted, a trial to their belief in her unwavering devotion to their welfare. And never before, in his recollection, had the monarch been absent on the occasion of the great royal fête on New Year’s Day, when the Princess always gave an immense dance to all those who had signed their names in her book, and a great banquet in the Guildhall to the humbler citizens of Rhodopé. There, just before midnight, she went with all her guests, and took her stand in silence under the clock, while the great assemblage waited, finger on lip and glass in hand, for the New Year to strike. As soon as the twelve great shocks had proclaimed another year, she drank prosperity to them all, and broke her glass, so that no one again might drink from it. She herself then mingled with the crowd, and spoke a few words to everyone she came across. Her wonderful memory made it easy for her to recognise hundreds whom she had never consciously seen except on this night, and a word of inquiry after son or daughter made many hearts beat proudly.

Likewise, if the Princess was away for December, the duty of proroguing Parliament would fall on Petros. The Assembly always rose from its autumn Session the week before Christmas, but it was not formally prorogued till the afternoon of the last day of December. On that day all Members attended in Court dress, and from the throne the Princess made a speech, thanking them for their labours in the past

year. As representative of her, Petros would speak from her seat, and Malakopf made a mental note that a somewhat telling scene might be planned for this occasion, and that Petros also would see a great opportunity.

They left the dining-room, foreign fashion, all together, each man giving his arm to the woman he had taken in, and as the Princess no longer objected even to the taste of smoke, there was no segregation of men when they reached the drawing-room. But after a few words with one and another of the guests, she beckoned to Lady Blanche, and the two sat down in a corner of the drawing-room somewhat apart from the others.

Malakopf had an uneasy moment when he saw this, but already in his own mind he had advanced matters so far that it did not matter much what the Princess did, and running rapidly over his conversation with Lady Blanche, he found no tangible cause for disquietude.

‘Blanche,’ said Sophia, speaking in English, ‘I have made my plans. You have to help me, so please be very intelligent.’

‘What has happened?’ asked Blanche.

‘I have given Petros his warning, and that is over. His silence made me sure that he knew what I meant. I told him he was no Napoleon, to carve himself a kingdom. But his odious little attentions to me, which I imagine are performed at Malakopf’s bidding, continue, and I think he has made up his mind not to take warning. *Tant pis*, for I do not give him another chance. You will hardly believe it, but the other night, only, he made crawlly little sentimental speeches to me, though we have done with that sort of thing long ago. He said he wished we had been a poor couple in a cottage, and he kissed my hand. The flesh of me crept.’

‘That looks like Malakopf,’ said Blanche.

‘Well, enough of Petros,’ went on Sophia. ‘To-night I talked rather loud to your father, so that Malakopf could hear. I told him I should leave Rhodopé in October, and not come back till the middle of January.’

‘But the New Year fête?’ asked Blanche.

‘Well, I deceived your father. I expect I shall be in Amandos before then; to speak more exactly, I expect to be back on December the

thirty-first. However, that shall be seen. Now, before I go, I shall give you the cipher which I use with Petros, and I want to be accurately informed day by day how things are going. I will tell your father that I shall be in correspondence with you, and ask him to send off your telegrams direct from the Legation, for Malakopf is cunning enough to suspect something if he finds you constantly sending despatches to me. Indeed, he looked a little suspicious just now, when he saw me sit down and talk to you.'

'It is too dangerous,' said Blanche. 'Dear Sophia, don't go away for so long; anything may happen in so long an absence.'

'It will be your business to warn me,' said the Princess. 'I have laid my plan carefully. You must learn as much as you can about the Prince's and Malakopf's little schemes, and I will return at a word from you. I shall not go to England for Christmas, as I told your father, but be much nearer home. By Christmas, indeed, I think I shall be at Corfu, so that I can get back here in a few hours. Conveniently enough, the Empress has asked me to stay with her there, and she will be incognito, and so, of course, shall I. The sailors of the *Felatrune* alone will know I am here, and I can rely on absolute silence. Oh, it will be as exciting as a run of luck!' she cried.

'Ah, I see,' said Blanche, 'you mean that you expect Malakopf will make the scene on the day the Assembly is prorogued?'

'That seems to me a Heaven-sent opportunity for him,' remarked Sophia. 'Yet perhaps Satan were the more appropriate derivative.'

Blanche burst out laughing—every now and then Sophia, in spite of her great knowledge of English, would use a sentence of a style hopelessly pompous, thinking to utter a crowning colloquialism—and her laugh closed the conversation. Sophia rose, and, with mock resentment in her voice, 'I had more to say to you,' she remarked, 'but I will not be laughed at. But I have told you all that is really important, and with you it is not necessary to say things twice. Dear Blanche, is it true that Lord Abbotsworthy has hired Pierre and a roulette-board for this evening? How touching an attention! A mark of true hospitality.'

'Pierre is waiting for your Highness,' said Blanche, seeing that Malakopf had drawn near them. 'Will you go to the card-room?'

Thus it came about that Sophia was not unaware of the conspiracy which was on foot against her. She had given her husband fair warning, and since he persisted in his childish policy of surrounding her with a hundred lover-like attentions, she thought it excusable and wise to have a policy too. Sometimes she was almost stirred to pity at the futility of his efforts to blind her, while her own seeming security was so illegible to him. She accentuated, if possible, her distaste of State affairs. Half of the twenty-four hours she spent at the tables of club; she yawned behind her hand at the most important and confidential communications of her Ministers; she was even less civil than usual (and her civility to Malakopf was never remarkable) to her Prime Minister. It is true that she had the easier part to play, for while Petros fished up little attentions and an affectionate demeanour to her, as a man draws water from a deep well, with an effort, she had but to let her natural inclinations, her distaste of Malakopf, her taste for play, her ennui at infinitesimal State concerns go unreined.

The effect of all this was that the conferences between her husband and the Prime Minister lapsed into their former frequency, and not a day passed but they were closeted together. Even the astuter Malakopf, lulled into security by the Princess's negligence of State matters, no longer went through the formality of asking for her when he wished to confer with the Crown. Yet the situation was more critical than she knew. Already there was a party in the House almost hostile to her, for the sedulity with which she kept her seat in the club, when should have been in the Council Chamber, though successful in its object, namely, that of giving increased confidence to the two main actors in the conspiracy, had had a certain effect in alienating from her many of her more sober-minded deputies. They saw with pain her unreasonable passion for the cards and her total neglect of the duties of a reigning monarch. They saw with silent sympathy the heroic efforts of the Prince to cover the deficiencies of his wife. Himself well equipped as a debater, he was primed and loaded by Malakopf, and his contributions to the debates were an edification. Yet the Princess played her part with consummate skill, and she trusted to the loyalty of the people to back her up when the great scene came. Her yawns were the picture of realistic art, her intolerance of Malakopf a triumph of sincerity. Thereby the caution of the Prime Minister was slowly and insidiously

relaxed, and the four years he had originally given to the dynasty were much abbreviated in his mind; for in its sinister depths he was revolving a new and startling idea, suggested to him by the Princess's absence. In itself it was so simple that he almost distrusted it; but as the days went on it grew more and more seductive.

August cooled into September, and the day of the Princess's departure for her necessary holiday was fixed for October 7. It was tacitly understood between her and Petros that the Prince would not accompany her, and such had been the success of his Regency the year before that now Sophia begged him never to send her anything referring, however remotely, to State matters.

'I am sick of the sceptre!' she said to him the day before she left; 'and you, Petros, are still rather fond of it. Oh, you remind me so much of a child dressing up in Court finery; when it comes to put the finery on in earnest, how bored it is! And you, Petros, if ever you held the sceptre in your own name, you would find it a bad companion of your days and nights. Sometimes I am almost tempted to abdicate this throne of Rhodopé, yet what sort of private person should I make? I am a Princess of royal blood; I cannot help it; and the burden will be with me always.'

'How can you say such things, dearest!' said Petros, with well-simulated warmth. 'It is an idle modesty that makes you seem to be ignorant of the adoration with which your subjects—I the humblest—regard you. Which of them, think you, would not willingly die for you? True, you could never be a private person, any more than a farmer's wife could be a queen, though she thinks she could.'

'Well, therein I am better than the farmer's wife,' sighed Sophia. 'She thinks she could be me; I know I could not be her. But let me have a good holiday, Petros; don't send me anything to sign or to consider. Consider everything yourself, and sign what you please; and get through all the business you possibly can, so that there will not be so much next Session.'

'You must give me more explicit instructions, dear,' said the Prince. 'It is not likely that any measure of great importance will come before the House, but what am I to do about proroguing it? You will hardly wish me to deliver the Speech from the Throne?"

‘And why not, dear Petros?’ said she.

She was sitting in a deep armchair in shadow, fanning herself slowly, he under the full light of a lamp, and as she spoke she leaned back and watched his face intently. She saw his eye brighten, a flush steal over his face, and his right hand clenched, as if it already held the sceptre.

‘Why not, Petros?’ she repeated.

‘Because that is so essentially the prerogative of the Crown,’ he said. ‘How am I to thank your Ministers for their labours? In whose name?’

‘In your own name,’ she said; ‘for, indeed’—and she laughed quietly to herself—‘you have had far more to thank them for, or curse them for, this last year than I. It is far more suitable that you should do it. I am sure you will do it admirably.’

Again his hand clenched, and again Sophia observed his face light up. She rose with bitter aversion in her heart.

‘Thus no long explanations are necessary,’ she said. ‘Act as if you were me. I shall be back before the end of January. And now, Petros, you must leave me; I have some little affairs to settle before I dress for dinner. Kindly ring the bell for me.’

He rang, and, advancing to her, bowed and kissed her hand.

‘My Queen,’ he murmured.

Sophia stood silent, and watched his graceful exit; then she took her handkerchief, and rubbed the place where his lips had touched. Next moment the groom of the chamber entered.

‘Go to the English Legation,’ she said, ‘and tell Lady Blanche that I shall come to see her to-night after dinner. Leave the message with her; see her yourself.’

The Princess left Mavromáti next day on the *Felatrune*. With her went the little Prince Leonard, and Petros saw them off. He went on board with his wife, but parted from her as soon as they gained the ship, for she was to start at once. Once more pity for this treacherous man, for so she certainly regarded him, touched her.

‘I leave you with the fullest confidence,’ she said. ‘I feel sure you will be a faithful steward for me and my child.’

But Petros's hypocrisy was not finished enough to suggest a reply, and he left her in silence.

That night, while the *Felatrune* ploughed her moonlit way southwards over the dim waters of the sleeping Adriatic, Malakopf dined at the Palace. Indeed, the two conspirators, to the best of their knowledge, had solid ground for self-congratulation. From their point of view, the Princess's conduct had been impeccable, and the precision with which she had played into their hands was admirable. The hours of her attendance at the Assembly during the past summer could almost be reckoned on the fingers of a one-armed man; the hours of her presence at the club were more like in number to the stars of heaven. To crown all this, she had now left the kingdom at a time when its affairs were in the full bustle of transaction, and, what would tell against her even more in the eyes of the public, she had decided to be absent on the great festal day of the year. Malakopf had had the wit to see how skilful was the bait she had prepared, how admirable its convenience to their plans; he only failed to grasp the little fact that it was bait.

The club which the Princess had inaugurated with such brilliance in May had thrived in a way that even she could scarce have anticipated. Originally the playing-rooms had been open only from three in the afternoon till three in the morning; but a few months afterwards its session never rose. The gambling instinct in the people, for so many years void of fruition, shot up like the aloe flower; already to tamper with the inalienable right of the people of Rhodopé to gamble in public rooms would have been more dangerous than to attempt to make penal in England cold baths or the game of golf; and it was the most skilful stroke that the ingenuity of the devil could have devised when Malakopf attempted by this very means to dethrone Sophia from her popularity.

'It has occurred to you,' said the Prime Minister that evening, when he and Petros were smoking, 'that the Princess will be absent from Rhodopé on the day that the Assembly is prorogued?'

'I have talked to her about that,' said Petros. 'It seemed to me very irregular; but she told me how to act.'

'Indeed! May I have the benefit of your conversation?'

‘She wished me to take her place absolutely,’ said Petros; ‘to speak from the throne not in her name, but in my own.’

‘Admirable!—nothing could be better,’ said Malakopf. ‘It did not occur to you, I am afraid, to get that in black and white?’

‘The Princess does not go back on her word,’ said Petros rather stiffly.

‘True; but I should have preferred black and white. Prudence can never be at fault. But we have our hands full.’

He paused, and decided to tell the Prince of the plan that he had been maturing.

‘By the thirty-first of December the fruit must be ripe for the plucking,’ he said. ‘I shall introduce a Bill next month to shut up all gambling-houses in Rhodopé, and to make even betting an offence. What do you think of that?’

Again he looked at the Prince to see what he would make of this. Petros fairly recoiled.

‘It is impossible,’ he said; ‘there will be a revolution.’

‘True, there will be a revolution; but I thought we were working to bring that about.’

‘But it is insane, this idea of yours,’ said Petros. ‘What line am I to take, for instance? Am I to oppose you? for if I do not, my chances are gone. Unless I speak against your Bill, the people will have none of me; and if I speak for it, where is our combination?’

Malakopf smiled grimly.

‘I thought you did not see how valuable was the Princess’s command to you to act absolutely in her name, or why I should have preferred it in black and white. That command is simply the coping-stone of my structure. You will vote for the Bill, of course; but you will speak against it. Heaven! is it possible you are so slow? Oh, do you not see? Reluctantly, regretfully, but with unimpeachable loyalty, you will find yourself obliged to act in her absence, as she would have you act, as she told you to act. She could not face the situation herself; she has run away, and she has left you behind to face the odium of her deed. All will vote against the Prince, as the representative of his unworthy wife; but what sympathy there will be for Petros! As for

your wife, she will at once become the most unpopular woman in Rhodopé. The people like their gambling, and they will not have that stopped, you may be sure; but they are brave, and they do not like running away. Why, man, it is the very opportunity for the speech you planned so long ago!'

Prince Petros had risen from his seat, and was pacing up and down the room excitedly.

'I see—I see,' he cried. 'Yes, it is a splendid idea; it is of the best. I stand corrected; but would it not be even more telling if I introduced the Bill myself in her name? As you know, any Bill introduced by the Crown is carried.'

'But we do not want the Bill to be carried,' said Malakopf. 'We want it thrown out by an immense majority. The minority, in fact, I expect will consist of yourself.'

But the Prince's suggestion had more in it than Malakopf perceived at once, and than the Prince perceived at all. Any Bill—such was the autocratic law of Rhodopé—introduced by the Crown passed into law. The privilege had rarely been used, and this prerogative was practically obsolete; but there could be no doubt, as the Prince said, that the Crown was constitutionally within its rights in so acting. Thus, if Prince Petros introduced the Bill in the Princess's name, and stuck to it, it could only fail to become law by a reconstitution of the power of the Crown—in other words, by a revolution. In this way Malakopf would be rid not only of the Princess, but also of the Prince, who, despite his speech against it, would have voted for it. This formed part of his original, but at present undetailed, programme, and he was fairly astounded at the fitness of his opportunity. He could kill both with one stone. So, after a moment, he corrected himself.

'But I am not sure,' he said, 'that you are not right after all. Perhaps yours is the simpler plan, for it makes a revolution inevitable. I will think it over. Meanwhile, may I ask for a whisky-and-soda? The night is hot for this time of the year.'

The two were sitting on the great north veranda of the Palace. The air was exquisitely fresh, with an easterly breeze, though still, as Malakopf had said, warm for October. But a divine mellowness is over October in Rhodopé, the sky is a perfect turquoise from sunrise to

sunset, and to sunrise again an inimitable sapphire. The French season at its height, and a band from the Casino gardens close by made the night an echo of the brain of Weber. The moon, swung full south, cast a great square of shadow from the Palace over the garden, and the metallic tinkle of the water from the bronze Triton fountain falling into its basin came from the darkness. Beyond, a balustrade of Pentelic marble bounded the headlong cliff below, and in the hollow beneath the lamps of Amandos twinkled innumerable. On the great range of Balkan peaks to the north the earliest snow of the year had already fallen, and the giants of the range were silver spearheads charging the sky. To the west, twelve miles away, the lights of Mavromáti, low on the horizon and small as a glow-worm, were more like a reflection of stars than an authentic constellation. But from minute to minute a luminous pencil of colour, now scarlet, now red, now yellow, shot with penetrating clearness across the land, and even dyed the white Palace walls for a moment in its passage, marking the rotation of the harbour lights. The murmur of busy folk buzzed like the swarming of bees from the town, and now and again a sudden shriller note betokened some infinitesimal excitement of the street.

But the perfection of the Southern night roused no echo in the heart of Petros; his thoughts were intent on himself. Little he recked of the ebony shadows, the white fields of moonshine, the beauty of the muffled sounds of the night, and in so far as they reached him, they reached him only by the sense of lordship. Soon, he thought, would the polychrome light from Mavromáti be his; his, too, would be the cicala that sang in the bushes; his the luminous evidence of mankind that shone from the lights of Amandos. For his outlook was but puny; nothing was great if it was not his, nothing was beautiful unless it owned his supremacy. Nor was Malakopf more poetically-minded: the spearheads of the Balkan were only interesting because the map of Europe traced across that untracked whiteness the boundaries of Rhodopé; the strains of Weber that came from the club gardens were only beautiful because he had invested a large sum of money in the Casino, and music was an attraction to the visitors. Once President of this Republic of Rhodopé, he would have willingly driven the snow-plough across the Balkans to mark the limits of his Presidency, if

thereby he could add an acre to its mileage, and painted the country magenta to correspond with the latest map.

But though the glory of the Southern night gave him no food for admiration, the last suggestion of the Prince was worth the expenditure of brain tissue, and the more he considered it, the more suitable did the Prince's unwitting scheme appear. It would be necessary, it is true, to alter the proposed chronology of events, and reserve for the last meeting of the Assembly before the Christmas holiday the introduction of the new Bill. The House should not be asked to vote on that day; the Bill alone should be read, and notice given that the voting would take place immediately before the prorogation on December 31.

The thought of the scene which would take place on that day almost dazzled him. The Assembly at Rhodopé had never been, since he had known it first, a House of melodrama. But on December 31 the scene would surely beggar the Adelphi Theatre, London. From the throne the Prince would make a regretful, and no doubt a very foolish, speech on this Bill for abolishing all gambling within the principality, and since he, as Sophia's representative, introduced the Bill, the Assembly would, on precedent and constitution, record indeed their votes, but, however the voting went, would be compelled to accept it. But he knew them very little if such was the event. In his speech the Prince would, as Malakopf had planned the scene, be forced to support the wishes and the commands of his wife. She, so he would say, had intended to introduce the Bill herself, but had been unable to face the situation, and had left the doing of it to him. All her subjects knew that she had opened the club herself, knew also the assiduity with which she attended its sessions. With what face now was she to order its abolition, when the institution had taken such deep hold on her people? But her purpose was irrevocably fixed. Abolished it should be, and she claimed (through her husband) the ancient right of the Crown. For a week past there would have been but one subject for talk in the principality; indignation would have flared like a bonfire since the Bill had been introduced. Half Rhodopé spent rapturous evenings in the Casino; they would not lightly give them up. But the Prince, as primed by Malakopf, would speak with strength and conviction. He would commit himself hopelessly to a policy of loyalty to his wife. His position (he would say) was most trying, but he was bound by every

code of honour to support without reservation her whom he represented. Such were her commands. The Bill was introduced by the Crown; let them vote if they pleased; the measure became law.

