

THE EMPRESS OF AN HOUR

BY FANNIE AYMAR MATHEWS.

CHAPTER VII.

There is now a profound silence in the apartment.

"Madame Zalka Orloff," reads he from a slip of paper in his hand. Zalka rises and inclines her head. "What can I do for you, Monsieur?" "Come with me at once," replies the man succinctly.

Several of the men start forward, and again these ladies begin their pretty screams. "Thanks, Messieurs," she says, warning them back with dignity. "You have doubtless a warrant for my arrest, Monsieur?"

"Yes, Madame, it is here" (the officer presents her with the paper).

Zalka eagerly scans it.

"Aha—very well! Monsieur, there is your warrant. I refuse to go!" She folds her arms and looks upon the ground.

"Then, Madame, it becomes necessary to force you—"

"Stop."

The Emperor steps from the shadow of the curtains, where he has been standing, and utters the word in a voice that is not to be misunderstood.

"From whom do you come? By whose order?"

"By the order of M. Ducrat himself, Your Majesty."

"And the charge?"

"Conspiracy against the life of the Emperor of France!" answers the officer, pompously reading from his paper.

There is an instant of terrible silence.

The face of Louis Napoleon is at this moment such a chaos of conflicting emotions as would have astounded those who accused it of immobility.

His eyes glowed like coals of fire as they flashed under his contracting brows upon the young Russian. His lips quivered with rage and perchance with that species of terror which is the familiar of men who pin their faith upon the ignis fatuus they christen a "destiny." His hand grasped the back of a chair with the tenure of a vice.

"And Monsieur Ducrat, where is he?"

"Without, Your Majesty. Monsieur Ducrat waits in his carriage at the portecocher."

"Request him to come in."

There is by this time sufficient noise.

Little nervous Monsieur Victoire alone is quiet, scribbling hurriedly in his note-book in a corner.

"Well, Madame?" the Emperor says, in a low, sharp voice, as he sits and turns his face to the woman who stands near him.

"What? No tears? No prayers?"

"Ami Louis!" cries she, bending her lips to his ear and whispering a few hurried sentences, while the noise of hurried steps echoes from the vestibule and across the pavements of the little flowery garden.

The Emperor springs to his feet as Ducrat enters the room attended by several gendarmes and two or three men in civilian's dress.

"Your Majesty has sent for me," Monsieur Ducrat says respectfully.

"Precisely."

"And Your Majesty's pleasure is?"

"To hear the history of this"—he extends his hand for the warrant which is at once presented to him—"this piece of paper."

"To be brief, Your Majesty, I have discovered, by dint of the greatest pertinacity—"

The Emperor smiled cynically, it would seem.

"—that a plot against the life of the Emperor of France had been for some time germinating in the very heart of Paris itself. Yes, this very night—nay, this very hour, as Your Majesty should have been en route to the Tuileries, the ruler of the French people was to have been shot like a dog in his carriage!"

A murmur of horror ran round the room.

Mr. Ducrat paused to enjoy the effect of his oratory.

"And Madame Orloff?" the Emperor inquires, as he caresses his mustache.

"Ah, Your Majesty—the arrest of Mme. Orloff becomes the last painful duty I have this night to see carried out. The others are under irons already. By means of papers found on the persons of the chief conspirators—now—within the hour!" Monsieur Ducrat glances picturesquely at the clock in the corner—"It is discovered that Mme. Orloff was in daily communication with these wretches—that it was she who furnished them with the exact hour at which Your Majesty might be expected to leave her house on your way to the State ball at the palace," Monsieur Ducrat pauses for breath and to indulge in the pardonable gratification which the amazement of his auditors affords him.

"That it was she—even she!—Your Majesty, who suggested to her abominable accomplices the exact spot on the corner of the Rue de Rivoli, at which they should lie in wait to assassinate the Emperor of France!"

"This is all, Monsieur Ducrat?" His Majesty inquires, still stroking his mustache.

"All, Your Majesty? Surely it is sufficient!"

"You are quite sure, M. Ducrat, that there is nothing—no incident which you have omitted in the rehearsal of this plot?"