Malakopf's eye glowed. He saw himself rise before the assembled House, and to the Prince's dumb and infinite dismay, oppose the Bill. Such a course, he knew, was without shadow of precedent. He would adopt it without attempt at excuse. He would denounce the Princess. As they all knew, she spent her holidays at Monte Carlo—much needed holidays, indeed! She was worn out, was she not, with the prosecution of State affairs! His brother ministers knew how wide and numerous were the yawns with which she honoured their audiences. The Bill could not become law; simply it was one of the things that did not happen. Yet it must become law unless they took a line of their own. On his part, he begged to move that the question of the Bill before the House be postponed a moment, for he had another proposal to make. The House (so he told himself in these imaginings) would vote on the postponement of the Bill for the abolition of gambling; the House would carry it. Then he would propose nothing short of a revolution, the dethronement of the line of Ægina, who, in the person of the Princess, sought to curtail the inalienable right of gambling inaugurated by herself. In this, and in no other way, could liberty be secured them.

But it was far better that the Bill, if such was to be his policy, should be introduced just before the Christmas vacation, and that no voting should take place till the last day of December, to give a whole week for the fermentation of righteous wrath to come to a head. And it would not be a bad thing to let a hint of what was coming be in the air, to let the free spirit of the citizens chafe at the thought of so grievous a curtailment of their liberties, to let Distrust flap its obscene wings about the streets. Again his own investment in the club itself had turned out most profitable, for the half-year's dividend had been declared at 20 per cent. This, too, he had no mind to lose.

By the beginning of December it was already a matter for street-corner gossip as to whether there was any truth in this extraordinary report that the Princess Sophia would introduce by the mouth of her husband a Bill for the abolition of gambling. To most the thing seemed scarcely credible, and the more loyal of her subjects flatly refused to

entertain so preposterous a suggestion. It was inconceivable that the queen of gamblers should attempt to deprive her subjects of the right to indulge in her own favourite pursuit, and it was bitter to contemplate her at Monte Carlo directing from the St. Peter's of the goddess the closing of this remote little chapel. Others, who pretended to more authentic information, declared that she was acting under the persuasion of the Prince, who, as it was well known, did not frequent the club, and though he had invested in it, rather disapproved of it than otherwise. By degrees this view of the question obtained a following, and as it grew by so much the popularity of the Prince waned and the delight of Malakopf waxed. Petros had never been seen at the club since his wife's departure, and this alone was sufficient to raise a prejudice against him. The air was full of disquietude, which increased as the days went on.

This disquietude was only not shared by Malakopf; indeed, the Fates seemed to be propitious for him. Sophia away, the odium of the proposed change gradually attaching to the Prince—no combination of circumstances could have been luckier. The exact execution of his great stroke must be largely left for the future to decide, but at present things were working out just as he desired. He was studious to keep the Prince unaware, as far as might be, of the growing feeling against him, for fear he might turn craven at the end, and not give him his full opportunity.

Meantime Lady Blanche kept an eager eye on the development of the situation, and noted every chop and change of popular feeling. She had already telegraphed to Sophia the rumour of the Bill, advising her to leave Monte Carlo instantly, so as to be nearer at hand, in case of any precipitation of events. The Princess had telegraphed back that she was on the point of leaving, and said that her next address would be at the Empress' Villa in Corfu, where she would be known to the postal authorities as the Countess of Ægina. As there was plenty of time for a letter to reach her before her arrival, Lady Blanche wrote to her at length, describing the exact condition of affairs, and recommending her to keep steam up on her yacht, since there was no knowing when the crisis would come. It seemed probable, however, as it was now definitely announced that the Bill would be introduced on the day before the Christmas vacation, but that no voting would take place

then, nor any speech from Prince Petros, that the last day of December was the date determined by the two conspirators for their grand *coup*.

The Bill was to be read, so Malakopf and Prince Petros had planned it, immediately before the adjournment of the House for the Christmas vacation. After reading it, the Prince would simply give notice that the voting on the Bill would take place on December 31, after which the House would rise. He would then return straight to the Palace, and as far as possible, so Malakopf advised, keep there till the day for the debate came on. There was sure to be a considerable public excitement, and the Prince's speech, in which he would tell them that his wife had strictly laid on him the communication of this calamitous and regrettable resolution, would come with redoubled force if he had been known to have shut himself up under the painful stress of his feelings.

The day for the reading of the Bill arrived, and the House was packed. The business of the day was transacted with immense indifference and rapidity, and when it was finished a dead dense silence fell on the Assembly. Then Prince Petros rose from the throne, and stepped forward to the edge of the little platform, where sat the monarch and the Ministers.

'Gentlemen,' he said, 'Her Royal Highness the Princess Sophia has bid me read to you the text of a Bill she introduces through me. On this Bill I shall myself speak on December the thirty-first, immediately before the rising of the House. To-day I shall simply read the text of it to you, and the House will then, without comment or debate, rise for the Christmas vacation. How much I regret——' he began, then stopped, and read the following:

‘ “That all gambling-houses in the realm of Rhodopé of every sort and degree, private or public, be closed, and that no game of hazard be henceforward played therein.

‘ “That to play any such game in public, or to bet in public, be a felony.

‘ “That licenses shall be withdrawn from every licensed gambling-house in the aforementioned realm of Rhodopé.

‘ “That the building known as the club be converted into an asylum for decayed and idiotic old gentlemen, the purpose for which the ground was originally intended.

‘ “That the person known as Pierre be sent back to Monte Carlo, his passage (second-class) paid.

‘ “That these regulations come into effect on the first day of January (new style), 1857.

‘ “SOPHIA,
‘ “*Heditary Princess of Rhodopé.*” ’

Dead silence followed; and the Prince, commanding his voice with difficulty, adjourned the House, bowed to the deputies, and retired through the private door which led to the steps communicating with the Palace gardens.

Copies of the Bill were laid on the table in the House, and each Member took one (these papers now fetch a high price among collectors of curios); one also was brought to the British Legation, and Lady Blanche, coming in from her ride just before dinner, saw and read it. The next moment a frenzied Amazon figure sped up the stairs, and ten minutes afterwards a telegram in cipher was handed to the Secretary, who was writing in the Chancery. It was addressed to the Countess of Ægina, care of the Empress of Austria, Corfu. Blanche had grasped the situation in its completeness. She saw that the *grand coup* was to be played on December 31, and that till then it was better that Princess Sophia should not be in Rhodopé. In a talk the two had had together, they had decided that the Princess’s appearance had best be sudden, like a lightning stroke, that in the very moment of the crisis she should again be with them, not to nip the bud, but to cull the flower of full-blown conspiracy.

Consequently her telegram ran:

‘Be in Amandos secretly on the afternoon of the thirty-first; the House assembles at half-past three. I will meet you at Mavromáti. For safety change the name of the *Felatrune*. Telegraph to me the changed name.’

Late that night a telegram was handed in at the Legation, addressed to Lady Blanche. It contained one word:

‘Revenge.’

CHAPTER IX.

THE PRINCESS RETURNS.

FOR the next ten days Rhodopé was a pandemonium of conflicting theory, and no half-dozen folk could agree as to the authorship of this incredible Bill. Some said that Sophia had gone mad, and was no longer fit to be the ruler of the country; some that Petros had tamed her haughty spirit, and that she was wax in his hands; some that things would explain themselves on the 31st. But all these divergent lines pulled to one resultant: it was impossible that the Bill should become law. It was a universally-allowed truth that, if the Bill was voted on, it must be opposed, and that the voice of the people must challenge the command of the Crown. Would Sophia accept such an affront? If she did accept it, what would follow? If she did not accept it, what would follow? The old Constitution in any case could not stand, and at this conclusion men bit their nails, and wondered what the new Constitution would be.

But there was yet another party—the ‘Extreme Loyalists,’ as they were ironically termed—who were faithful to Sophia. They were few in number, but fanatically sure of their own orthodoxy. There must be, they said, another explanation; it was not within the bounds of possibility that Sophia had originated this scheme, or was in any way responsible for its execution. These, when asked for any explanation that could hold water, would not commit themselves; some silently held Malakopf responsible, some Prince Petros; others, who had seen the wife of the Mayor of Amandos lose a hundred francs with a very bad grace at the tables, were ready to affirm that she, being born from princely blood, had secret schemes on the throne of Rhodopé. This last explanation was considered to be in indifferent taste; men did not just now desire jokes about the future of the monarchy.

But no crisis of feverish excitement could stay the passage of hours. Christmas Day, with its sequence of festas, was a mockery of merriment, and still there came no sign from those in authority, no word that could in any way allay the rising fever of the people. More than once crowds collected outside the Palace, and shouted for Prince

Petros to speak to them. Once he appeared at the window and bowed to them, but shook his head, and those who saw him said he was pale and haggard and unshaved, and the mob dispersed in silence, feeling that perhaps there was a deeper tragedy than they knew. How unlike his gay and gallant figure was that mournful, dishevelled apparition! They would have been even more puzzled if they had been able to see him a moment after turn to Malakopf, who was sitting with him, and ask with a sprightly air, ‘Didn’t I do that well?’

Up till the 28th the serenity of the weather corresponded but ill with the tempest of the political outlook, but on that morning it seemed that even the elements were drawn into the vortex of the storm. A morning of sultry and unseasonable heat, thick like a blanket, ushered in a wailing wind from the east, but in some higher current of the air a rack of thunder-clouds, black and ominous, stole up from behind Corfu, and before evening had spread slowly and impenetrably over the sky. The heat of the morning had given place to a bitter and freezing cold, a cold which pierced the marrow and congealed the vital forces. But the east wind had dropped, and, a portent to behold, flash after flash of remote lightning lit up the gathering darkness of an Arctic night. About midnight the storm burst in a blinding hurricane of sleet and snow, and all the artillery of heaven thundered above it. At Amandos snow was as much a foreigner as thunder; often in summer the great hilltops round were cloaked in thunder-clouds or smouldered with lightning, yet no cloud obscured the brightness of the heaven from the valley. Again, in winter these same hilltops wore white mantles for four months, yet a genial sun, bright and invigorating, shone ever on the town. To lie beneath this double portent was an ominous thing, and the people, tuned to superstition by their new education at the tables, shook their heads, and prophesied a revolution of elements more intimate to them than snow or thunder.

An even livelier disquietude possessed Lady Blanche. The morning of the 29th it were an abuse of language to call a morning at all. The darkness, peopled by nothing but snowflakes and the maddened scream of the wind, seemed more palpable by the faint, sick glimmer of the day than it had been at night. All the forenoon the hurricane waxed ever fiercer, and, like drums, it was possible to hear, amid the shrill clamour of the wind, the booming of the great surges driven on

the Cape of Mavromáti, a dozen miles away. Lady Blanche determined to telegraph to the Princess that should leave Corfu at once, even anticipating her arrival by a day rather than risk the danger of arriving an hour too late; but her fears were irremediable, the telegraph-wires to Mavromáti were down, Amandos was cut off from all the world.

Then she would have sent a messenger to Mavromáti with her message, but that too was impossible. Who could hope to pass alive through the forest in which the road lay, where the pines were falling like ninepins and snapping under the snow like matches? Noon came, unmarked except by the clock, and her anxiety grew irrepressible. Outside the Legation windows lay the square of the town, which had been so gay for Sophia's wedding; to-day it might have been a rural scene in Spitzbergen, so completely had the snow denuded it of its evidences of civilization. A desert of white drifts was all her view; one could scarce believe that a row of houses ran north and south from their door, that a hundred yards away rose the cathedral, or that fifty paces to the left were the steps of the Assembly, which in two days would meet—for what? Yet it was necessary, no less, that Princess Sophia should be here in forty-eight hours, and it was this problem of how it was possible that she should get here that Blanche, crushing her temples in her hands, set herself to solve.

She must get here, so much was certain; that, at any rate, was a fixed point in this awful vagueness. The Adriatic boomed its shipwrecking denial; twelve miles of tree-strewn, snow-drifted forest lay between Mavromáti and Amandos. How, how, and yet again, how?

Of the Princess's courage to face, if need be, the final storm, the trumpet of the Archangel, Blanche had no doubt. Yet what sane skipper would put to sea in such a madness of the heavens? A telegram must be sent to tell Sophia that all the powers of hell must not hinder her return. The telegram had to be sent. Who could be trusted to go to Mavromáti, and not turn back, saying that the mission was beyond all possibility? Instantly the solution struck her—she would go herself. Lord Abbotsworthy dozing after lunch; she broke in on his slumbers.

'Oh, father,' she said, 'there is not time to explain, but take my word for it. Unless Sophia—unless the Princess—is here before that forged Bill of hers comes before the House on the thirty-first, she is no

more Princess of Rhodopé. She, her line, her country, are at stake. She is at Corfu—ah! do not ask me how I know, but I know she is—with the Empress, ready to return. Come she must.’

Lord Abbotsworthy held up a listening hand.

‘Boom! boom!’ he said; ‘that is the Adriatic. But you are so unexpected, Blanche. Dear me, how sleepy I am! Princess Sophia may be at Corfu, or the Falkland Islands; it is all one. Why should she come? In any case, she cannot.’

The Minister was still struggling with the drowsiness that snow brings, and regarded Blanche’s voice more as the imaginings of a political nightmare than the tones of his child.

‘Oh, you don’t understand!’ she cried. ‘But I know all about this wicked Bill. It is an invention of Malakopf and that husband of Sophia’s. I am in communication with the Princess. Well, the wires are down between here and Mavromáti, and I am going there to tell her to come back at once.’

Lord Abbotsworthy was by this time sufficiently awake to understand that Blanche was in earnest.

‘My dear child, you can’t go,’ he said. ‘But a man might get through. Shall I telegraph to the Foreign Office? Oh, I forget, the wires are down.’

He rose and went to the window.

‘It is impossible,’ he said; ‘the drifts will be deeper than a man’s height through the forests.’

‘I know,’ said Blanche, ‘but one could follow the river till one came out on to the lower plain. There will probably be less snow there. And I must go myself. I must see Sophia before she comes to Amandos; it is her crown to her.’

Lord Abbotsworthy looked at Blanche approvingly. His diplomatic calm never left him.

‘You are not the first woman of your race who has shown a man’s pluck,’ he said. ‘Well, you shall have your way. There is a bridle-path by the river, is there not? Take two men with you—Yanni, and the English groom, who will see to the horses. Yanni can find his way anywhere, even at Waterloo Junction. Meantime, Blanche, if this is

likely to be a question of an hour or two losing or winning everything, I will send out some men to clear the path for the Princess's return. I take your word for the whole matter, and I will not delay you by asking questions. I assume that I can do nothing, or else you would have told me what I could do.'

'Oh, father, that is good of you!' she cried. 'Let them do all they can to make the carriage-road passable by Wednesday morning; one can go quicker that way. I will send for Yanni.'

In half an hour they were off. Lord Abbotsworthy's head-keeper, a shrewd greyhound of an Albanian, who knew the forests as a man knows his house, had said that it would be possible to make a way along the bridle-path by the river, thus avoiding the delay and danger of falling or fallen trees, and the groom took the order with the bland imperturbability of an English servant. They had each a horse, or rather a sturdy mountain cob, animals more surefooted than a cat, wise, strong, and steady. They left the Legation by the stable-gate, so as to avoid the possibility of being seen by anyone from the houses in the square, and in a moment the white tumult of the driven snow had swallowed them up.

The confusion of the elements was incredible; the snow, driven almost horizontally by the wind, was more like a solid sheet than an infinity of flakes. Beneath the shelter of houses, they made their way quickly out of the town, though not without danger, for the tiles on the windward side of the roofs, where the snow could not lie, were starting up like disturbed game, and would be shot with a rattle half-way across the street, burying themselves with a silent plunge in the snow, and once half a chimney fell not three yards in front of Blanche.

It was not till they left the last houses behind that they realized the full uproar of the heavens, and in ten minutes, for all that could be seen, they might have been at Amandos or Mavromáti. They could discern nothing, except a few yards of white ground on each side; they passed lumps and hummocks of snow to the right hand and the left, which might have been houses, or buried flocks of sheep, or hedgerows. But Yanni, with the aid of a compass and a long pole, which from time to time he thrust forward beyond his pony to guard against slipping into a drift, led them cannily on. In an hour or so they

could tell he was on the right track, for the ground began rapidly to decline, and on their left they passed from time to time a fallen tree, or a group of wind-tormented pines, which must be the outliers of the forest. Soon the screaming of the wind was overscored by a hoarser note, and in ten minutes more they came down to the river, yellow and swollen beyond recognition, a furlong breadth of maddened foam, peopled with trees, house-beams, débris of huts and now and then some dead animal—sheep, pig, or goat—all twisting and whirling down with a ghastly sort of gaiety in a veritable dance of death.

A steep bank of snow led to the river-side, on which lay the bridle-path they must now find and follow, and Yanni dismounted to probe about for it. Once he slipped up to the neck in a drift, and when Blanche and the groom dragged him out, he shook his head in grave self-reproof.

‘I doubt my mother bore a fool,’ he said.

But before long they found it, and once found, it was easily possible to follow the path, for it lay notably level on that hillside of snow.

About four of the afternoon, when the faint glimmer of day was turning into a more palpable darkness, a change, at first hardly perceptible, began to come over the tumult of the weather. The wind blew only in sudden squalls and sonorous gusts, with intervals of quiet; the falling snow grew thinner and finer, and though they were rapidly descending, the cold grew more exquisite and piercing. The ponies’ feet, instead of plunging noiselessly into the fallen stuff, made each step through a crisp upper crust of frozen snow. By five the sky was clear and the wind dead, and an innumerable host of large and frosty stars began to glimmer like half-lit lamps in a vault of velvet. As the intenser darkness of night came on they burned ever more luminously, and every foot of the country, lying white polished and shining, caught and reflected their brightness. Eastwards the sky was gray with the approach of moonrise, and even before the full circle topped the hills to the east, it was as if day but now succeeded to night rather than night to day.

Before seven they had joined the main-road from Mavromáti below and beyond the intervening forest. The air was of an exceeding clearness, and crisp with frost, and not five miles away twinkled the

lights of the port, and the various fingers of the lighthouse. Behind them, a black blot in the moonlight, rose the forest, shoulder over shoulder; to their right brawled the swollen stream, but all was as still and as frozen as an Arctic day.

Not till then, when, morally speaking, their journey was over, did Lady Blanche realize how acute her anxiety had been.

‘Oh, William!’ she exclaimed to the groom, with a sudden, half-hysterical laugh, ‘we shall soon be there.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ replied that iron-faced functionary, and he brushed a little frill of icicles from his hair and eyebrows.

The night was windless and deadly cold, but the beauty of it was beyond compare. On all sides stretched acre on acre of frozen snow, rounded and billowy, but every outline was etched with the crispness of the frost. The sound of their ponies’ going was like a biting of toast; other noise there was none, except the crashing thunder of the broken surges on the shore. As they drew nearer, these ever became the more stupendous, till the ear was filled with their booming, as with the roar of a train in a tunnel. Soon it was possible to detect above the increasing riot the scream of the pebbly beach continually dragged down to the jaws of one wave, only to be vomited up afresh by the next, and her anxieties again began to lie heavy on Lady Blanche. Her part was done; in another hour the telegraph would twitch her message across to Corfu; but how would it be possible for any yacht to win through those mountainous billows? Down on the sea-board the snowfall had been less deep, and before eight they had entered the streets, all dumb and silent, and the telegram summoning Sophia at once had been despatched.

Early on the morning of the 30th came the Princess’s reply. ‘I am just going on board. We start at once. It will be rather rough,’ it said, and no more; and all that day Blanche watched in a fever of impatience for a sight of the newly-christened *Revenge*. In fair weather it was a crossing of not more than six hours, but who could say how many in such a sea? She consulted with Yanni as to the possible means of return to Amandos, for this frost would render the road impassable to carriages, however zealous had been the work of the men Lord Abbotsworthy had sent out, and he said that riding was the only mode

of passage. Lady Blanche was seated at her window in the sitting-room of the Hôtel Royal while the old keeper talked to her, and looking out idly into the street, she saw two children playing together on the frozen and compacted snow. One had a board, to which he had tied a string; the other sat on it, and was easily pulled along. Suddenly she applied the suggestion, and with dismay at her own stupidity.

‘Oh, Yanni!’ she cried, ‘I am a fool, and you another! A sledge!’

But a sledge was an unknown conveyance in Rhodopé, and Blanche hired a light cart. She had the wheels taken off, and two wooden runners, shod with steel, fitted on to its springs. The superintendence of this carpentering served to fill in the hours of that awful day of waiting; but when night fell there was still no signal of a ship. The wind had again risen to hurricane force, maddening still more the maddened sea, and a threat of a further fall of snow was abroad. The stars in their courses seemed to fight against Sophia.

The meeting of the Assembly was fixed for half-past three the next afternoon. Allowing for a long speech from Prince Petros, and the possibility of opposition contrary to the Constitution of Rhodopé, by six o’clock to-morrow afternoon at latest Sophia must be at Amandos. How she would choose to act Blanche could not guess, but that she was content to leave to the Princess. Her part was to get Sophia there. Outside the note of the gale would rise and fall again octave over octave, like the hootings of some infernal siren, but as yet there was neither more snow nor thaw. But the crash of the breakers grew ever hungrier and more splitting, and still the *Revenge* came not.

She could not bring herself to go to bed, but sat listening in a horrible dread for she scarcely knew what. But when across the mingled bellowings of the storm she heard a gun fired out at sea, she sprang up with a palpitating heart and a gasp for breath, knowing that it was this which she had feared. Running to the window, she saw a rocket shoot up in a line of flame, like a match struck in the dark, and a minute afterwards the report of it followed. She rang the bell hastily and told Yanni to come with her along the pier out to the lighthouse at the end.

It was now only a little before midnight, and the moon plunged and sped through a rack of flying clouds, like a woman distraught, now

naked, now clad in blowing vapours. The wind came straight off the sea, piercingly cold, and full of spray and blown sand, while over the frozen carpet of snow in the street wisps of brown seaweed and pebbles from the beach scudded and bowled along like little people in a panic. On the pier itself the force of the wind was more tremendous, and they had to make a slanting tack as they walked, zigzagging to and fro, and leaning against the gale as against a wall. Once and again the signal of distress came from the sea, and round the house where the lifeboat was kept they could see a throng of men growing and increasing, and the light of lanterns tossed up and down in the stinging air. Then from the sea shot up another rocket, and a cold blue light burned steadily for some seconds or so, and in that glare Blanche made out the three masts of a sailing-ship, and a flood of relief welled in her heart.

‘Oh, thank God!’ she cried, ‘it is not she!’ And next moment ‘Oh, poor folk! poor folk!’ she said; and Yanni crossed himself and muttered a prayer for their safety.

There was a coastguard station at the end of the pier, and she asked for the officer in command, giving her name, and saying that a steamer called the *Revenge* was expected, which had on board some friends of Lord Abbotsworthy. It had started from Corfu early that morning. Then, remembering that no communication with Amandos was possible, and that though the men would, in case of the necessity for rescue, do their best, though there were only a crew of the hated Turks on board—yet the knowledge that Sophia was there could not but be an incentive to heroisms—she told all.

‘Captain Hatsopoulo,’ she said, ‘the *Revenge* is none other than the *Felatrune*. Princess Sophia is on board, and little Prince Leonard; the whole hopes of the House of Ægina are there. There is a foul plot against her—this Bill, in fact, which you may have heard of. I can tell you no more. But she must be in Amandos to-morrow—she must! she must! Ah, it is already to-morrow—she must be there this afternoon.’

The ship which had made signals of distress had by now come close into shore, and already the lifeboat was out. They had quickly got a rope out to her, for she was already breaking up, and the work of rescue was going on. Blanche had gone into the house of the

coastguard station, for an inward necessity for being near prevented her from going back to the hotel, and she sat by the fire in a room they prepared for her, waiting. In another hour came news that the crew of the vessel had all been saved, but the ship lost. Not long after this she fell into an uneasy doze, and dreamed that the kingdom of Rhodopé was a bright little round thing, like a roulette-marble. She and Sophia had gone out for a walk together, and Sophia had dropped it, and now she and the Princess were hunting for it in the snow. Others were hunting for it, too. Gray, uncanny shapes like wolves trotted incessantly about; some were like Malakopf, some reminded her of Prince Petros, others had terrible whiskers and green eyes; others, again, were more in the semblance of fiends unimaginably horrible, and they all scratched and nosed in the snow for the little bright marble. Then she slept more deeply, and a dreamless slumber succeeded to these uneasy visions.

It was already day when she awoke; the faithful Yanni was stretched out on the floor beside her chair asleep, and it was Captain Hatsopoulos entrance that had roused her. She started at once into the full possession of her faculties, and sprang up.

‘Ah! I no longer hear the wind,’ she cried. ‘Well, captain, what is it?’

‘The *Revenge* has been sighted,’ he said. ‘You can see her out of this window.’

Far out over the waste of tossing water there heaved up and sank again the masts and bulwarks of a steamer. Captain Hatsopoulos took Blanche to where the great telescope stood.

‘Watch her as she rises to a wave,’ he said. ‘There! that is none other than the *Felatrune*. You can see her colours. The Princess is flying her own flag! God save the Princess!’ he cried.

‘God save her!’ echoed Blanche; ‘and confound the tricks of her enemies!’

The *Revenge* was steering an easterly course from Corfu, and about ten of the morning she came opposite Mavromáti, still some miles out to sea. They saw her swing this way and that, now labouring low in the trough of the waves, now poised on the top, and for the next hour watched her still nearing them, her masts striking wildly right and left

across a space of some ninety degrees, so that it made Blanche feel qualms of nausea only to see her. On shore, opposite the landing stage where she would put in, was drawn up the sledge, ready to start at a moment's notice; and opposite, on the other side of the harbour, the lifeboat was launched with its crew, in case she could not make the harbour mouth, and was driven ashore. The port of Mavromáti faced almost north, and the gale from the north-west had raised a terrific cross-sea. As she drew nearer, they could see that she had changed her course a point or two northwards, to allow space enough so that she should not be carried against the south pier by the huge billows that swept across the entrance. Already she had slackened steam, and made almost imperceptible way towards them. Then came a minute of awful suspense as she moved close up to the harbour mouth, so perilously near to the wall of broken water which dashed over the end of the south pier that the spray of it hid her for a moment; the next she was beyond the breakers, and safe.

Blanche was already half-way across the harbour to meet her, and before the yacht had come to anchor she was over the side and in Sophia's arms.

'Ah, you are not much too soon, dearest Sophia!' she cried, 'I have waited here all night. Quick! come ashore; and the sledge is ready.'

'Is there room in it for a box?' she asked. 'I do not want to appear before the Assembly in travelling clothes.'

'Yes, yes, there is room,' cried the other. 'You shall dress at the Legation. Come—only come!'

'Petros will be surprised to see me,' remarked the Princess. 'As we go, you shall tell me everything.'

CHAPTER X.

THE PRINCESS IS VERY MUCH THERE.

THE Parliament House at Amandos, standing next the cathedral in the square, is but a small building, for its full attendance is only sixty; but for beauty of proportion and exquisiteness of finish it would be difficult to name its fellow. Over the main entrance is a carved wooden gallery, where the friends of Members can attend a debate; at the other a raised platform, on which are the seats for the six Ministers of the Crown, and the throne itself. These are near the wall, and close behind the throne is the small door which communicates with the Princess's private way into the Palace. Three steps lead up from the floor of the House on to the platform, which is faced by a low bronze balustrade of dolphins, and foliage, and mermaids. It is the custom for any Minister who wishes to address the House on the debate to take his place not on the platform, but on the Ministerial front bench. Similarly the monarch, if contributing to the debate, sits as the first of his own Ministers. The custom is an ancient one, and certainly signifies that while appealing to the House, and arguing for or against a question, all are equal as Members of that House, and carry no official rank.

The seats of the Members are arranged in two rows on each side of the gangway of the House, which is paved in variously coloured marbles from Bûlbeck. The most exquisite patterns in red, green, and yellow adorn it, and in the centre, in lapis lazuli, jasper, and white marble, are wrought the crown and royal arms of Rhodopé. Behind the Members' seats on each side stand the busts of the Princes of Rhodopé, an unbroken line dating from the time of Constantine, first Prince of the House of Ægina. This is one of the finest of the series, and is by Desiderio da Settignano, one of Donatello's few pupils. The seats of the Members are great oak armchairs in scarlet brocade, and the walls are covered with old oak woodwork of the fifteenth century.

But the marvel of the place is the throne; it is made throughout of ivory, a panel of gold brocade is let into the back, and the cushion of the seat is covered with the same. Two gold lions support the arms, and back, arms, and front are thickly incrusted with precious stones, and

goldsmith's work attributed to Benvenuto Cellini. The footstool is likewise of ivory, and gold brocade covers the tread of it. The whole is set on four steps, the first of which is covered with a thick facing of white Arabian agate, the second with jasper, the third with cornelian, and the fourth with chalcedony. Thus, though it stands far back from the House, the whole of it, owing to its elevation, is clearly seen over the low bronze balustrade of the platform.

The morning of December 31 dawned clear and light after the tempest of the two days before, but an ominous stillness, like the hush before a storm, hung over the town. None was bold enough to forecast the probable issue of events—none, indeed, knew exactly what was happening. Those who refused to believe that Sophia was responsible for this crisis were already in the large majority, but as it was thought that she was in England, nothing but a telegram from her—unless, indeed, she was still ignorant of what was taking place—could within the bounds of possibility save the situation. That this preposterous Bill could be carried was not worth consideration; it was not even known whether Prince Petros would vote for it. None knew what manner of communication he would make. It was hinted that he would merely mention that it was introduced by the Sovereign, and thus would become law, others thought he might go so far as to disclaim all share in it, and even express sympathy with the nation. Some, as has been already mentioned, saw in him the first cause of it, and were wildly indignant against him; others, again, affirmed that none were so indignant as himself, and that he regarded the fall of Sophia as inevitable, and not unjust. What line the present Government would take, what form the future Government would assume, none knew. There was, however, certainly a considerable party which would gladly have seen Petros on the throne, if Sophia really intended to commit this wild and obstinate mistake; others, it was supposed, were Republicans in tendency, and pointed silently to Malakopf as the President of the Republic. One thing only, in the midst of this feverish uncertainty, was sure—the Bill could not become law.

The debate was fixed for half-past three, but long before that time the gallery of the House was filled to overflowing with eager eyes, and every Member, chilly and apprehensive, was in his seat. All the Ministers were in the body of the House, indicating that all meant to

take part in the debate. This by itself was ominous enough, for it showed that there would be a debate on a Bill introduced by the Crown, a fact in itself unique and unprecedented. Prince Petros had not yet arrived, but the half-hour still tingled in the air from the great bronze chime of the cathedral, when the private door from the Palace opened, and he came quickly in. The Members, all wearing levée dress, remained standing till he had taken his seat on the throne; then, after a moment's pause, he took up the paper for the day, and again read out the text of the inexplicable Bill. It was noticed that he looked pale, but his voice was steady.

‘ “That all gambling-houses in the realm of Rhodopé, of every sort and degree, private or public, be closed, and that no game of hazard be henceforward played therein.

‘ “That to play any such game in public, or to bet in public, be a felony.

‘ “That licenses shall be withdrawn from every licensed gambling-house in the aforementioned realm of Rhodopé.

‘ “That the building known as the Club be converted into an asylum for decayed and idiotic old gentlemen, the purpose for which the ground was originally intended.

‘ “That the person known as Pierre be sent back to Monte Carlo, his passage (second class) paid.

‘ “That these regulations come into effect on the first day of January (new style), 1857.

‘ “SOPHIA,
‘ “*Hereditary Princess of Rhodopé.*” ’

In dead silence he read, in dead silence he put down the paper on the little ivory table by the throne, and walked to the seat reserved for the monarch, if he should take part in the debate, as the first of his Ministers. His step did not falter, he neither hurried nor hung back, and after a pause of a moment or two, in which the House waited in dead silence, he took a little sheaf of papers from his pocket, and, rising to

his feet, turned his back on the throne so as to face the Members, and spoke.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘you have heard in silence and in dismay the communication I have read you from the throne. With what dismay I read it I cannot hope to picture to you. It is an anomaly that any speech should be made on a Bill introduced by the Crown except by the Crown itself, but I observe that Her Royal Highness’s Ministers have taken their places in the House. I sympathize with them, and though I suppose I have the right, as the Princess’s representative, to order that they go back to their places’—here an angry murmur arose from the gallery—‘I cannot find it in my heart to do so. I suspend the rule that no speech should be made but my own. In this I trust I am not disloyal to my beloved wife, whom I represent. I really cannot feel clear how she would act. I must use my judgment.

‘I do not know what manner of speech you expect from me,’ he continued. ‘Indeed, I scarcely know what to say, and yet I must tell you what is in my heart. At least I may claim your pity, for no man, I think, was ever in so terrible a position. Every word of that Bill was bitter to me, for, indeed—you hear my voice for the last time—the people of Rhodopé are very dear to me. But dearer is my love for my wife’—here his voice rose a little—‘the Princess Sophia, and dearer the little rag of loyalty which I can still keep, which nothing—no iron chains of circumstance, no monstrous necessity—can strip from me.’

The last words vibrated with intensest passion; they seemed instinct with truth and loyalty. The man was a great orator. He paused a moment, and went on more calmly:

‘But in justice to myself, though you shall all see which way my conscience commands me to vote as the representative of Her Royal Highness—in justice to myself, I must say a few words of exculpation. Believe me, I am altogether innocent of this stupendous error. Not one word have I exchanged with the Princess Sophia on this matter; she never consulted me on it, and perhaps wisely, for she must have known what I should feel. It is scarcely six months ago that she in person inaugurated the club, in the formation and execution of which I may, without boasting, claim no inconsiderable share. That club, so I am happy to think, has poured money like a snow-fed torrent into

Rhodopé; many hundreds of the citizens have shares in it, which yield a percentage which no gold mine can rival. Indirectly how much more has it proved to have enriched us! Was not the capital last autumn one hive of visitors from other countries, bringing not only wealth to us, but an interchange of ideas, enlarging our horizons, making us feel that we had brethren from over-sea? And now what? This great building is to be closed, the visitors will come no more; they will leave our pine breezes for the languorous air of the Riviera, and we—we shall go back to the old life. Let me take a few figures to show you just what this means, dealing only with small items easy to understand. Last year there were eight restaurants and five hotels in Rhodopé, now there are forty-six restaurants and seventeen hotels completely open, and far more in course of construction. This increase is not profitable alone, nor even principally perhaps, to the enterprise of those who have started them. The farmer finds a readier market for his sheep, the vine-grower for his wines; there is not a single trade which has not profited largely by this. This increased prosperity has filtered through every minutest channel of our industries. Where sheep only fed on the mountain-side now resound the cries of the golfers, and the barren land north of Mavromáti fetches a rental of eighty pounds sterling as a links. Take, again, the case of the vine-grower. Such is the wonderful fertility of our soil, in other years we have often sent wine abroad, for the consumption at home is not equal to the supply. But now what do we see? Our vineyards cannot keep pace with the demand; we import much from France, from Germany, and the cheaper hotels, I am told, from California and Australia, and the duty swells our revenues. From this I hoped that we should advance even further, that more land would be taken into cultivation, more folk profitably employed. Alas, and alas, for my dreams!'

The House had been attentive when he began; now, you may say, they hung on hooks. It had not, at any rate, been expected that the Prince would express himself so unmistakably. A murmur of sympathetic applause rose and died and rose again. The tide of popular approval flowed in his favour; he at least was opposed to this measure. Malakopf alone was uneasy; he shifted in his seat, his quick brain sought handles in the Prince's words, yet from every point he retired baffled. Petros, it is true, was creating an impression most

unfavourable to Sophia. Malakopf had to do the same for him. The Presidency of the Republic still hung in the wavering balance.

‘I had hoped otherwise,’ continued Petros. ‘I had hoped to see the commerce of Europe pour into Rhodopé. Acre on acre of fruitful soil waits only for the cultivator to say “Sesame!” We are not a tax-ridden folk like Italy; our country, happier than England, produces more than unwholesome beer and unpayable corn. We wanted only the impetus to begin, for we are but at the beginning. The impetus we have had; what follows? Again Rhodopé will become a sealed land, a land of mountains and inhospitable ravines to the civilized world, a minor State, an insignificant Balkan province. Ah——’ and he stopped with a cleverly taken gulping breath.

Once more a murmur of more audible applause thrilled through the benches; sympathy seemed on the way to be warmed to boiling-point. Malakopf signed to the Prince to cease, but the latter took no notice, and the Prime Minister held himself in readiness to make his attack.

‘Two years ago—more than two years ago,’ continued Petros, speaking slowly and regretfully, ‘I first set eyes on your incomparable land. Many daydreams were mine. To the best of my poor ability I have striven to make them real. I have devoted my time, my powers, such as they are—but, oh, how gladly!—to contribute to the welfare of the country. I have had two thoughts only—loyalty to my wife, loyalty to my land—and now——’

Had the Prince and Malakopf had leisure to observe, they would have noticed that eyes and attention were no longer glued on them. The people of Rhodopé, always fond of drama, were having a delightful afternoon. A more palpable stillness had fallen on the House, and when Petros paused on the pathetic word, no sympathy thrilled the Assembly. But his great point was approaching, and it was too imminent for Malakopf to disregard. The unstable tide was setting too strongly for him not to interfere, and as he rose the Prince sat down in an assumed humility, and with a gesture to Malakopf to proceed.

‘I have a question to ask,’ grated out the Prime Minister. ‘The Princess Sophia is known to be tolerant to gambling, yet now she introduces a Bill condemning it. She shuts up the club she has opened —on whose suggestion? We are here in debate, a course

unprecedented when the Crown introduces a Bill. That such a Bill should be opposed is beyond question, but who is the real author of it? Who but one has persuaded her to this course? Too long—I say it openly—have we suffered under the strange whims of the House of Ægina. Princess Sophia, as you all very well know, spends her days at Monte Carlo, yet she treats us like children, and would forbid us to gamble in Rhodopé. And has she never been seen at the tables? And how often is she seen in her place in this House? Who, after all, is the Prince Petros but the husband of the gambling Princess? Who, after all, is the Princess herself? Her place is here among us, but where is she?" And looking round to face Petros, he faced also the throne, and his speech froze.

Petros sprang to his feet, determined, like Malakopf, to play his last card.

'I, too, am no friend of the House of Ægina,' he cried, 'except in so far as I am the husband of the Princess. We want a ruler who will have the true interests of the nation at heart; we want——'

And he, too, seeing Malakopf stare open-eyed before him, stopped, then turned round, for Malakopf's eyes were fixed not on him, but beyond.