"I am sure—positive, Your Majesty!"

"Ah—very well!"

Louis Napoleon approaches the latter and holding the warrant lightly, he sets it on fire at the flame of one of the tall candles.

"But, Your Majesty—this woman?"

"This woman—well?" His Majesty repeats, coldly, watching the bit of paper wither into a flimsy ash.

"This woman is dangerous—criminal!" Monsieur Ducrat is becoming very much excited. "Surely Your Majesty will not endanger a life that is dear to millions of Frenchmen for the sake of—?" Monsieur Ducrat pauses.

In his position and with the present surroundings Monsieur Ducrat's command over language may go no further.

"For the sake of—?" repeats the Emperor icily, turning from the table and brushing a fleck of the burned paper from his sleeve languidly.

"Pardon! pardon! Your Majesty, but I have your Majesty's own recommendation regarding Madame Orloff. It is here! The date—almost four years since." Monsieur Ducrat hastily takes a note book from his inner pocket and reads:—"Zalka—Russian

—Quartier Latin a resemblance—ahem! "A journalist has in his possession, &c., &c."

M. de Morny takes a step forward and ventures to whisper a word or two to the Emperor.

It is as if he had not spoken.

"Thank you, Monsieur Ducrat," the Emperor says. "You have nothing more to tell me of this affair, I presume?"

"No, Your Majesty," is the reply.

"There is time if you have, for I shall not go to the ball to-night."

"No your Majesty," Monsieur Ducrat's eyes are greedily fixed upon Zalka.

What a morsel to escape the hand of justice!

"Very well, Monsieur. I then have something to say to you. Appreciating to the full the extraordinary exertions which you have made on my behalf, I am disposed to lay at the door of fatigue the defect in your memory which has caused you to omit any mention in your recital of a letter which you received only this afternoon!" His Majesty emphasizes these last three words in so singular a manner that M. Ducrat fairly starts.

"For the benefit of these, the friends of Madame Orloff, I must be at the trouble of repairing your deficiencies. It is this then. At three o'clock this afternoon our good friend Monsieur Ducrat, being in his office immersed in affairs, receives an anonymous note, signed 'Ami Louis.' It runs thus:—"

"To-night at the corner of the Rue de Rivoli and the Place de la Concorde, four men—one in a blouse, two shabby, one as a cab driver. They have for their object the assassination of the Emperor as he is en route to the Tuileries, after visiting a certain house in the Avenue de Villiers. The plot has been months in preparation. The time and place are decided upon only within the last twelve hours!"

A hum of intense excited interest quivers through the apartment.

"Monsieur Ducrat, who wrote that letter?"

"I do not know, Your Majesty."

The voice of Monsieur Ducrat is subdued. "You have it?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"I would thank you to permit me to see it."

It was curious to note that at this crisis the Emperor's face for the first time betrayed a faint emotion.

It was perhaps possible that he feared that this letter might not be forthcoming.

Nevertheless, in a second it was in his possession.

And turning with a smile of rare courtesy to Zalka he said:—

"Perhaps Monsieur Ducrat would care to know the name of the person who wrote this letter?"

"Oh, Your Majesty!"

"Zalka Orloff," the Emperor ejaculates sharply. "You see, Ducrat, there is a loyalty which is not to be counted by so many francs a year and which risks life itself and calls it by no such title as the 'greatest pertinacity.' Good evening, Monsieur!"

The Emperor turns away and amid the joyful exclamations of the assembled group Zalka sinks into a seat.

"What can I do for you—one thing, and that is lay my commands upon you—mademoiselle? I will permit no more risks, even, he whispers, "for my sake." And aloud,

"Can I create you on the spot Comtesse de—?"

"St. Sauveur!" murmurs the witty young journalist.

Zalka shakes her head.

"No, ami Louis. You gave me the *mauvais quart d'heure* in advance; it is all that I ask!"

"Nothing. Am I so poor, then, that I have nothing that is worthy of your acceptance?"

"Ah, it is not that. Stay! Yes, one thing, I will ask for your portrait."