The platform where stood the throne and the official seats of the Ministers was brilliantly lighted. On each side of the throne were three seats, untenanted, for the Ministers were all in the body of the House. On the throne sat Sophia, who had entered through the private door from the Palace. She was dressed in white brocade; round her neck were four strings of diamonds, conspicuous among which shone the Eastern gem; on her head was the great tiara, an heirloom of Rhodopé, and she wore all her Orders. She sat as still as the throne on which she was seated. She seemed to listen to the debate, for her head was bent a little forward, and her mouth was slightly parted, as if she would have something to say in reply. The sun, low to its setting, shone full on her through the window above the western door, and she was enveloped in a mantle of rose. The beauty of her was incomparable.

For a moment there was dead silence when the echo of Petros's last words had died in the groining of the roof; then she raised her head a

little, and in a voice of gold, ‘His Highness Prince Petros is addressing the House, gentlemen,’ she said.

Still dead silence, except for some woman in the gallery, who suddenly burst into a cackling hysterical laugh.

‘I should like to hear my husband continue his speech,’ she said, when the woman had stopped laughing.

Malakopf had sat down; Petros alone continued standing. Then Sophia rose, but the House, still open-mouthed, continued gazing at her. She drew herself up to her full height.

‘Gentlemen,’ she said; and they rose to their feet.

Without a shade of excitement in her face or hurry in her movement, as if the subject of the debate were of no concern to her, she walked across the platform, her train whispering behind her, and down to the Ministers’ bench. Petros was in the place she would occupy if taking part in the debate, and not even looking at him, she waved him aside with her hand.

‘Do not leave the House,’ she said. ‘I have heard your speech; you shall hear mine.’

Next Petros stood Malakopf, and the Princess swept by him with an air of ineffable disdain. In her hand she held the Bill Petros had just read out, and standing in her place she glanced through it, and her face flushed. Then, ‘Be seated, gentlemen,’ she said.

She still held the Bill in her hand, and when the House had seated itself she tore and tore it through and through, and again through, scattered the pieces on the ground, and burst into speech.

‘That for the Bill!’ she said—‘that for the Bill which falsely and impudently is before the House as my Bill. Before God, I never set eyes on the thing before, and I think you will read the truth of what I say if you look at the face of the Prime Minister on my left and on the face of my husband. It is one of the duties of Royalty to be punctual, and am I not divinely punctual? Oh, it is incredible!’ she cried—‘it is incredible that two men could be so infamous and so stupid! And I was to be the victim of this astounding conspiracy—I! Indeed, gentlemen, I am not in the humour to be a victim. You heard the Prince’s speech; he spoke of his loyalty to the interests of the country; he spoke, as I thought, very convincingly of the benefits the club had brought to our

country; but above all, to cap his insolence, he spoke of his loyalty to me. Did a man ever hear the equal of that? Oh, Petros, you are unapproachable!' and she looked at him for the first time.

Then she turned to Malakopf: 'You spoke of the strange whims of the House of Ægina,' she said. 'The strangest of all their whims was on the day that you were made Prime Minister. I heard you ask, "Who, after all, is the Princess Sophia?" I, after all, am the Princess Sophia! "Where is the Princess Sophia?" you asked. Malakopf, I am here. In the name of my ancestors!' she cried, pointing to the row of busts—'in the name of my ancestors, Alexis Malakopf, I thank you for your loyalty to my House!'

Then, turning to the Chief Justice, 'I impeach both these men on a charge of high treason against myself, Sophia, hereditary Princess of Rhodopé. Let them be removed from the House; they await their trial.'

They were removed in custody, and till they had vanished there was absolute silence in the House. Then Sophia rose again.

'I intend,' she said, 'to make no further inquiry into this prodigiously futile attempt against the throne. Indeed, it is difficult to take such folly seriously, and were I not a little angry I should laugh. If any present was associated with that dismal couple we have seen leave the House, it is a matter for himself alone, and let him thank his Maker that I heard no more speeches on the subject. This Bill, not being introduced by me, falls to the ground. And now, gentlemen, for a pleasanter task. I am here according to immemorial custom to thank my Ministers and the Members of this House for the services they have rendered to me and to my country during this past year. We have seen the revenues increase and multiply during the last eight months; never, I think, has Rhodopé been in so prosperous a condition. I thank you, gentlemen, from my heart for your services.'

She curtsied right and left to the members of the Assembly, and then stood a moment silent.

'One thing more only,' she said. 'The customary New Year fêtes will take place as usual, and Prince Petros's list of invitations is mine. Gentlemen, the House is prorogued.'

Flesh and blood could stand it no longer; Sophia's appearance at such a moment, the magnificence of her beauty, her royalty of

demeanour, would have made a man dumb from his birth to shout. The Minister of the Interior leaped on to his brocaded chair like a schoolboy, and the Chief Justice, being stout, mounted on to his as if it had been a horse.

‘Three cheers, and another and another, for the beloved Princess Sophia!’ he cried, waving his three-cornered hat.

The scene was indecorous in the extreme. Some jumped on to their chairs, others on to the table; they pounded the ground with sticks and stamped and yelled. The chair of the Chief Justice collapsed under him, but those near said he continued cheering even at the moment his head came into sharp collision with the marble floor. The gallery was one open mouth, roaring. It had already got about the town that the Princess had come back, and when she appeared at the main door leading into the square, where her carriage was waiting for her, a sea of faces met her. As the door was opened the shouts of those inside streamed out like a river, and, like the sea, the voices of the crowd outside swallowed them up. In a moment her horses were unharnessed, and the folk fought and pushed for a place between the shafts. Indeed Sophia had come back.

CHAPTER XI.

A FOOL LEAVES RHODOPÉ.

MEANTIME, at the Palace the large house-party who were staying with Petros for the New Year fêtes had heard the shouting, and wondered a little nervously what it meant. They knew that the Bill for the Abolition of Gambling-Houses was to be considered that afternoon, and this acclamation, if it was to be referred to the Bill, could only mean that it had been thrown out by an enormous majority. If so, how did Petros stand? Was the shouting an applause to his vote recorded against the Bill? And if so, how did Sophia stand? The subject was a delicate one for guests to talk of, and they pretended not to hear the shouting, and spoke politely together of the change in the weather.

But it ever grew in volume, and the noise was getting nearer. Uncontrollable curiosity gained on them, and, rising, each questioned the eyes of the others. Soon the shouting, like some tide on the flow, reached the courtyard of the Palace, and a moment later the doors of the great reception-room, where they were awaiting the coming of the Prince, for the dinner-hour was now long past, were thrown open by the major-domo, and to the incredible surprise of all—for she had dressed at the English Legation—Sophia entered.

The Princess had no idea who formed the house-party which Petros had invited for the New Year fêtes, but in the very flush of her triumph it did not seem to her possible that there might be an awkward moment in front of her. But had she known what presences that door flung wide would show, even she might have paused. But, smiling, and on fire with the music of the shouting, she sailed into the room. Just in front of her, imminent and encompassing as a nightmare, stood Petros's mother, Princess Caroline of Herzegovina.

That remarkable lady was English, of overwhelming size, and she always denied ever having been a barmaid at the Alhambra Theatre. She was dressed—or you would rather say bound—in a ruby velvet gown, her ornaments were cairngorms and turquoises, and her fan was of ostrich feathers dyed pink. To her Prince Petros, in a moment of unguarded confidence, had hinted at the upshot of this night's work,

and when she saw Sophia her voluminous bodice remained expanded with a quick-taken breath, and the two for a moment looked at each other in silence. Sophia recovered herself first.

‘Oh, I am even as delighted and surprised to see you, dear Princess,’ she cried, ‘as you are to see me. I appear like the man in the moon, do I not? It is ages since we met. Where is Petros, you ask me? Petros is detained;’ and she passed on, shaking hands, to her other guests, mistress of herself and her house.

The Princess Caroline’s face was a fine study for a man who was bold enough to look at her. Her black, swarthy eyebrows meeting over her large, parrot-like nose grew knotted with thought; she could not doubt but that something had happened. What could this return of Sophia amid acclamation and welcome portend? Where was Petros, who a few hours ago had gone to the Assembly, tremulous, yet hopeful? Malakopf, too? Malakopf was to have dined at the Palace to-night. He had not come, and already Sophia had passed through the folding dining-room doors, and the others were following. The arrangement of the table had been thrown hopelessly out of gear by these alterations, but Sophia did not have Malakopf’s chair removed. She herself, with an extraordinary naturalness of manner, talked and laughed and ate and drank heartily and with great enjoyment, and Princess Caroline grew momently more thunderous in aspect and more apprehensive.

The dinner had been later than usual, and it was nearly ten when the dessert was put on. Suddenly Sophia rose.

‘I must beg the attention of all of you a moment,’ she said. ‘You will probably hear a strange story when we go to the ball to-night, and it is as well that you should hear the truth of it from me, though in outline only. I have come back just in time to nip in the bud a plot against the House of Ægina, against me and my son. The authors of the plot are consequently unable to attend. Let us rise from table, your Royal Highnesses, my lords and ladies.’

Princess Caroline wavered a moment, then threw herself, fan, eyebrows and all, at Sophia’s feet.

‘Oh, have pity!’ she cried, and in her emotion her breeding had its way. ‘Poor Petros never meant any ‘arm. Oh my! I don’t know what I

shall do! Where is poor Petros? Oh, let me go to him!’

Sophia motioned to her other guests to leave the room, and they were left alone.

‘My poor dear Princess,’ she said, ‘Petros has made a tragic ass of himself! He has been quite incredibly foolish and wicked. I am very sorry, but I gave him a warning before, and he would not take it. Oh, don’t cry so! He will not have his head cut off; but he will never sit any more close to the throne of Rhodopé, because he tried to occupy the seat. Yes, you shall see him to-morrow. You will not come to the fête to-night, of course? I really am very sorry for you. Oh, please get up! Your tiara has fallen off.’

Prince Petros—and herein was a sting—had ordered the fête on a scale of unexampled magnificence to celebrate the events of the afternoon. These events had turned out somewhat wide of his conjecture, but the magnificence of the fête was unimpaired, and very fitly commemorated Sophia’s return. He had planned an enthusiastic reception of himself and Malakopf. Sophia took their place, but the enthusiasm of the welcome fully came up to his imaginings.

The High Court of Justice met early the next week to try Prince Petros and Malakopf. It was not difficult to find witnesses for the prosecution, for the whole House had heard Malakopf’s public repudiation of the House of Ægina, and Prince Petros, wise for once, when asked whether or no he was guilty of high treason against his wife, the Princess Sophia, pleaded guilty, hoping thereby for a mitigation of his sentence. The Lord Chief Justice, as he was bound to do, pronounced sentence of perpetual imprisonment at the Princess’s pleasure, and, without ordering the removal of the prisoners from the dock, sent, in accordance with the procedure of the Court of Rhodopé, a message to her, to say that he had done his duty, and waited for the confirmation of the sentence. She had also petitioned the Court for a separation between herself and her husband, and this, of course, was granted her.

Sophia had spared the two the humiliation of a public trial, and the case was tried *in camera*, there being present only the jury, sufficient witnesses to establish the accusation, the judge, and the counsel for

and against the prisoners. In a few moments, however, the door to the judge's private rooms opened, and Sophia herself entered.

The Chief Justice immediately vacated his place, and all remained standing till Sophia had seated herself. She was dressed in black, her face was very stern, and Petros, looking thereon, felt his hopes die.

But she spoke first, not to him, but to Malakopf.

'Alexis Malakopf, prisoner at the bar,' she said, 'Prime Minister of my Government, you have been found guilty of high treason, and for you I have no pity. I heard your words spoken in the Assembly, I heard your astounding insults and repudiation of our Royal House. How is it possible for me to mitigate your sentence? You are not young, you have not been led away by another; you are old, and you are wicked. Long ago I knew what you were planning, long ago you made a boast that my husband was but the glove which covered your hand. Do you remember your words? I see that you do. I may have been unwise—I have been unwise in many things—but I have ever dealt frankly with you. I will hear if you have anything to say in your defence. But if you have any self-respect left, I cannot conjecture what you will say.'

There was silence in the court.

'So be it,' said Sophia at length; 'as you have sown, so shall you reap. You have been accused of high treason to my house, you have been found guilty. Your crime is the more odious in that you must needs act through another; you must needs make my unhappy husband your tool. You have done a monstrous thing. The sentence of the Court is confirmed, and for the remainder of your days you are confined in our prison at Amandos.'

Malakopf was removed, and when he had gone Sophia turned to Petros.

'Oh, Petros,' she said, leaning forward, and speaking so that he alone could clearly hear her, 'have I deserved this of you? What had I done that you could treat me so? Was it not your place rather to reason with me, if you thought I was acting unwisely for my people? If you thought I ought to have been more sedulous in my duties, should you not have told me so? Yes, you will say that I did not give a very patient ear to you, and thus the fault is partly mine, and I own it. But no good fruit ever came out of disloyalty, and even if your infamous plan had

succeeded, the fruit would have been an apple from the Dead Sea, dust and ashes to your mouth. Perhaps this is no time to make reproaches, but we shall not meet again, my poor Petros, and what I have to say to you must be said now.'

She stopped a moment; her voice was soft with tears, and trembled. The unhappy man had covered his face with his hands, and his shoulders shook with his sobbing.

'Petros,' she went on, 'what a change is here, since when you came so gallantly to Amandos, since we sat all night at bezique, since we rode to the review, and raced home! We have not made a very successful marriage, and I blame myself, believe me, as much as you. But that it should come to this! There I blame you. Did I not warn you? Have the justice to admit that I warned you when I told you that you were no Napoleon. Jesting words, no doubt; but you are not slow, and you saw what I meant. Oh, I know well that you saw what I meant. Again, when I left Mavromáti, did I not say that I trusted you to the utmost? I could think of nothing which should have been so tonic as that. If there had been one seed of loyalty in you, those words should have warmed and watered it.'

Petros raised his head.

'Before God, Sophia,' he cried, 'I never thought——'

She shook her head.

'Do not say that,' she said, 'for you did think. You must have calculated long and carefully. I should, I think, have forgiven you if you had in some sudden exasperation tried to cut my throat, for I know how exasperating I must often have been; but this scheming and cold-blooded conspiracy, it beats me! I cannot understand it. My poor friend, I do not mean to mock at you, but you would have been a more successful figure to-day if you had stuck to your riding and your bezique. Good-bye, Petros; we shall not meet again. You shall know how Leonard grows up.'

He buried his face in his hands, unable to look at her, waiting only for the confirmation of his sentence. Sophia paused, allowing her emotion to quiet itself, and then spoke in a firm voice:

'The separation granted by the court between Prince Petros and myself is confirmed,' she said. 'But the Crown, having pity for the

Prince's youth, and bearing in mind that he was no more than the tool of another, commutes his sentence of perpetual imprisonment to perpetual banishment from the realm of Rhodopé. He is free to go and to do as he will outside our dominions. He will leave Mavromáti this afternoon in the royal yacht *Felatrune*, to the commander of which orders shall be given to go where the Prince directs. He will be removed secretly, so that no public disrespect shall be shown him. I thank you, my Lord Chief Justice and gentlemen. The court is adjourned.'

She stepped down from the Bench, and went to the front of the dock, holding out her hand.

'Good-bye, Petros,' she said, and with a sudden flood of tears he bent and kissed it.

CHAPTER XII.

THE EDUCATION OF THE HEIR-APPARENT.

PRINCE LEONARD early exhibited that same craving for diversion and excitement which had made the childhood of his mother so full of incident to her teachers. He could not, as she had done, request reluctant tutors to elope with him, but he made their lives burdensome by a scientific curiosity to observe their conduct under such trying circumstances as the cold aspersion of unsuspected booby-traps. Indeed, such was the continuous pressure of his animal spirits, and his greed of adventure, that the gentlemen who held these brief appointments were as precariously situated as engine-drivers the boilers of whose machines might be expected momentarily to burst. He was an excellent rider, born to the saddle, and at the age of eleven his handicap at golf was only nine. He had a fanatical abhorrence of his lessons, and his natural linguistic powers, and the royal birthright of memory, made whatever intellectual task he was good enough to undertake extremely easy to him. He had the fair skin and dark hair of his mother, and in the whole realm of Rhodopé there was not a more lovable or so unmanageable a boy.

When he was just thirteen, he indulged in a series of escapades that made Sophia take him seriously. The first of these was that he challenged, fought with, and wrought havoc upon the pasty person of the son of the Mayor of Amandos, an act undignified in one of his station, and performed in a manner distressingly public. The two, stripped to their shirts and trousers, had fought three rounds in the square in front of the cathedral, while Sophia, with whom Leonard had been driving to a public function, paid a call of condolence on the wife of the Mayor, a victim to neuralgia. The Princess and she had been sitting in a room overlooking the square, when the hubbub from outside, and shouts of ‘Go it, Prince Leonard! Three to one on the Prince!’ caused them simultaneously to rise, and run in apprehensive haste to the window. The carriage, which had waited in the street, was tenantless, the Prince’s hat and sailor jacket were lying in the road, a crowd of street-boys made an enthusiastic ring, and the heir-apparent

to the throne had his opponent's head comfortably in chancery. The wife of the Mayor gazed but for one moment, and then shrieking out, 'The monster! he will kill my child!' rushed distractedly from the room. Sophia followed, and on the stairs ran into the boy's tutor, who, being totally unable to stop him fighting, had very sensibly hastened to tell his mother. The Mayoress bore her battered offspring away, and Sophia returned to the carriage with Leonard.

'Oh, mother, didn't I give it him!' cried the boy. 'My knuckles are quite sore with hitting his great head. He couldn't have lasted another round.'

'Put on your jacket at once, Leonard,' said his mother sternly. 'You, the Prince, fighting in the public street! I wonder you are not ashamed!'

'But I couldn't help it,' cried Leonard. 'I had to fight him. He said things about you.'

'Don't talk so loud, Leonard,' said Sophia. 'Tell me what he said.'

'He said that you were the most notor—notorious—he always uses words a yard long—the most notorious gambler in Rhodopé; so, of course, I said he lied, and would he fight or take a licking? Indeed, he did both.'

His mother flushed with pleasure, but she sighed at the end.

'I'm afraid he was near the mark, Lennie,' she said.

'But what is notorious?' asked Leonard, 'I didn't know what he meant, but, anyhow, it was calling you names.'

'It means the most regular,' said Sophia.

Leonard considered a moment with his head on one side.

'That doesn't sound very bad,' he said; 'but, anyhow, he had no business to say so. No. I'm glad I fought him. Lord, how sore he will be!'

He smoothed his ruffled hair, and put his hat on.

'I suppose it is true that you are at the club pretty often?' he continued. 'Mother, will you take me there sometimes? I have never been.'

Sophia felt suddenly serious and responsible.

‘No; never,’ she said with energy. ‘Promise me you will never go. I certainly shall not take you there; it is no place for you.’

‘Then, some day I shall go without you,’ remarked Leonard.

Sophia was so anxious that he should not—why, it perhaps would have puzzled her to say, except that she vaguely pictured his fresh young face looking singularly out of place in that gas-lit assembly—that she did her best to persuade him to promise that he would never set foot in the club, but unavailingly. The more she urged, the more Leonard’s desire to go increased.

‘And,’ as he remarked with candour, ‘I shan’t make a promise, because then I should feel obliged to keep it.’

So at last she desisted, feeling she would have been wiser not to have urged, and hoping that the boy would forget about it; for she would sooner he fought the Mayor’s son than cut his gambling teeth, and, indeed, the history of their quarrel had warmed her heart.

Two evenings afterwards she was sitting at her usual place on the right of Pierre, playing roulette. She was enjoying a rare run of luck, and her stakes were recklessly high. She had just placed the limit on a single number, when, looking up, she saw opposite her a young girl seated at the table watching the game with flushed and wide-eyed interest. She turned to Blanche Amesbury, who was sitting next her.

‘Look at that pretty child opposite,’ she said. ‘But what a way to dress a girl! She must be the daughter of that English brewer peer. What refined types you meet among the bourgeois! How its dear little heart is in the game! Yet it seems almost a shame to bring it here—this is no place for children—but the *nouveaux riches* are always horrible. Why—— Oh, good gracious me! it’s Leonard.’

Leonard caught the sound of his name, and looked up for a fraction of a second.

‘Oh, a moment—a moment!’ he cried. ‘Fourteen, fifteen—— Hurrah! sixteen wins. Good old sixteen! I wish I had staked on a single number instead of the half-dozen.’

He had been so absorbed in the game that for a moment he did not notice his self-betrayal, nor the shout of laughter which followed; but now he stood there in all the conscious shame of his girl’s dress. He blushed up to the roots of his hair, and pushed his way confusedly out

of the room, forgetting even to take with him what he had won on the last roll.

Sophia tried to look grave and unconscious, but in a few seconds the corners of her mouth broke down, and she leaned back in her chair with peal after peal of laughter.

‘Oh, I could never have invented so divinely apt a punishment!’ she cried. ‘Leonard detected in a girl’s dress, and before all the people! Indeed, that is an instance of the fierce light that beats upon a throne. Oh, how furious he will be! I wonder where he got his costume. His hat—oh, my dear Blanche! his hat! It was like Covent Garden on a summer’s morning—a cargo of flowers and nameless vegetables. Oh, I cannot stop; I must go and rub the lesson in. He has a horror of making himself ridiculous. Perhaps this will cure him for awhile.’

Sophia went straight back to the Palace, where the servants were all agape to see her return so early, and to Leonard’s room. He had got there only a moment before her, since she had taken the short-cut through the private door in the Palace garden, and he was tearing the detected finery from him. On his bed lay the hat, a perfect garden of magenta roses and sage-green ribbons, and he was even then wrestling with the hooks and eyes of the bodice. The boy stamped his foot angrily when he saw her, and his cheeks were redder than the roses in his hat and infinitely more healthy in tone.

‘Why did you make a fool of me, mother,’ he cried, ‘before all those people? I shall never be able to go to the Casino again. It was brutal of you, and I was enjoying myself so much.’

Sophia burst out laughing.

‘Dear Lennie, what a lovely hat!’ she cried. ‘Where did you get it? I shall order one like it, and we will go driving together in them. Do you propose to wear that dress always instead of your sailor clothes? It is not very well cut. As for my making a fool of you, I think you are more to blame than I. How could you do such a thing!’

‘It was your fault,’ cried he. ‘I had forgotten everything in the game. Oh, these strings! I think the devil made them.’

‘And a fool tied them,’ said Sophia. ‘Here, let me do them for you. I thought the dress did not fit very well, and no wonder, if you had your shirt on under the bodice and your trousers under the skirt. And where

are your stays? It is all your fault, Leonard; I told you not to go to the club.'

'I hope you didn't think I was going to obey you?' said Leonard, with singular contempt.

'Anyhow, you thought fit to disobey me—oh, don't wriggle so!—and you have been very properly paid out for it. You are too young to gamble. My poor boy! every shopkeeper in Rhodopé is laughing at you this moment, and I'm sure I don't wonder. For me, I have never been so nearly hysterical; I was helpless with laughter. I told you you were too young to gamble, and you would not take my word for it. You have been very naughty and disobedient, and you made a thorough exhibition of yourself—within three days to fight in the streets and to dress up as Polly to go to the Casino. Oh, that hat! What a creation!' and she began to laugh again. 'I thought you were one of the bourgeois.'

Leonard stepped out of the skirt, and pulled down his trousers, which he had rolled up to the knees over his sturdy calves, and regarded his mother critically.

'I say, mother, you know you must have begun pretty young, too,' he said. 'The earliest thing I can remember is being told you were the finest gambler in Europe. I watched you playing to-night. You played very quietly, and by your face a man could not tell whether you had won or lost. Is that the *chic* way to gamble?'

'That is the only way to gamble,' said she, forgetting for a moment the moral lesson. 'I have seen men and women tremble so that they could scarcely pick up their winnings. Whatever you do, always keep quiet at the tables. There is no such test of decent breeding.'

'You must teach me,' said Leonard insidiously. 'We might play for—*for counters* at first, quietly, at home.'

'That would be very amusing,' remarked his mother, 'and roulette for two would certainly be a novelty; but I don't want you to grow up a gambler, Leonard.'

'Yet to-night I found it very entertaining; and did not you grow up a gambler?' said he. 'Also, it seemed to me easy, which is an advantage.'

‘Easy! There is no such word. There is good luck and bad luck; that is all the vocabulary.’

‘When did you first begin playing?’ asked he.

‘When I was too young.’

‘Then, I expect that was a very long time ago,’ said the boy; ‘for I do not see how you can begin too early;’ and with this the conversation closed. Sophia, as may have been detected, could never have been predestined to attain to eminence as a disciplinarian, and Leonard’s tutors, like her own, proved about equally inefficient in managing him. One after another were surveyed by the boy, and judged wanting. One could not ride, another could not shoot, a third wore spectacles, and topped his drives with unique regularity; but one and all joined hands in this, that they were totally unable to make him learn except when he chose to learn, or to exercise the slightest discipline over him out of lesson hours, and very little in.

Sophia soon grew considerably exercised about the boy. She had begun to see that the atmosphere of the Palace of Amandos was not entirely wholesome. He was not disciplined in any way, which she considered the worst preparation for a lad who would one day be an autocratic Sovereign. She compared the escapades of her own youth with his, and had to confess that she, at any rate, had been a little in awe of her father. She had often revolted, but with an uneasy feeling that consequences might follow, and thus disobedience had its drawbacks. Leonard, on the other hand, disobeyed her whistling, with his tongue in his cheek, and to him disobedience never seemed to bring with it any drawbacks at all. By the time she saw him next she would have forgotten about the incident, or if she remembered it, and began a little homily, Leonard would shut his eyes, turn down the corners of his mouth, and, with an air inexpressibly comic, say, ‘Let us pray.’ Once she had instructed Mr. Lanthony, the tutor with the spectacles, not without much inward misgiving, to use the cane to Leonard next time punishment was necessary, and, such an occasion occurring within an hour of the edict, Leonard had thrown a copy of Magnall’s Questions at Mr. Lanthony’s face when he produced the cane with so much precision that his spectacles were dashed into a thousand fragments, and his eyes gushed out with involuntary water. His mother

had not told the boy that the proposed caning was consonant to her orders, and Leonard came to her in much indignation.

‘Mother,’ he cried, ‘you couldn’t guess what has happened if you tried a hundred times: that old giglamps said he would cane me this morning—me!’ and he tapped his waistcoat.

‘I am convinced you deserved it,’ said his mother calmly.

‘And I am convinced that his spectacles will never be fit to see through again,’ retorted Leonard, angry at finding her so unsympathetic.

‘Leonard, what have you done?’ she said.

‘I threw Magnall’s Questions at him hard,’ he said; ‘and thus his spectacles are not worth anything now.’

‘You wicked boy!’ cried his mother. ‘It was I who told Mr. Lanthony to cane you. You are very naughty and mischievous, and you must go and beg Mr. Lanthony’s pardon, and take your caning like a man; and your pocket-money shall be stopped to pay for his spectacles.’

Down went the corners of Leonard’s mouth.

‘Oh, dear!’ he sighed; ‘let us pray; but get it over quick.’

In effect Mr. Lanthony had to do without the apology, and Prince Leonard without his caning; but the tutor had an interview with Sophia, and, after tendering his resignation, ventured to offer a word of advice.

‘I should lose no time in sending him to Eton,’ he said.

‘Who is Eton?’ asked his mother.

Mr. Lanthony was frankly horrified.

‘Eton is a school, your Royal Highness,’ he replied; ‘in fact, it is *the* school. It seems strange to an Englishman to find even in Rhodopé that Eton is unknown; but “Non cuvis attingit adire Corinthum.”’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Sophia politely.

‘I merely said Eton was a school,’ said Mr. Lanthony.

‘I think I have heard of it, now I consider,’ said Sophia. ‘It is near Windsor, is it not? What does one do? Shall I take a house for him, or will he live in London, and go down for an hour or two every day?’

‘That will not be necessary,’ replied Mr. Lanthony. ‘The house, on the other hand, will take him;’ and he sketched to the Princess the main features of a public school.

‘Yes, it sounds nice,’ she said vaguely; ‘but he is, as you know, so high-spirited. Will they try to cane him there? I tremble to think what will happen—dear me! your eye *is* bad, Mr. Lanthony—if the headmaster tries to cane him.’

Mr. Lanthony gave the ghost of a smile. His mouth was untouched by Magnall’s Questions.

‘I don’t think you need consider that, your Royal Highness,’ he said —‘at least, you need not be uneasy for the headmaster; nor, indeed, for the Prince—the birch is quite harmless.’

‘The birch!’ cried Sophia. ‘How terrible it sounds!’

‘It is of no consequence,’ said Mr. Lanthony gravely; and the pain of Magnall’s Questions grew sensibly less.

‘Well, we must ask Leonard,’ said his mother. ‘Supposing he refuses to go? What are we to do then? I don’t think either of us has much influence with him, you know.’

But Leonard, when appealed to, was considerably taken with the idea; there would be a lot of boys to play with, and he wanted to go to England.

‘I expect it’s more fun with heaps of other boys than with one old muff at a time,’ he said. ‘Yes, I’ll be an Eton boy.’

When Sophia had made up her mind to a thing, she was not slow to put it into execution. She wrote an exceedingly kind and condescending letter to the headmaster, giving him to understand that she was prepared to confer this priceless boon on Eton at Mr. Lanthony’s recommendation; but that gentleman, to whom she read it, advised another tone. The headmaster was radically-minded, and would not be likely to be dazzled at the prospect; she could put it more simply. Indeed, perhaps it would be better if he wrote himself to a housemaster he knew there, asking if he could by any means secure a vacancy in his house for a boy aged fourteen, or if he knew of anyone else who had a vacancy. All this sounded terribly democratic to the Princess; but, having failed so signally herself with Leonard, she was desirous that other more practised hands should take the reins from

her, and she would, so she expressed herself with a little acidity, go down on her knees before all the masters in Christendom if this were the more proper attitude to take.

It was finally arranged that Leonard should enter the school in April, and Sophia threw herself with zest into the scheme. She conferred on his housemaster the Second Order of the Bronze Cross, and sent him the key to a private cipher, by means of which he could daily communicate with her. She asked whether £1,000 pocket-money a term would be sufficient to supply her boy with school requisites, and whether she should open an account for him at the Eton and Windsor Bank. She hoped they would all remember—perhaps he would be so good as to speak to his colleagues about it—how exceedingly high-spirited the Prince was, and how little discipline he had yet received. Finally, she drove the unfortunate man to the verge of imbecility by saying that she hoped they allowed no roulette *at all* in the school, and only vingt-et-un at moderate points. Mr. Lanthony had already left for England before this unhappy series of letters was despatched, or some of them might have been averted.

Leonard left for England at the end of March, and it was in a way an immense relief to his mother when he had gone, for she felt strangely responsible for his education. She had made up her mind that he was to be a good ruler, and she saw clearly that Rhodopé was no place for him yet. Her own popularity had redeemed, so far, her reign from failure, but she was candid enough to allow that she might have let her sphere border more nearly on usefulness. Prince Petros's mad attempt had been an unexampled piece of luck; it had given her an *éclat* she could scarcely have won otherwise, so also had her institution of the club. She had founded it to supply amusement to herself; she found that she had given occupation to her people. But already she foresaw that in the course of years the morals of the people would deteriorate, the hardy mountain folk would become people of the asphalt, of the gaslight. As long as the club continued to act as a star for the enjoyment of health-seeking moths, so long, no doubt, would the Budget of Rhodopé be a pattern to other more puritanically constituted States; but the surplus on the Budget would be paid for in other ways. She saw the sheep of Rhodopé without their shepherds; she saw the vineyards without their vine-diggers; she dimly forecast the army destitute of privates, and

peopled only with honorary colonels. She had the grace to shudder at the logical outcome of the era she had instituted, only she could not in her own person break the chain of circumstance on which it hung. Amandos without the club! She starved at the thought. It had been bad enough before; now, when the days there had actually ceased to be tedious, owing to the diversions supplied by her roulette, with what a cold shuddering of the spirit she saw herself shorn of that which made life tolerable! But that chain of circumstances should be broken by her son. She had endowed him with the gambling blood, but that was inevitable; at least she was now making an effort whereby the hereditary instinct should not come to fruition. She had sent him to England, that home of three-penny points; she had expressed herself most clearly to his housemaster at Eton on the question of roulette. She could not have done more, and her conscience approved her.

Meantime, throughout the length and breadth of Europe her reputation had gone abroad. Her great *coup*, now eleven years ago, which had steadied the tottering House of Ægina, had taken hold on the popular imagination, and the boldness and dash of the move had raised up in real hosts those unknown admirers which so many of those who act in public secretly and mistakenly suppose are theirs. That return from Corfu, triumphant over a riotous and wrecking sea, the cross-country sledge journey, the arrival in the nick of time, the hopeless and utter defeat of her husband and the acuter Malakopf, her rapturous welcome by the people, were all things to enkindle the blood in an age in which diplomatic papers are sufficient to set the world blazing. She was a picturesque figure, and an unpicturesque epoch has always this saving grace, that it delights in picturesque figures when they do appear. However much we may live environed by gray and green, a vider tint is ever applauded. Again, she was admirably posed. To the eye of Europe she went stake in hand from the roulette-board to the rescue of her House, and having saved her House, went back to where the ball was still rolling and won. She had dash and brilliance and beauty, she was neither prude nor puritan. Indeed, she seemed one of those to whom success comes as if by birthright.

But with the instinct of a true gambler, she called her own success a run of luck. Sooner or later, unless her line staked on another colour, it would go against them, and her resolution to reform took the shape of

reforming, or rather putting on the other colour, her son, Prince Leonard. She was determined, at the sacrifice of her natural desire, to see him but seldom; he should be a stranger to the tables of Rhodopé and the Riviera; he should play cricket and polo and hockey—whatever that was—instead of bezique and baccarat. She was herself so warm an admirer of the open air, that she felt she was not starving him. Had she not been a Princess, she would have chosen to be a man and a dweller in the mountains. Horses and dogs, a keen eye, and an obedient hand, were admirable things, and good enough for anybody.

For the next few years Leonard did not set foot in Rhodopé at all, and he saw his mother occasionally only, in her short and scarce visits to England. At Eton the high spirit which his mother had feared would be a source of possible danger to the head had shown itself reasonable, and in the course of one painful interview between the two, of which the cause was tobacco, and the end the birch, no books had been thrown. He did the minimum of work required with cheerfulness, if not zest, and, far more important, he was immensely popular with his fellows. He grew tall and strong on the banks of the Thames. At the age of sixteen he got into the eleven, and in the match against Harrow cracked the enamelled face of the clock at Lord's off a half-volley just outside his leg-stump. He also indulged in various other amusements, which as yet had not come to light, but which appeared in damning concourse very shortly indeed before he left.

One morning in July he went into his room after twelve to change for cricket. On the table were two letters—one from his mother, who told him that she was on her way to England, and would arrive at the end of the month. She would stay a few days in London, and if Eton had broken up he had better come to her there. It was long since she had been in London, and they would see the sights together, from the Westminster Aquarium to the Tower of London, and from Madame Tussaud's even to the Zoological Gardens and the Adelphi Theatre. There was no harm, she said, in a little gaiety, and she did not wish to cut Leonard off from all amusements. The other letter was from a groom of some training stables, and it interested him far more, for it gave the best possible account of Muley Moloch, a horse which Leonard was backing heavily for the Eclipse Stakes at Sandown. Accordingly at the end of the half Leonard went up to London to join

his mother. She had taken a great suite of rooms at the Hôtel Métropole, with a private entrance, where she lived under her usual incognito of the Countess of Ægina.

Leonard arrived late in the evening, and found her with a few friends playing baccarat. His mother threw down her cards when he entered.

‘Dearest Leonard!’ she cried; ‘but I should scarcely have known you. How you have grown, and how you have improved! I am so delighted to see you again! Have you dined?’

Indeed, any mother might have been proud of him. He had grown up tall, well-looking, and with an extraordinary frankness and charm of manner. Though he was still but seventeen, he looked almost a man, and Princess Sophia felt how wise she had been to send him to school.

‘I have dined,’ he said, after being introduced to his mother’s guests. ‘And if you will let me, mother, I will join you in your game. Baccarat, is it not? A good game.’

‘Oh, Leonard, what business have you to know that!’ cried his mother. ‘I particularly asked that no baccarat should be allowed at Eton.’

Leonard laughed.

‘It is strictly prohibited,’ he said; ‘every boy at Eton will tell you so. Do not blame the masters. Will you lend me some money, mother?’

Though the Princess would have preferred that he should not play at all, she had the consolation of that he played well. His face was a mask of good breeding, not an eyelash betrayed emotion, and he looked gravely amused whether he won or lost.

‘He is a born gambler. It is in the blood, you know,’ she said under her breath to her cousin, the Duchess of Winchester, who was sitting next to her, and the Duchess thought she detected pride and not regret alone in her voice.

Mother and son, as arranged, went out the next days to see the sights of London. To the Princess it seemed to have grown sadder and foggiest since she had seen it last. Their expeditions were mostly made on foot, for the Princess loved the bustle and stir of the streets, and more than once they made the top of an omnibus their observatory.

‘There are plenty of people, certainly,’ she said one day to Leonard, as they swayed and rolled up Baker Street; ‘and I love crowds. But observe their infinite sadness of demeanour. What a load of responsibility seems to rest on the least and meanest shoulders! Look at that baker there! If he was in Rhodopé I would make him Court undertaker. To what genuine melancholy is he the prey! If I was responsible for the whole creation, I should not be so sad. And they all walk so fast, as if they were going to catch the dying words of a near and dear relative, and would only just get there in time. After all, I am glad I am a Southerner. We may not be so good, but we are certainly gayer. And it is certainly good to be gay.’

They stopped at the corner where Madame Tussaud’s red exhibition stood, and Leonard, who for some minutes had been with difficulty restraining his laughter, suddenly burst out into a great shout of amusement.

‘England, at any rate, has not made you sad at present,’ said the Princess. ‘What is the matter, Leonard?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ said the lad; ‘at least, you will soon know.’

She paid their entrance-money—Leonard tossed his mother who should pay for both, and won—and began the tour of the room. Suddenly the Princess gave a little exclamation of horrified surprise, and rapidly turned up No. 27 in the catalogue. What met her indignant eye was this:

The gambling Princess Sophia.—Princess Sophia of Rhodopé, though only just forty, is surely the most rankly notorious crowned head of Europe. She spends the greater part of every day in the club she has started at the capital, Amandos, and the era of gambling she has introduced is rapidly undermining the physique and morale of her little kingdom. She has confined her old Prime Minister, Malakopf, a financier of European reputation, to a life-long imprisonment for some imaginary plot against the throne; and her husband, Prince Petros of Herzegovina, she has divorced and banished from the principality of Rhodopé. He is described by those who knew him as a man of charming manner and quick insight. The Princess has a violent temper and is growing very stout. Her only son, Prince Leonard, is at school at Eton.’