The guests are now amusing themselves with the fragments of their late supper, and some fresh bottles of wine, which Monsieur Alexandre has seen fit to order.

"You refused it once," Napoleon smiles.

"Ah, that was gold. I do not like gold—it is what we pay our debts with. Monsieur Louis owes me nothing—"

"But his life! You shall have the portrait."

"Thank you." She raises her lovely eyes to his face.

"Why did you do it?"

"What?"

"Risk so much for me."

"I have risked 'so much' for you for five years and more."

Zalka looks down.

"But why?" His Majesty's clear piercing eyes are intent upon her face.

"Because," she murmurs inarticulately, "because I—I am your Majesty's most loyal subject!"

Never before had she so addressed him.

With one long pressure of her two hands Napoleon, with De Morny, shortly afterward quitted the house.

Not many weeks latter Zalka received and accepted a small and exquisite cameo likeness of the Emperor.

It was set with diamonds in a frame of chased gold.

And it now lies neglected, half hidden by a little portrait of a Maintenon, in the dusty case of one of the most noted collections of miniatures in Paris.

One of the diamonds is missing, and it is likewise true that the golden frame is slightly battered.

CHAPTER VIII.

It is toward three o'clock of a beautiful day in the early summer.

Paris wears her holiday aspect, and it is evident that something unusual is transpiring.

Quite true.

The Court is about to set out for St. Cloud, and all about the Tuileries there is the harmonious confusion of soldiers, equestrians dashing to and fro, officers reining in their restive horses, sabres flashing in the sunshine, low murmurs of curiosity and impatience, strains of music, the crush of an expectant and eager crowd and the bewildering, surging away and play of Paris bent on witnessing one of the sights dear to her heart.

The open carriage awaits their majesties at the entrance.

Within the palace grooms and gentlemen are rushing about hither and thither.

But in the private apartments of the Em-

press everything is quiet—quiet almost to a sense of oppression.

Eugenie is alone.

She sits—true daughter of the universal mother, before the long mirror, which reflects her graceful figure and its graceful pose.

She listens, for her head is bent and her hand is pressed against her heart, while the lovely, languid eyes are fixed upon one of the portieres that lead into the adjoining room of the suite.

Presently the curtains part and in an instant fold together again behind the favorite actress of Paris.

Zalka stands in the presence of the Empress, in the presence of the woman to whom she bears so strange and subtle a resemblance.

Contrary to etiquette—but, perchance, etiquette had after all but small affair in this meeting—the subject spoke first.

"Your Majesty," she said, in a low tone, "has done me the honor to send for me. Can I serve Your Majesty in any way?"

Eugenie rises involuntarily, there was a sweet imperiousness in Zalka's voice that compelled a deference from any one. But also at once Her Majesty reasserted herself with half a smile and half a frown.

"Yes, Madame, I have sent for you to see you—alas! not that I have not seen you many times, studied your every motion and expression."

Zalka bows.

"But," Her Majesty with an impetuous and terrible sigh, rises and crosses the room.

"But, mon Dieu! Madame, I wished to see you face to face!"

Zalka again inclines her head.

"Not there," continues Eugenie, passionately, "with the flare of the footlights lighting up the beauty they say is so like my own, but to see you as he sees you—in the sunshine, in the daylight—as he sees you, do you hear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. But of whom does Your Majesty speak?"

The Empress turned toward the window and as hastily withdraws her gaze.

Can it be that the blazes of light and glitter on the casement is offensive to her beautiful eyes?

She takes a few steps nearer to the actress, and then sinking upon a chair she exclaims, in a broken voice:—

"Of my husband, Madame."

Zalka starts.

"Of my husband," cries the woman madly. "I wanted to see the face that has robbed me of his smiles, his lips, his looks. Oh, Madame, you have Paris at your feet, the world is ready to do you homage, go where you will. Can you not leave to Eugenie the heart of Louis Napoleon? I plead with you! I beg of you!"

Her Majesty's slight, long hands are locked tightly together, and the tears are dimming the soft lustre of the wonderful eyes.