The room was almost empty, and Leonard put no bounds to his amusement. He stamped and choked, his mouth was full of laughter.

‘Oh, oh!’ he cried, ‘it is too funny! And, mother, I hear they are thinking of sending you to the Chamber of Horrors. I stayed in London last long leave and saw it. Oh, oh, the Chamber of Horrors, with murderers and Phœnix Park tragedians and people who have their throats cut in their baths. Oh, I shall burst!’

Sophia turned icily from him, read the description of herself through again in the catalogue, and then examined the figure. It was seated in the most realistic pose in front of a small green-cloth table. One hand held three or four playing-cards, the other was clutched on a heap of counterfeit coins. It represented her in full evening dress, with the Order of the Silver Cross and the Salamander on her shoulder, both faultlessly executed. Her dress was of white brocade, and it might have been copied by Worth himself, so she thought, from the gown which she had worn on the night of her memorable and unexpected home-coming. The pasty, formless fingers glittered with immense glass jewels; she wore a tiara of diamonds, and a copy in some cheap and tawdry material of the Rhodopé pearls.

But it was the presentment of the face that most appalled the Princess. The likeness was unmistakable, yet it was the most prodigious parody. She herself was pleasantly furnished with flesh, the waxwork bulged with fatness. Her own black eyes, with their long lashes, became wicked lakes of darkness, her fine-lipped mouth was moulded into evil and monstrous curves. Avarice sat enthroned in her greedy expression and in the clutching hand.

The Princess examined it with scrupulous care, then turned with a petrified face to Leonard, who was wiping his eyes. Every now and then a fresh gust of laughter shook him, and he held his aching ribs for fear they should burst. Sophia watched him a moment with malignity; it seemed yet doubtful whether she would run her parasol through the face of the waxwork, or box his ears; but by degrees the infection of his merriment caught her, and sitting down by him on a crimson-covered ottoman, she gave way to peal after peal of laughter. He had been on the verge of recovery, but they mutually infected one another, and in a few moments were equally lost to all power of speech, and

could only point feebly and shakily, as they shook and rolled on the sofa, at the greedy and clutching figure of the waxwork. A few more people had come into the gallery, and were attracted by this convulsed couple, but, with the supercilious contempt with which the English regard merriment in which they do not share, passed them by. Close at hand, however, sat the figure of the gambling Princess, and one by one they glanced back furtively to the real one on the crimson ottoman. There could be no mistaking, even in the convulsions of her laughter, the prototype of the figure.

Soon Princess Sophia observed this, and with a sudden accession of dignity hurried Leonard off.

‘Let me show you the way to the Chamber of Horrors,’ he said, in a voice vibrating with suppressed laughter, ‘so that you will know where to look for yourself next year.’

They could give but a superficial attention to that temple of classical criminals. Sophia longed to go back to her own figure, which exercised a strange fascination over her. She wanted to see the manager, to have him to dinner, to hail him as the first humorist in Europe. Then she protested that it was monstrous that she should have to pay to see an exhibition in which she herself was so leading an attraction. She was half inclined to demand her money back at the door, had it not been for the treat she had enjoyed in seeing herself as others, or, at any rate, that strict moralist who wrote the account of the figure, saw her. The Monument, the Zoological Gardens, the Underground Railway, even a most remarkable play at one of the West End theatres, where two ignoble gentlemen cut through a pack to see who should marry an heiress, both turning up sevens and then kings, had a touch of bathos after Madame Tussaud’s; and Leonard and Sophia went back there more than once and found the joke remained of that superlative order which is only enhanced by repetition. The Princess, even in her middle life, retained a youthful passion for being amused, but never, so she thought, had she made a better investment in joy than with those shillings she paid to the doorkeeper at the waxwork show.

She remained in England all August and September, and in the third week of that month Leonard went back to Eton. Sophia, who wished to

see the place, paid him a visit there, and made herself remarkably popular by securing for the school the promise of an extra week in the next summer holidays, in honour of her visit. In eight weeks Leonard would be easily repaid for his four days' journey to Rhodopé, and she intended him to come home, for the first time since he went to Eton.

Femme propose.

She was to leave England about the middle of October, and a week before she should have started she was back in London again from a round of visits. One morning she found on her breakfast-table a letter with the Eton postmark on it, but not addressed in Leonard's hand. She opened it without apprehension, and read the following statement in the headmaster's neat and scholarly handwriting:

‘YOUR ROYAL HIGHNESS,

‘Little did I think when we had the honour so short a time ago of welcoming your Royal Highness to Eton that it would be my painful duty to write this letter to you. Your son, Prince Leonard, was found last week to have visited the Windsor races, where he was seen smoking and talking to a successful jockey, whose equestrian skill, so it appeared, had been the means of winning your son a considerable sum of money. This offence could not, of course, be passed over, and it was my duty to visit it on him in the most severe manner—in short, I gave him a flogging. But he refused, apparently, to take the warning to heart, and yesterday evening his housemaster, going into his room, found him, with several other boys, engaged in a game of roulette. This was more particularly heinous, since I well remember how warmly your Royal Highness urged on us not to allow roulette in the school. I therefore beg to advise your Royal Highness to remove Prince Leonard at once from Eton, to save him the disgrace, which must otherwise be inevitable, of being expelled. The roulette-board I send to you to-day by parcel post. I must add that Prince Leonard was most anxious to have it

understood that he had persuaded the others to play, in spite of their unwillingness.'

Sophia did as she was advised, and instantly telegraphed to the headmaster, saying that she intended to remove her son at once from Eton. She was exceedingly annoyed at what had occurred, and felt quite angry with Leonard. She had expressly desired him not to play roulette; it was very tiresome to be disobeyed like this. She had hoped that he would have learned obedience at school. As for his removal from Eton, it was most inconvenient; she was at her wits' end to know what to do with him. It would hardly be possible, at his age, to send him to Harrow; besides, she believed that Harrow boys always fought with Eton boys, and wore swallow-tail coats in the morning, which would never do. That the headmaster of Harrow would not be infinitely delighted at his entering there did not for a moment occur to her.

Her annoyance was very materially increased by the arrival of the roulette-board. It was a villainous piece of construction, faulty in carpentering, odiously coloured with the crudest and most violent tints; and it contained two zeros. She had, as the reader will have gathered, no moral objection at all to gambling, but her horror of not doing the thing properly was vital and ineradicable. In a fit of anger she smashed it into bits and threw the pieces on to the fire.

Later in the day Leonard arrived, completely himself.

'How could you be so stupid and disobedient!' cried the Princess.
'And, Leonard, to play with that roulette-board is a disgrace.'

Leonard looked up in surprise.

'How have you seen it? Where is it?' he asked.

'It is at present in ash in the grate, and its finer particles are contributing to the London fog,' said the Princess, with some asperity.
'In fact, I threw it into the fire. The headmaster sent it me.'

'I thought we might have had a game together this evening,' said Leonard, seating himself. 'What was the good of burning it? Besides, it was mine. Oh, mother'—and his handsome face flushed with a sudden fresh eagerness—'you never saw such a run of luck as I had last night! I staked three times on thirteen, and won twice!'

‘On thirteen! Good gracious,’ cried the Princess, ‘it is madness, Leonard! No wonder your housemaster came in and discovered you. Dear me, I remember horrifying your poor foolish father so much at Monte Carlo by backing single numbers. He had a system. Thank Heaven, you did not get caught playing on a system! The disgrace would have been double. I am spared that.’

Sophia pulled herself up sharp, for she was aware that her instinct had taken the reins from the serious spirit with which she had intended to handle Leonard. The little homily she had prepared had merged into the never-ending discussion on the subject of number thirteen.

‘But I am very much shocked and distressed at all this, Leonard,’ she went on. ‘You have ruined and cut short your school career, and disgraced your name.’

Leonard’s eyes began to twinkle.

‘How about Madame Tussaud’s?’ he asked. ‘I am not the first.’

‘That is beside the point,’ said Sophia, and when the boy laughed outright: ‘At any rate, it is no good talking of that. Oh, but it was very funny! Well, Leonard, I do not mean to send you to the other public school—what is it called?—Harrow. Also, I do not intend you to come and live idly at Rhodopé.’

‘No, that would be rather too slow after England,’ remarked Leonard.

‘Well, what do you want to do? Can’t you suggest anything?’ asked the Princess, with some impatience.

‘I should like to stay in England, or travel, perhaps. Yes; why shouldn’t I travel?’

‘I think that is the best thing you could do,’ said the Princess, ‘and I am glad you suggested it. But I shall have to get you a tutor; it will be a great expense. I suppose you will go round the world. We will go to some agent to-morrow—I suppose there are agents for such things—and see how they are done.’

As usual, the Princess put her purpose into effect without loss of time. She advertised for a travelling tutor, and for three days made the life of Thomas Cook and Sons but a parody of existence. She went to the docks, and inspected large numbers of ocean liners, and at length

fixed upon a vessel of the Peninsular and Oriental line, which would take him as far as Egypt. There he would spend a few weeks, go on to India, thence to Australia, and back over America. She had a personal interview with the captain of the vessel, and insisted on all the games provided for the use of passengers being turned out, so that she might assure herself that no game of hazard was played on board. But as the entire stock of entertainment consisted of some inglorious little rope-rings, which were to be thrown into buckets, she felt no further anxiety on this score. It puzzled her to understand how people could find amusement in this, but the captain assured her that they did.

She saw Leonard off on a drizzly November morning. He was to be away at the least for two years, and she parted from him with some emotion. But the conviction that she was doing the wisest thing for him was a large consolation. To let him go back to Rhodopé with all his inherited instincts of gambling would be a dangerous experiment, for she was firm in her resolve that he should prove a good and useful man, a ruler who might be able to grapple with the insidious gambling disease which had spread so direfully through the country, for she felt herself unable, morally incapable, of dealing with it. Personally, she could not face the idea of Amandos shorn of its club, and how should she, the priestess of the goddess, recant? She was determined to give Leonard the best chance possible. He should live on vessels where only rings were provided for entertainment, and when he landed he should shoot animals, and see mosques and wigwams, and other tedious and exotic objects.

She had engaged for him a tutor who inspired her with confidence. He had a lofty, commanding forehead, with high, knobby temples and a pedantic and instructive manner. He kept accounts in a book, and money in a purse. She herself had tried to teach him picquet, and was delighted to observe that he seemed almost incapable of understanding the ordinary value of cards, though he was said to be a fine classical scholar. He said he thought games of chance were irrational amusements, and though in sheer loyalty she was bound to attempt to convince him they were not, she was delighted to find that she failed egregiously. And next day Sophia saw the s.s. *Valetta* start from Tilbury, bearing Prince Leonard, his tutor, and the little rope-rings out into the siren-haunted mists of the mouth of the Thames.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLAGUE-SPOT SPREADS.

A FEW days afterwards Princess Sophia herself started on her return to Rhodopé. The *Felatrune* was to meet her at Monte Carlo, but she crossed France overland. Her original scheme had been to go by sea all the way, but this saving of time caused by crossing the Continent gave her a balance of eight days, which she proposed to spend on the Riviera, where she lost a good deal of money.

Even in the few months of her absence, the change which had come over her mountain kingdom was startling. The crowd of foreign visitors, chiefly English, had never been so great, nor the season so brilliant. November in Rhodopé is the month of months, clear, cool, and bracing, with a sun of heavenly purity, and a wind just *frappé* with the snows which have fallen on the higher ranges of the Balkan. The air has a sparkle as if of frost in it, a translucent brightness which in the North we associate with the white rime of autumn mornings. To the Princess, fresh from the damp gray of England, and the tawdry theatrical brilliance of the Riviera, her home seemed an enchanted place, and for once she was glad to get back.

The club had pushed the limits of its gardens and kiosques up the slopes of the hills behind Amandos; bandstands and boulevards were loud with the orchestra and gay with colour. Even Monte Carlo seemed to her empty and depopulated in comparison. But the place was changed in other ways. The discipline of the army was relaxed; a Bill had been introduced in the House, and passed without opposition, which abolished conscription, and though the people were as picturesque as ever, they were infinitely more idle. The demands for provisions and wines consequent on the ever-increasing hosts of foreigners who flocked to the town had made living easier than ever. A man could work two days a week where he had worked six a few years ago, and yet find his earnings undiminished. It had been necessary to limit the number of members of the club, and in consequence a hundred other gaming-houses had been started, and deep into the hours

of the night shepherds and sailors watched the roulette-marbles, which rolled as unceasingly as the stars of heaven.

Sophia was almost frightened at the success of the era she had inaugurated, and she was truly shocked at the deterioration which counterbalanced the increased prosperity. She had still, even in her forty-first year, a strong love of keen eyes and fit limbs; her admiration for a fine rider still warred with her respect for a bold player, and she saw to her dismay that a nation of gamblers tends to lose its grip of the saddle. The Life Guards were a mockery of horsemen; they were growing pale and fat, and when they received her on the quay of Mavromáti, she was horrified to observe that they were sleepy-eyed and unerect—a regiment of putty soldiers. She herself, who could still, as in the days when Petros came a-courting, watch the tide of gold ebbing and flowing on the green tables for hour after hour when she should have been asleep, without suffering for it next morning, saw that if the common folk sat up at roulette all night, their parade on the following day lost its briskness. But her regret passed; the town was full of amusing people, and she had a series of house-parties with her from November until the New Year fêtes were over. She was well entertained, and as she was one of those to whom boredom is a pain more exquisite than earache, she found that so long as it was entirely absent, her mind was distracted from the consideration of the deteriorated physique of her people.

Leonard's letters also were full of consolation. They were so crammed with excruciating facts about mosques and minarets that Sophia was wholly incapable of reading them, and put the interminable sheets into her desk, gratefully feeling that her experiment was brimming with success. His tutor, she was informed, had fallen ill of typhoid at Cairo, and Leonard was purposing to spend a month up the Nile while he was recovering, a trip which he told her was well likely to repay a visit. The pyramids of Sakkarah which he had just seen were magnificent beyond description. As she knew, the Great Step Pyramid was there, a magnificent structure of the Sixth Dynasty, while closer at hand were the great pyramids of Gizeh, the tombs of Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus, or Menkau, as he was more properly called. Archæologists were disagreed as to the date of the Sphinx; for himself, he was inclined to side with Mariette ... and Sophia murmured, ‘Dear

boy!' and read no further, merely glancing at the last of the sixteen sides he had written her, which contained an account of a usaptiu figure he had just purchased from a dealer, which he had every reason to believe was genuine, and not imported from Manchester for the ignorant tourist.

His next letter gave a most exhaustive historical account of the temple of Karnak, and a description of the tombs of the kings, which he urged his mother to see. In a few days she could get across to Port Said, and a week afterwards they would be standing together lost in wonder at the monuments of the Pharaohs. It was a liberal education, he said, to visit Egypt; already in a few weeks he had learned more than his three years at Eton had taught him. As a series, indeed, the letters really resembled pages of a guide-book, so conscientious were they and so unreadable. The next letter, after an interval of some six weeks, was merely dated s.s. *Ammon*; but it described the holy city of Benares, where there is a golden statue of Buddha twenty-five feet tall, the alligators in the Hooghly, and the methods of the manufacturing of filigree work. This was all as it should be, and Sophia's belief in her experiment became a creed with her. It no longer an experiment; it was an assured success.

The spring passed into summer, and summer into autumn, and still Sophia was deluged with floods of categorical information. Leonard had been away a year, and the tutor, having successfully battled with typhoid in Egypt, had unfortunately fallen a victim to yellow fever in the West Indies. Leonard duly reported this to his mother, but declined altogether to have another tutor. While the first lived he had continually been tied in one place by his ailments, and he proposed to do the rest of his journeying alone. He was now in Boston, U.S.A., where there was a remarkably fine statue of George Washington; his mother would doubtless recollect that this eminent statesman (one of the brightest men the Western continent had ever produced) was notably truthful. In fact, the story of his childhood, etc. He was now going an excursion among some Indian tribes, and he hoped in his next to give some account of wigwams, Yosemite, and squaws.

Sophia could not understand it. Was the boy going to grow up a pedant? She almost preferred that he should be a gambler.

The Princess left Rhodopé that year in November, twelve months after Leonard's departure. Her *soi-disant* visits to her relatives were unusually protracted, for the tables constantly backed her luck, and it was already May, the almond blossoms were over and the House was sitting, when she returned to Amandos. She was beginning to get very stout, but she found consolation for this in the advice of her doctor, who recommended her a month at Carlsbad in the summer. That month lengthened itself to six weeks, and on her arrival in Rhodopé again in the autumn her neglect of her duties became more edifying than ever. For one reason or another the visitors to the capital were much diminished in this year; the death of her aunt, the Princess Olga, had thrown the Court into mourning for a month, and time hung terribly on her hands.

It was during this enforced absence from the club, in obedience to etiquette, but meaningless to her—for her aunt was one of the most sour-tempered women God ever made, and mourning for her death was of a farcical nature—that the Princess, in an excess of ennui, began those practices which have been censured so severely, and which even the indulgent historian must stigmatize as undignified. Night after night she would steal out from one of the private doors of the palace, and, disguised as well as might be like a widow, with a pair of spectacles, a bombazine jacket, and a thick veil, make her way to one of the numerous gaming-houses which held out their signs in every street in Amandos. For fear she should be recognised, she dared not go to her own club, where it would be certain she would meet someone she knew, and who knew her well enough to pierce her somewhat transparent disguise; and for the same reason she would not go to any of the houses frequented by the upper class of her people. Instead, she would skulk along unfrequented thoroughfares and narrow streets until she came to some sorry restaurant, over which there would be a low, dingy room, ill ventilated, and thick with the acrid fumes of inferior tobacco, and there she would play perhaps for hours, in stakes limited to ten or twelve francs. In this she would do violence to her better nature, for often the roulette-boards were as pitiable as that which had so roused her anger against Leonard, thus showing that they were contraband, and not supplied by the Government monopoly; but gambling had become a necessity to her, and she would have played

with any wretch, however depraved, on any board, however infamous. The pathos of the situation lay in the fact that she was constantly recognised, but her loyal people, sympathizing with her in being deprived of her games at the club, owing to this meaningless etiquette, never gave a sign that they knew her. Certainly, also, there was a curious attraction to her in the very squalor of the surroundings. To be elbowed by hairy sailors, to be smothered in musk by the wives of smaller tradesmen, excited her by its strange incongruity. Lombroso, so she told herself, would certainly have diagnosed her practices as belonging to one who showed the early stages of egalo-megalomania, or some such mental deformation, but, as she also told herself, nothing could matter less than what Lombroso said.

At other times she would even dine at the restaurants below, with a secret gusto for the abominable food, and the sort of joy a miser must feel, to know that in the palace her French chef was in the middle of his inimitable alchemy, changing for her the raw material of his craft into an artist's dream. The daily risk of detection she ran at the hands of her own servants even amused her, and she liked to see the blank, masklike wonder of their faces when she told them that she would have dinner at a quarter to eleven, little knowing that they were perfectly aware what she was going to do in the interval. To her, gambling had become as imperative as a dipsomaniac's cravings, and the death of her sour aunt made it a necessity to her to indulge her passion, as she thought, secretly. It interested her also to find how much the secrecy and squalor of these adventures resembled those of her remote cousin the Empress Catherine of Russia. How strange a thing is heredity!

But the month of mourning passed, and she resumed her seat in the club. Letters from Leonard still reached her, but she scarcely read them; and though she loved the lad, and no sight would have been so welcome to her as his face, yet she determined to keep him abroad as long as possible. He had been away two years, and he would now be just twenty. He should come back to Amandos to celebrate his twenty-first birthday, but if she had her way, not a day before that.

Again the winter passed, again the seemingly interminable tedium of business was suspended on the last day of December; again she thanked her Ministers for their services to the country during the past

year; and as soon as the New Year festivities were over, she was off on the new *Felatrune*, a yacht she had built with her winnings of the past twelve months, for Monte Carlo. There her presence had become so regular and assiduous, that the urbane manager had named one of the new rooms the Princess's Salon. She had a beautiful villa on the hills above the town, which was generally full of guests; and while she was there this room was reserved, unless she sent a message that she would not play that day, for herself and her friends, but such days were few. It was built at an angle of the Casino, and a little private lawn stretched down in front of it to a terrace overlooking the sea. Crocuses, narcissi and daffodils were sown all over the grass, and in the early spring it used to look like a foreground of one of Fra Angelico's pictures. Inside the room was divinely appointed, but less like Fra Angelico's pictures. It was walled with crimson satin, and had a moulded gilt arabesque along the top; the floor was of parqueted oak, with thick Persian rugs; on the mantelpiece was a bronze doré clock by Vernier, which told the hours unceasingly. On the right of the croupier's place the Empress's chair of walnut wood, with little Sèvres plaques let into the arms; on the back was inlaid her monogram underneath her crown.

The party with her was often enough to fill the room, for her house was usually full of the orthodox; but when there was a place or so vacant, the Princess would often stroll round the public rooms, and if she saw there an acquaintance who played well, that is, high and with the calmness of conviction, she would invite him to join her table. As a rule her party would meet at her room for an hour or two before dinner, adjourn again till half-past nine or so, and then continue the game till two or three in the morning. Sometimes, when the roulette proved more than usually exciting, and luck adorably capricious, it would be prolonged to a later hour; and as the nights got shorter, it was no rare thing for them to see morning break in thin lines of red on the eastern horizon, and the dim dark change to an ethereal gray before they left the Casino for the Princess's villa.

For many weeks Sophia had had no word of any kind from Leonard, but as his last letter had that he was going to shoot bears (*Ursa major*) in the Rockies, she concluded, with all the enviable calm of a mind which never knew anxiety, that where *Ursa major* is plentiful, there also postal arrangements are correspondingly scarce.

Thus his continued silence was scarcely noticeable to her, and, at any rate, she was so happily constituted that no fear that bears had devoured him ever occurred to her. When he came back from shooting bears, no doubt he would write to her.

The month of April this year had been peculiarly seasonable; the lucid atmosphere of summer had come, but not its heats; the freshness of spring remained, but its armoury of squalls was spent, and seldom in her life had the Princess enjoyed a more delectable score of days. Her Ministers at Rhodopé, she was pleased to observe, at length entirely understood her, and the completeness with which they indulged her intolerance of State affairs was worthy of the Regency of Petros. She was still, as in the days of her girlhood, a fervent lover of the sea, and no morning failed to see her scudding up and down the coast in her little cutter, and with the same regularity an hour before her déjeuner she would be put ashore opposite her little tent on the beach, and have a long swim before luncheon. No watering-place bather was she; her bathing was no affair of a ducking of the head, a few random strokes, and a bubbling cry. With a boat a hundred yards behind her, she would swim out not less than half a mile from shore, rest a little, floating with arms out-stretched in the rocking cradle of the waves, and then head back for the shore. This exercise and the bracing water kept her young, and while those only half her age would find but a rotten world welcoming them to their lunch, after watching the dawn from the little red room, hers was a brisk step, a feeling of slight well-earned fatigue, a joyous elasticity of spirit, and the appetite of a youth. She drank wine but sparingly, and in spite of her increasing stoutness, she was still a woman to whom the eyes of men were drawn as steel to the magnet, and none bore her years with half so good a grace as she.

But the early days of May brought straight the balance of imperfection of this world and its weather. A stifling sirocco blew day after day out of the south, bringing with it, you would have said, all the scorching of the Libyan Desert and all the moisture of the sea it passed over. For five days it blew without intermission, and on the morning of the fifth the heat was rendered doubly intolerable by a great bank of ominous clouds which spread eastwards over the sky at right angles to the current of the wind. These were fat and fleecy, like blankets, and

like blanketed fever patients were those that stifled beneath them. Princess Sophia alone was a shining exception to the rest of the limp world; she had much enjoyed her buffeting with a gray and angry sea, and she received her guests who collected in the drawing-room before lunch with all her vivacious cordiality. Princess Aline of Luxemburg was one of these, Prince Victor of Strelitz another; the rest were mainly English, and all were gamblers of the most honourable order.

‘You call it a terrible day, Aline!’ cried the Princess. ‘My dear, what do you know of the day? It may be delightful, for all you know. If I had stayed in my bedroom as long as you, I should be dead by now. You slept, or tried to sleep, till eleven.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Princess Aline.

‘How? Because I was in the cutter—a very rough sea this morning—and it so happened that my opera-glass was on the house. I saw a blind go up; I knew it was the blind of your room. I looked at the time, and it was eleven. Oh, why was I not a detective? What a series of simple and acute deductions!’

‘Do you consider it a pleasant day, Sophia?’ asked her cousin, Prince Victor.

‘Dear Victor, to me every day is a pleasant day, except in Rhodopé. How is it possible to be more happy than I am? I have an admirable digestion. Yes; is lunch ready? Let us come in. I have luck at the cards. I slept for six hours like a tired child, as Shelley says. I have swum a mile. I had no letters to worry me this morning, and my nation has no history. Happy is the Princess whose nation has no history!’

‘The club, is not that history?’ asked Lady Blanche, who was of the party.

‘A chapter only—a paragraph only. It cannot make history alone, and positively nothing else has happened in Rhodopé for thirty years.’

‘Something nearly happened once,’ remarked Blanche.

‘Yes, dear Blanche, and you proved yourself my best and only friend, and my worst enemy. Oh, I am not ungrateful; you know that. But think: if only I had been deposed eighteen years ago, what garnered happiness had been mine by now!’

The Princess's admirable English, as usual, provoked a laugh, but she scarcely paused to join in it herself.

'Only think: for eighteen years I should have been a free woman—one of those happy individuals whose luncheon-parties and whose tea-parties are not recorded in the daily papers! Great Heaven! to be recorded in the daily papers makes the happiness of some women. Yes, Blanche, but for you I should have been one who does as she chooses. What nonsense is that which we are told of free-will! For my class there is no such thing. We do not wish or want or desire to go to lunch with the Mayor, yet we go. On the other hand, Mayors are inevitable. What is supposed to happen when free-will is opposed to that which is inevitable? Does no one know? How ignorant!'

'Be truthful, Sophia,' said Princess Aline, 'and tell me when last you went to lunch with an inevitable Mayor.'

'You are getting personal, Aline,' said the other.

'We will draw our conclusions, then.'

'Dear Aline, draw what you like; the principle is the same. If I have not been to lunch with a Mayor for as long as you choose to suppose, I have vanquished the inevitable. If any of you had been in my place, you would have lunched with the Mayor once every week-day, and twice on Sundays.'

'A day of rest,' observed Blanche.

'Yes, you would have slept afterwards,' said Sophia. 'Ouf! but it is hot. The house is abominable on a day like this.'

After lunch they broke up again, Princess Aline announcing without shame that she intended to lie on her bed and sleep, if possible, till tea. Prince Victor, less honest, took a large chair in the veranda, and pretended to read; but before long the book fell heavily to the ground, and he snored without restraint. The others, with the exception of Sophia and Blanche, said they were going to write letters, and the Princess laughed at them.

'Aline is the only honest one of you all,' she said, 'and Blanche and I are the only people awake. Blanche, I ordered the horses for half-past two; we will leave these shameless people. The view from the hills under this great pall of cloud will be magnificent. See how near and

distinct everything has become! The wind has gone down; we shall have thunder. I always win when it thunders.'

As Sophia had said, the wind had ceased, and the air hung as heavy as a pall over the mountain-side. The noise of the sea filled the air, but the waves no longer broke; a great thunderous, oily swell swept up to the shore, and poured its volumes of water ponderously on the beach. Far out to sea an ocean-going steamer was ploughing its way eastwards, and as the swell caught and lifted her, they could see now the whole deck slanted perilously towards them, and now she would be but a black line in the trough of the sea. Overhead a mottled floor of cloud obscured the sky, so lowering that it seemed almost within a stone's-throw. The olive-trees on the slope were unruffled by wind, and the very leaves of the trees hung drooping as if sleeping uneasily. The horses were as if tired by a long gallop, though they had not been out of the stables except for exercising, and went heavily. Their riders alone seemed unaffected by the weather, and their talk turned, as was not uncommon, on the tables.

'There seem to be rather fewer people here than usual,' said the Princess. 'A few years ago May was always crowded.'

'And now Amandos is crowded,' remarked Lady Blanche.

'Yes. How delightful not to be at Amandos! Blanche, I have sometimes wondered—usually on Sunday evenings—whether it was really a good thing for Rhodopé when I started the club. Of course, the wealth of the country is enormously increased, but after all, has one not sacrificed something else—the spirit of the land, the spirit of the mountains, and the great out-of-doors?'

'If you think so, restore it.'

'I cannot,' said Sophia—'I simply cannot; Rhodopé without the tables would be impossible to me. Oh, Blanche, why did you save my throne? I almost wish I had received a polite note from Petros saying that the Assembly had dethroned my House. Yet it was a great stroke, and I have seldom been so excited as I was during that sledge-drive up from Mavromáti, when we did not know if we should be in time. Dear me, how splendidly punctual I was on that day! What a thunderstorm we had in Corfu when I set out! The day was not unlike this afternoon.'

Blanche laughed.

‘Abdicate, then,’ she said. ‘Send for Prince Leonard to seat himself on your throne.’

‘Ah, if he would only come! But I think he would be no better than I. He was expelled from Eton, or rather I withdrew him, as you know, for playing roulette.’

‘Do you think his travels may not have cured him?’ asked Lady Blanche.

‘How can one cure a passion? It is incurable. You may repress it, but it is always there. True, I hope it is so much repressed that it will not break out. Perhaps you may even call it cured. But what self-respecting young man would banish himself to Rhodopé, especially one who has the instinct for play, if there was no club?’

‘When will he be back?’ asked Blanche.

‘I don’t know. I have not heard from him for weeks. He was to shoot bears, I think he said. It seems hardly worth while to go to America to do that. Look how magnificent the view is! It was worth our while to come.’

They got back about five o’clock, and after tea drove down to the Casino. The rooms were very empty, and a restless, unsettled atmosphere was abroad. Over the sea from time to time came blinks of remote lightning, and rumblings of thunder, like the sound of a gong very far away. Even roulette somehow seemed monotonous, in such poor spirits were the Princess’s guests, and it was a relief to her when dinner-time came, for there was no such tonic to the mind as dinner.

As they dined, the storm moved nearer, and while they drank their coffee on the terrace, they watched a continuous play of violet-coloured lightning southwards over the sea, and the noise of the thunder began to overscore the hoarse voice of the swell on the beach below. A few drops of rain, warm and large, splashed down on the terrace like sudden frogs, and the tension of the atmosphere grew unbearable. Even Sophia felt it.

‘Something is going to happen,’ she cried, as they entered the Casino doors—‘something is going to happen fit for the lightning to look at and the thunder to listen to. I am excited! I am delightfully excited!’

CHAPTER XIV.

BANG!

THE world seemed to have stopped at home that night, and in the large room—a thing Sophia had never known before—there was no one playing. The croupiers were all at their posts, some of them idly spinning the wheels, or dealing right and left for imaginary trente et quarante; but the visitors, perhaps only twenty in all, were lounging by the open windows, silently watching the gathering of the storm. Due south, and far over the sea, a terrific thunderstorm was going on; to the west, a separate and distinct display winked and grumbled. Both storms were certainly moving nearer; it was as if the elements were banded together for the destruction of Monte Carlo, and the whole world seemed to be waiting, finger on lip, for an imminent judgment. The air was windless, but every few minutes a sudden gust swept rattling and hissing across the garden, some outlying feeler, cast down like a grappling-iron from a balloon, of the fearful tumult that was raging fathoms overhead. In such a way seaweed and ooze feel the suck of a swell above, stir and wave madly through the translucent water, and are still again.

Close to the window near where they entered the large room a very tall figure of a man lounged against the wall, his face averted. Over it —no uncommon sight—was tied a black domino, for the more finished gamblers of that day—gamblers, that is, of the first water, who cultivated style—often concealed their faces in this way, for fear that some ungovernable seizure of the muscles might declare their emotion. Princess Sophia had often talked this curious custom over with Blanche.

‘It is a ridiculous invention,’ she said, ‘for the involuntary and ungovernable spasms of emotion are betrayed, not by the face, but by the hands. I, as you know, have had some experience of the table, and though no one—this sounds hardly modest, but it is true—can conceal their excitement better than I, I cannot always check little sudden movements of the fingers. The muscles of my face I have in perfect control. There is no difficulty. It is a mask; but if you watch my third

and fourth fingers, you will see them, if I am more than usually interested in the game, make little movements which I simply cannot control. It is hardly a movement, it is more a vibration; and to conceal this, as you have noticed, I sometimes wear dark gloves at the tables.'

They passed on into their private room, where Pierre—he always left Rhodopé with the Princess—was awaiting them. Even he seemed touched by the weather, and his bow lacked briskness, and his moustache looked limp.

'Pierre, Pierre, this will never do!' cried Sophia. 'We are all like old rags in this weather, and we need more players. Let us have all the windows open; we shall soon have to shut them. Yet in the other room —no, no one is playing. Whom can we get? Is not the lightning amazing!'

'There are some good players there, your Royal Highness, though no one is playing yet,' said Pierre—'a tall man, for instance, in a black domino.'

'Yes, I saw him,' said the Princess. 'He even bowed to me as I came in, which is impertinent of a stranger.'

'He bowed to the Queen of Monte Carlo, madam,' said Pierre, brisking up a little, for Sophia always stimulated him, 'not to the Princess of Rhodopé.'

The Princess laughed.

'But he wears a domino,' she said; 'he must be a bad gambler if he cannot control his face.'

'Watch his hands, madam,' returned Pierre; 'they are as if of ice.'

'Then, why does he wear a domino?'

'Perhaps to conceal some deformity, poor gentleman!' said Pierre, 'or perhaps he has the dance of St. Vitus. Your Royal Highness will find he plays well.'

'Ask him to come in, then,' she said, 'and ask three others; we are short to-night.'

Pierre hurried into the other room to do her bidding, and a moment afterwards returned with the desired number. It was considered a sort of brevet rank among card-players to join the Princess's table, and her requests were always eagerly obeyed. Last of the four came the Black

Domino, and as the Princess bowed to him, ‘Your Royal Highness will be so kind as to excuse my domino,’ he said; ‘it is a practice of mine to wear it.’

‘And gloves?’ asked the Princess, with interest.

‘No, madam; I have my hands under control,’ he replied.

‘That is odd,’ said she. ‘My face I have under control, you shall see, but occasionally I have to wear gloves.’

Princess Aline was not gifted by nature with the best of temper, and for the first hour she had certainly the worst of luck. Eight times she betted limit stakes on the second half-dozen—no mean form of play—and seven times she lost. The limit was one hundred napoleons, and the seven rolls were expensive. At the end of the seventh she lost her temper as well as her stake, and in a spasm of irony quite ineffectual against inanimate objects she laid two sous with much asperity on the same half-dozen, although the lowest stake was understood to be a napoleon; but her bet was addressed, not to the company, but to the offending marble. This time, of course, she won, and in a fit of rage she hurled the innocuous penny-piece which Pierre had hastily fished out of his pocket on to the floor.

The Black Domino, who was seated next her, pushed back his chair, and picked it up for her.

‘I think this slipped from the hand of your Serene Highness,’ he said gravely, and with such suavity and seriousness of tone that none thought to laugh.

The Princess meantime, as she so often was accustomed to do when beginning a night’s play, trifled and coquetted with Luck, to see in what mood the goddess was, as some *gourmet* who is ordering his dinner will sit over the choice of dishes with an olive or a glass of bitters, testing the quality and leanings of his appetite. She bet a napoleon or two on a single number once or twice, and lost; she bet on a few half-dozens, and lost also; she even bet occasionally on the colour, but Luck seemed to have turned its back on her. These insignificant triflings gave her time to observe the Black Domino, and before long her candour told her that Luck had been right to leave her. If she was, as Pierre said, the Queen of Monte Carlo, here indeed was the King. The domino, of course, concealed his face; but, even as

Pierre had said, his hands might have been of ice. He seemed to stake nothing lower than the limit, and he never staked on more than a half-dozen. Once, when he had bet on a single number, she noticed he had just lit a match for his cigarette, and his hand was half raised, the elbow off the table, when the marble, as sometimes happens, after some few wild dashes backwards and forwards, began to slow down very suddenly. Watching it, he forgot to light his cigarette, and though his arm was unsupported, she saw his white fingers cut like a cameo across his black coat, and the edge never wavered. She grew so interested in watching him that more than once she forgot to stake on a roll, to the extreme amazement of all present, including herself.

After an hour or two Pierre went to get his supper, and in the momentary pause before the new croupier took his place she leaned forward across the table.

‘Let me have the honour of complimenting you on your play,’ she said to the Black Domino; ‘it is perfection, and I have seen a good deal of play.’

The man bowed.

‘Praise from the Princess Sophia is praise indeed,’ he said. ‘You see, your Royal Highness, I make it a rule never to get up a loser; that gives one a certain calmness. One only has to play long enough.’

She laughed.

‘A good rule,’ she said. ‘Your methods are the same as my own. It will come to a duel between us.’

‘That shall be as your Royal Highness pleases,’ he said.

Prince Victor was of that imbecile type of gambler which is usually known as the prudent; in other words, after having lost a specified sum, he closed his performances for the evening. This consummation he usually attained after about three hours’ hesitating and inglorious adventure; but this evening his rate of progress was somewhat more advanced, and he rose from the table shortly before midnight. On the stroke of the clock, without warning, the two battalions of storm burst overhead; a wicked flicker of lightning zigzagged across the darkness close outside the room where they were playing, and simultaneously, it seemed, a crack of thunder so appalling burst above them that even the Princess, who seldom showed emotion, half rose from her seat with a

little cry of fright. Princess Aline buried her face in her hands; Pierre, who had returned from his supper, cried ‘Mon Dieu!’ in a trembling voice and crossed himself; the Black Domino alone remained perfectly unmoved.

‘Your Royal Highness should recollect,’ he said to Sophia, ‘that when one has heard the thunder it is proof-positive that one has not been struck by the lightning. I am quite sure we all heard the thunder. Personally, I am deafened; my ears sing. I see no has staked on this roll.’

Shortly after one Princess Aline got up rather hastily from the table. She said something in a loud, angry tone; but her words, luckily perhaps, were drowned by a prodigious explosion overhead. Outside the rain was falling like a shower of lead, and now and then a lightning flash crossing the black square of the windows would turn the water into a deluge of prismatic colour. Already the air was cooler, but the chariots of God still drove backwards and forwards over their very heads. As Aline left the table, the Black Domino asked for a whisky-and-soda, and Princess Sophia put on her gloves; for her hands trembled perceptibly, and her little finger made strange twitching movements. The Black Domino must already have made a fortune, and Princess Sophia thought with dismay that her Civil list would not be paid till September, and she was not very good at economizing.