"Your Majesty!" cries the actress passionately; "Your Majesty labors under a mistake; I have robbed Your Majesty of nothing—nothing! What do you think that Zalka could do with the heart of another woman's husband? Your Majesty, we have a little proverb in my country; it is this:—'she who meddles with the husband of a loyal wife burns her soul.' Will Your Majesty graciously permit me to retire?"

The young Russian is drawn up in an attitude of strange hauteur. One looking might say that she was the Empress, and that the woman who gazed upon her with an expression of mingled admiration and amazement was the inferior in rank.

For an instant Eugenie made no movement nor any response.

Then she spoke slowly:—

"You mean to tell me that you do not love the Emperor?"

"Your Majesty, I mean to tell you nothing whatever about my love. I am the keeper of my own heart," Zalka says, with a sad and bitter emphasis. "I believe the Emperor or will tell you as much."

"And what of him?" cries the reckless and unhappy wife of Napoleon III. "What of his love, his heart? What can you say to me of that? I implore you, I implore you!" she cries, sinking among the cushions of the lounge, while sobs shake the slender frame.

"Ah! Your Majesty must surely be the keeper of the Emperor's heart. Why do you come to me for information of such a nature? Your Majesty will pardon me if I remind you that actresses are the toys—the splendid Northern eyes dilate with pride and passion as she speaks—"the toys of monarchs, and playthings of a public that, through us, can take pleasure in sitting by and watching the dissection of their own choicest emotions. Your Majesty should know that with hearts and love and homes and firesides people of my trade have little to do. We toil, Madame, in sweat that may be amused and that we may be fed. The Emperor's flowers are no sweeter, to my thinking, Your Majesty, than any others, and as to his admiration, why, surely the ruler of France could not quarrel with the verdict of his own Paris." Zalka laughed lightly, showing her white teeth very prettily, courtesies and takes a step toward the portiere, but a motion of the Empress' hand arrests her.

CHAPTER IX.

"You are very clever, Mademoiselle Zalka," Eugenie says, "but the Empress is as clever as you are. Metternich and Bismarck are clever too, but they have not been, so far, able to deceive me."

The tone is brave, haughty, even defiant, and the Empress raises her lovely golden head proudly.

But then in an instant all is changed. With a sob of agony she staggers across the room and falls almost fainting at the actress' feet.

"Oh!" cries she, through fast falling tears, "why then, since you say he does not love you, do you wear upon your bosom his portrait?"

The cameo has fallen from between the sheltering folds of Zalka's robe.

"Your Majesty," returns the Russian, with imitable sangfroid, "that was the Emperor's gift to me, who saved his life."

"And if you care nothing for him why does his image hang about your heart?"

"Your Majesty, listen. I am a loyal subject. France has none too many such in these days." The Russian speaks hurriedly and low, perchance she suffers, for she presses her hand to her heart, and the cough that is such a natural feature with her Marguerite Gautier for a moment convulses her.

"Your Majesty, the Rhine is rising; it will overflow its banks and rush into France. Mark my words, there is disaster in the air. I feel it!" She smites her breast.

"In Berlin they are already prating of a new empire, and in Alsace-Lorraine children

tremble as they hear the distant hum and roar of an army. I am a loyal servant and subject of the Bonaparte dynasty—surely Your Majesty cannot find fault if I wear the Czar's imagine as my badge of fidelity."

The Empress regards the woman before her with incredulous eyes.

Is she then some splendid prophetess, this golden-haired girl, with her clear eyes and quivering lips? Is it—can it be, that these rumors are only rumors?

No; Eugenie is a woman and reasons from the feelings—

No; Zalka is a woman, therefore her fidelity is to her heart and not to her head.

She turns like one demented, wringing her hands, sobbing, pacing up and down the room.

"You are a sorceress!" cries the Empress madly.

"Bless, Madame. You are an Empress—command me to be burned at the stake. I do not know," she adds gloomily, "that I should not thank you for it."

"You love him?" whispers Eugenie with concentrated anguish.

"And what then?" cries the other, goaded to desperation.

"He must then have first loved you, for you are not the woman to have given unsought."

"What then?" murmurs the Russian, in a voice of imperious impatience.

Suddenly without is heard the sound of approaching footsteps.