On the retirement of Aline and Victor, the Princess had sent out for two others to take their places; but when at three o’clock Blanche also rose, she sent in vain for another. Play had ceased in the large room, and there was positively no one there. Half an hour afterwards two others got up, and the Princess, looking round the table, saw that weariness sat on all faces.

She rose at once.

‘Do not let me detain you, ladies and gentlemen, if any of you wish to go,’ she said. ‘I am infinitely obliged to you for your charming company. The storm, I think, is passing over; you can get to your hotels without a drenching. Good-night—I wish you all a very good-night.’

A sigh of relief went round the room—for it was not etiquette to leave the Princess’s table, except for her intimates, till she herself

suggested it—and all rose. The Black Domino, however, lingered.

‘Am I to understand that your Royal Highness is willing to go on playing with any who wish to remain?’ he asked.

Sophia flushed with delight.

‘*Mon cher inconnu*,’ she cried, ‘you are inimitable! But what game shall we play? It will have to be a game for two. I will cut you through fifty packs.’

‘I would as soon play old maid, begging your Royal Highness’s pardon,’ observed the Black Domino with some heat.

‘Bezique?’ suggested Sophia.

‘Surely that is more a game for Ash Wednesdays, your Royal Highness,’ said he.

‘Suggest, then,’ she said; ‘only I will not play trente et quarante. No doubt I am unreasonable, but it bores me; and I entirely refuse to be bored. After all, roulette is the only game worth playing; but we can’t play roulette with two.’

‘I think it might be managed,’ said the Black Domino, ‘if the bank will stand aside and let us fight it out.’

‘How do you propose to manage it?’ she asked.

‘In this way. One of us—say whichever of us won the last roll—stakes on a number, or on six numbers, or a dozen, or on the colour. The other then stakes, but may not stake on more numbers than the first has staked on. Thus, if your Royal Highness stakes on a dozen, I may stake on a dozen or anything less than a dozen. In the same way, if I, staking first, back colour merely, your Royal Highness may stake on colour, on the dozen, on anything down to one number. If I, again, stake on one number, your Royal Highness must stake on one. Thus, if you stake on one number to my dozen and win, I pay you twelve times your stake. If we both stake on a dozen and you win, I pay you your stake only. It will not be roulette, but it should not be tedious.’

Sophia turned to Pierre.

‘Will it make a game?’ she asked.

Pierre wiped an excited dew from his forehead.

‘I would my father were alive to see it!’ he exclaimed piously. ‘Madam, it is the greatest gamble conceivable! Heaven will not be

found to hold such a gamble.'

'That is probably the case,' said Sophia dryly.

They sat down again, and at the Princess's request the Black Domino spun a coin.

'Heads!' she cried; and it was heads.

Sophia intended to begin gently till she saw the run of the game, and staked five napoleons on red.

'Black,' replied her opponent, and lost.

Sophia hesitated.

'Red,' she said—'limit. I think this will make an amusing game.'

'On number thirteen, limit,' replied this remarkable young man.

Sophia held her breath. Hardened gambler as she was, she always let thirteen severely alone, and she heard her pulse hammering in her throat as the ball clicked and flew off at tangents. Long before it stopped she had a presentiment what would happen, and when it paused, ran on again, slowed and died, dropping into thirteen, she was not surprised.

'I congratulate you,' she said with entire truth, and handed him sixteen times the limit stake.

For the next half-hour after this the play was only moderately sensational. They staked on dozens and half-dozen, occasionally even on colour, and the Black Domino continued to make a handsome income. About four o'clock he yawned slightly, and it being Sophia's turn to stake, when she backed a colour, he wearily laid down the limit stake of a hundred napoleons on number twenty.

'My age,' he said.

'Indeed!' remarked Sophia. 'You look older;' and her voice vibrated with suppressed emotion.

The ball slowed down. Again he had won on a single number to her sixteen.

At this she grew a little reckless; but do what she would, her own recklessness seemed to fade into a pallid system by his; the fire of her play dwindled like a candle in sunlight before his extraordinary hazards, and yet his hands might have been hands of ice.

Only once again before the pale face of the dawn began to peer in at the eastern window did they pause, and that when Pierre rose to walk up and down the room, for he was cramped with sitting. Then for the first and only time in her life the Princess showed herself inquisitive.

‘I should be honoured by knowing your name,’ she said.

‘With your Royal Highness’s permission I will keep it to myself till we have finished,’ he replied. ‘But I have on my side a question. Shall we, with your Royal Highness’s permission, place no limit on the stakes? These hundred napoleon stakes are getting a little tedious, are they not? We are used to them, and when one gets used to a thing it is better to change it.’

Now, most men when they have won a fortune would absolutely refuse to raise the stakes, and the Princess raised her hands in amazement. Never had her wildest imaginations pictured a gambler so magnificent as this. What a king, she thought, he would have made! He was royal—a man out of sight of the run of humanity, as kings should be. None but she could so well have appreciated his extraordinary self-control, none could have so estimated his scale.

‘My limit shall only be that of which I am possessed,’ she said. ‘I have still six thousand napoleons to lose, but I am afraid I have no more.’

The black Domino separated from his pile of winnings sixty rouleaux of a hundred napoleons.

‘The night is already gone,’ he said. ‘I will stake on red.’

‘And I on black,’ said the Princess; and her little finger twitched like the indicator of a telegraph.

The ball slowed down, and she rose.

‘I would play with you till the Day of Judgment,’ she said, ‘but positively I have not a penny till my Civil List is paid in September.’

‘Your Royal Highness has Rhodopé,’ said he.

‘True; and what shall be your stake?’

‘The revenues of Rhodopé, paid year by year to you and your heirs for ever.’

‘They are large, and “for ever” is a long time.’

‘And I am rich. Also I have luck. I will stake on the first half of the board.’

‘And I on the second,’ said the Princess; but her voice was a whisper.

Pierre’s hand so trembled that he could scarce set the wheel in motion, and the Princess’s foot beat an electric dynamo on the thick Persian rug underneath the table. The spin was a long one, but at last the ball began to slow down; it crept through one to sixteen, crawled through sixteen to thirty-two, wavered over zero, and settled into number one. They rose together.

‘A pleasant jest,’ said the Princess rather tremulously, ‘to end a memorable evening.’

‘I never jest when I am gambling,’ said the Black Domino. Then he drew himself up and removed his domino. ‘Is it possible you do not recognise me, mother?’ he said.

The Princess’s hands made a sudden quick movement together.

‘Oh, Leonard! Leonard!’ she cried; ‘when you ought to have been among the wigwams! How tiresome of you!’

‘Even so, but I preferred, like you, to be at Monte Carlo. I have been here two months, and I have played every day since I saw you last. The rest of my time was occupied in copying pages out of guidebooks.’

Sophia could not restrain herself. She threw her arms round his neck and embraced him, kissing him on both cheeks.

‘But you are magnificent!’ she cried. ‘I never thought the world contained so splendid a man! And how you have grown! I left you a little boy, now you look a man of twenty.’

‘I am nearly twenty-one,’ he said.

‘Yes, you must be. How time flies! Leonard, how can you keep your hands still? You shall teach me.’

‘It is practice, and natural predisposition to keep quiet at the tables,’ he said. ‘I inherited the second from you, dear mother, and I have had a good deal of the other on my own account.’

Pierre—and he should have been given a medal for the act—had seen that this was no interview for him to witness, and, as the others

had forgotten his presence, he went softly and discreetly out of the room. For a moment there was silence. Then Leonard said:

‘I wonder if you realize what you have done, mother.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You have staked Rhodopé and lost it.’

The Princess sat down heavily in a chair. Her emotion dazed her.

‘Leonard, you can never do it,’ she said. ‘My poor boy, you would die in a month at Rhodopé. You would beggar the principality in a night, and a week after you would be dead of boredom. No, it is too great a sacrifice! I will not accept it. To-morrow I shall go back to Rhodopé. I will banish myself there, and never play again. I have perfection, and that is you, and I am content. I have seen my ideal. Besides, I am a beggar.’

‘I insist on your paying me your debt,’ said Leonard. ‘You have abdicated. I am Hereditary Prince of Rhodopé. You shall come to Rhodopé to-morrow, and say farewell to your people; but after that you shall not come to Rhodopé again, and I think you will not care to. I have played my last stake. I shut up every gambling-house in the principality, otherwise we shall be the mock of Europe; and I will not be Prince of a country that is one roulette-board.’

The Princess sprang up.

‘You mean it, Leonard?’ she said. ‘You will do what I have been unable to do? You will save Rhodopé? Oh, but you cannot—you cannot! Think what you are: how young; how many glorious nights of play may lie before you!’

‘I am going to do as I said,’ he replied.

The Princess embraced him again.

‘And I shall never see Rhodopé any more,’ she cried. ‘Oh, merciful heavens! how happy I am! But I will go with you and say farewell, and then I will come back to Monte Carlo for ever and ever. I will wear a lace cap at Rhodopé, and shed real tears. I will invoke all kinds of blessings and that sort of thing on everybody. The poor Princess abdicates because of the burden of State; she leaves the burden on the shoulders of her dear son. The laws of dramatic propriety make me go to Rhodopé once more. Oh, Leonard, although I was determined that

you should shake off this fatal habit of gambling, I thought but poorly of you when I imagined you were taking an interest in mosques and wigwams; but they answered their purpose, you naughty boy! Those letters you wrote me the acme of absurdity. You shall tell me all your adventures to-morrow. Come! let us get home; it is day.'

EPILOGUE.

IT was my fortune, two years ago, while drifting about the Continent, to be passing through the Riviera on my way to Greece, and, happening to spend a night at that very pretty place Monte Carlo, it was not unnatural that I went to take a look—no more—at the tables. After that it was easier of demonstration than the first proposition of Euclid that I laid a few francs on a half-dozen of numbers, and, oddly enough, I won. Just as the marble slowed down, though I was too intent on it to raise my eyes, I saw that a little stir of attentive movement was going about the room, and after receiving my stake with a studied negligence—the right pose, so I am told, at tables—I looked up. Close beside me was standing a very large lady, with four of the most magnificent ropes of pearls I have ever seen round her neck. She smiled affably, and with a most charming graciousness.

‘Please continue,’ she said; ‘you have yet time to stake on this roll.’

I at once guessed who this great jewelled lady was, and in some confusion of mind laid a napoleon at haphazard on the board.

The instant after the croupier set the wheel going, and I was struck with consternation, though not naturally superstitious, to observe that the number I had chosen to back was thirteen.

In the room there was dead silence, and looking up, I saw the Princess’s eyes glued to the table. This, as I soon observed, was a habit with that remarkable woman. The play of others she would watch as if her last franc was at stake; when she played herself, it was as if she staked a sixpence. Round and round went the marble, clicking and whirring; it slowed down, and I had won.

‘My dear young man,’ said the Princess, ‘I shall be delighted to know your name, and to receive you in my little private room to-night; I have a small party with me.’

I willingly made the Princess the present of my name, but regretted that circumstances over which I had no control made it absolutely impossible for me to play for the stakes she was accustomed to risk. She scarcely seemed to hear what I said.

'Come,' she said; 'we will begin at once. I only want one extra to-night, as we are a houseful.'

Now, by nature I am a profound loyalist, and hold heads which are crowned, or have once been crowned, in a fervour of respect. To refuse to obey a royal command seemed to me a thing undreamed of, but to play with the Princess was dipped in an equal impossibility. As we entered the Princess's room, again I explained the meanness of my position. She looked at me compassionately.

'How much are you prepared to lose?' she asked. 'I mean, till you had lost what sum, would you have remained in the Casino?'

I told her the meagre total.

'Well, come and lose it with me,' she said, 'instead of in there. My room is far more comfortable, and you may smoke, of course.'

Now I disapprove of gambling, especially for those who, like myself, cannot afford it. I had been caught, like Dr. Jekyll, tampering with my conscience, and Nemesis, in the person of the Princess, had come swift and stout. I resigned myself, I dare to hope, with a fair grace, and after the Princess had mentioned my name vaguely to a host of royalties, laying little stress on it, but much stress on the fact that she had seen me win on a single number, and that thirteen, we sat down. The situation reminded me of the 'Rose and the Ring.' The room was full of royalty, and my impression was that I was the only uncrowned head present. I felt myself the apotheosis of obscurity.

However, there was no help for it, and feeling that I had better curtail the evening as much as possible, but maintain the reputation of recklessness, I proceeded to stake on single numbers, or on two or three at a time, never backing more than six. Whether it was that the Goddess of Luck was fairly astounded by the sudden recantation of an apostate, or whether the powers that be wished to make up to me the missing of a train the day before, I do not know, but the fact remains that I simply could not lose. Pierre's eyes were bright with admiration, and soon from handing me my stake with a 'Monsieur,' he gave me rank as 'votre altesse.'

The clock by Vernier on the bracket seemed to me never to stop striking. Hardly had one hour died in the air than the next was on the chime. I was lost to the nimble passing of the time, and I remember but

little of the next few hours, except that the heap of gold by me grew like Alice when she ate the mushroom. Hardly a word was exchanged by anyone, but I recollect, just as the clock struck twelve, looking at my hands. For the moment I thought I had an ague. I was sitting next the Princess, and she too observed them.

‘There, there!’ she said, as if soothing a child, ‘it may happen to any of us. Your face is all right. But send for a pair of gloves, if you have none with you. What is your size? A large eight, I should say. Pierre, procure some gloves—large eight—for this gentleman. Send one of my footmen. I often wear gloves myself, and I think I shall put them on now. I am a little excited. We are having a charming evening!’

One o’clock struck, and we adjourned for supper. As we rose I suddenly realized that the excitement had made me ravenous, though till then I had not been conscious of the slightest hunger. The experience, I believe, is a common one.

We supped in one of the restaurants in the Casino, and I was assailed with questions. Why had I not been seen here before? or was it that I played at other tables only? What was the largest sum I had ever won? and what did I really *entre amis*—(was not that gratifying!)—think about number thirteen? It was in vain that I pleaded I was no gambler, that I had no ideas whatever about the number thirteen, except that when thirteen sat down to dinner they usually all lived for more than a year afterwards. I was listened to with polite incredulity. I had not known that crowned heads were so slow of belief. Princess Sophia, I think, alone credited me with speaking the truth, for she said (and subsequently explained what she meant):

‘At first I thought that you were like poor Petros, when he said that he was but a beginner at bezique, but I think I was wrong.’

After an interval of half an hour we went back to the tables. If I had been lucky before, I was Luck incarnate now. The thing was absurd and ridiculous. I won so regularly that it became almost monotonous. For more than an hour I consistently played limit stakes, and still the rouleaux of gold poured in. I had recovered my nerve, and did not again put on the large eights, which fitted me exactly, and from opposite I saw the Princess looking at me with a wistful air.

‘It reminds me so of a night I spent with poor Leonard,’ she said, half to herself, as for the hundredth time her stake was swept away to join my winnings.

We left the tables at half-past three, and though I had meant to stop at Monte Carlo only one night more, I found it impossible to go. In fact, I engaged myself to lunch at the Princess’s villa next day, and be of her party again in the evening.

The details of the play during the next few evenings would be tedious to relate. It will suffice to say that Luck turned her back on me, and though she could not quite efface the result of her first favours, I am still not in a position to play roulette for large sums. In fact, I have only introduced this little episode to explain how it was that I became acquainted with the Princess, who told me the afore-written history of her life, and graciously suggested that I should make a little book of it.

‘For, indeed,’ she said, ‘my adventures seem to me not uninteresting. Perhaps that is only my egotism, but I do not think so. And as you are going away to-morrow—to Greece, I think you said?—I will finish the story of which I have told you a part, and mention what happened to Leonard after that memorable night at Monte Carlo when I gambled for Rhodopé and lost.’

She sighed.

‘Poor dear Leonard!’ she said; ‘that was his *tour de force*, his fine moment. He never came near it again. It is sad to me to think what a mess people make of their lives. Some are born to one thing, some to another; he was certainly born to be a gambler, but an adverse fate, like the seventh godmother in the fairy-tales, gave him a terrible gift. She made him Prince of Rhodopé, and endowed him with a mania for reformation. I call him Luther sometimes.’

‘But surely you can hardly regret what he has done?’ I said. ‘Has he not made a power of Rhodopé?’

She shook her head sadly.

‘He has only done what any obstinate, stupid, and excellent man could have done,’ she said. ‘I will not argue that it is a better thing to be a gambler than a reformer, but when you are born a gambler, it is silly to devote your life to reforming. Sometimes, when I think of the parable of the ten talents, I wonder——’ She broke off. ‘Well, for my

story,' she said, after a pause. 'It is very short—just the sequel of what I have already told you—but English people, I think, like a story to be finished up, and to know that the hero lives happily ever afterwards, and it will do for a little epilogue. In this case, it is certainly true that Leonard has lived happily ever afterwards, for, indeed, he is quite content. He has married, as you know, and he has five children, none of whom have ever a pack of cards, and they are all the pictures of health, and go to bed at nine. My dear young man, think what that means. It is horrible! The Education Department ought to see to it. But in Rhodopé, unfortunately, I doubt whether even the Education Department know what cards are now. Dear me, how things have changed! Poor Leonard!

'Yet he is content,' she went on. 'He has a magnificent army, and I really believe he will make a great power of Rhodopé. When the Turkish Empire is broken up, you will see he will get a great slice. And the people adore him. They think he is the wisest, most Christian, and most enlightened of monarchs, and I am afraid that if Leonard lives long—and he is sure to live long, because he always goes to bed at half-past ten, and gets up at a quarter past seven—oh, that quarter past! —he may get to believe it, too. That would be a great pity. Humility is the first duty of a crowned head, and if the German Emp—— Well, I suppose I had better not say that.'

'Please do,' said I.

She shook her head.

'No, you must not put that into your book. Say I stopped just in time; it will make people think how discreet I am, and, indeed, it is true. But to return to Leonard. He shut up every gambling-house in Rhodopé; he even stopped knuckle-bones. As I told you, he had a bonfire of all the roulette-boards, and gradually he made Rhodopé what it is. He has a passion for doing his duty—an acquired passion, I admit, but still a passion. It is a very common passion nowadays, and you English have got it worse than anyone. You are all too good, and in consequence, as a nation, you are just a little dull.'

'I don't think that is the result of our goodness,' I said, for, like Stevenson, I hate cynicism like the devil.

‘Pardon me,’ said the Princess, with some asperity, ‘but I know it is. I like people to be good, when being good comes natural to them; but the continual effort to do one’s duty is paralyzing to other energies. You get developed incompletely. Also, the continual doing of one’s duty makes one all nose or all forehead, or something disproportionate. You have not time to be gay. Good gracious! there is the dressing-gong! I must go, so good-bye. I am sorry you cannot play with us to-night, but I think you said you were engaged. I have written to Leonard to say you will go to Amandos after your visit to Athens, and I have not told him you play roulette, or he would refuse to see you. Good-bye, and a prosperous voyage. If you should get away from your dinner early, you will find us at the tables, I expect. A little roulette would be pleasant, I think, for a change. The large eight gloves, which I see you have left on the table, I shall keep by me. When the madness is on me, and I want to stake on thirteen, they ought to bring me luck.’

THE END.

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