Zalka shrinks within the shadow of the curtains.

It is impossible to intrude upon the privacy of the Empress whose commands have been strict, but it is quite possible for an eunuch to boldly impart the information to the ladies in waiting and for them to as loudly echo it, that the Emperor impatiently awaits the appearance of the Empress.

"What shall I do? What can I do? What is to become of me?" exclaims the Empress, frantically, as with a gesture of despair she catches sight in one of the great mirrors of her tear stained face, her dishevelled hair, a disordered mein.

It would take at least an hour to restore her appearance to its usual calm.

And to appear before Paris in this guise is among the positive impossibilities.

"A sudden illness," cries she, after a moment's pause, falling back amid the cushions of a luxurious fauteuil and catching up a silver smelling bottle.

"The Parisians are in no mood, permit me to remind Your Majesty," Zalka says timidly, emerging from her retirement, "for a sudden illness. They will not fall in love with a disappointment to their fete loving senses. It were more wise for Your Majesty to devise some plan for their better amusement than to cheat them of their expected pageant. The Empire wins a victory by every royal progress that it makes."

The girl's voice fairly trembles as she speaks, and in her eagerness she has approached Eugenie very closely.

The latter glances up, and as she does so her eyes fall upon the reflection in the looking glass of her own and the actress' face.

"It is impossible for me, mademoiselle," cries she, rising, "but you—you are used to playing parts. We are alike, do you not see? You can, if you will, save me from the Emperor's displeasure and the odium of the people—do you not see and understand, madame? I will make it worth your while. See! We are of the same height! This robe!" The Empress picks up a dress of pale mauve satin which lies ready for her use in the adjoining dressing room.

"Your Majesty is very good, but I require no reward. As Your Majesty is pleased to say, I am 'used to playing parts' and to serve the Empire," (Zalka speaks with a grand enthusiasm) "I am willing to appear in a new role at even so short a notice. Your Majesty will direct me."

CHAPTER X.

In a few moments and with fewer words the Russian is invested with the splendid costume that had been designed for the Empress' wear on the drive to St. Cloud.

The faultless robe, the lace mantle, the bonnet with its delicate plumes, the amethyst jewels, the fan of long violet feathers, the boots.

With a dexterous hand she arranges her golden hair in the mode affected by Eugenie. She pencils her brows and dashes her lips and cheeks with the rouge that Her Majesty was of late seldom seen without.

She pins the thin, small *masque* veil across her face and then turns toward her counterpane.

"Is Your Majesty pleased—suited?"

"Ah!" cries the impetuous woman, "it is perfect!"

"Now, Your Majesty, what is my cue?"

By this the noise and confusion without has grown greater.

The stir and hum of impatience are in the air.

"I rely upon you," whispers the Empress, "although Heaven knows why! and you are to be with him—ah, what have I done! I am crazed! I—you must not go—I—"

"Your Majesty may rely upon me. Be at the theatre at eight o'clock. You will find Zalka there. I save you mortification, disgrace—perhaps something even more serious. Your Majesty has more to hope than to fear."

There is a splendid light in the northern eyes—a splendid light of enthusiasm and purity, of devotion and loyalty that the southern born woman who listens cannot understand, but still instinctively relies upon.

Between mingled prayers, entreaties and sobs, the Empress shrinks back into the inner boudoir; and the actress, with her head erect, steps out into the auditorium, amid the ladies and people in waiting.

Once visible the great throat of Paris cheers itself hoarse over her.

"Never," they say, "has the Empress been so exquisite, so animated, so condescending."

It is remarked that even the Emperor half turns his haughty head to look at her as they pass up the Champs Elysees.

It is even remarked by a casual onlooker that as she speaks to her he seems almost moved and that a deep flush overspreads his face.

But this may be but the outcome of a vivid imagination on the part of the casual onlooker.

However, once well past Boulogne it is quite true that his Majesty spoke with some animation to the lady at his side.

"Zalka," whispers Louis Napoleon, "I have dreamed of this hour, and it has come. Tell me that my star is not a faithless one. I have desired nothing that has not been mine sooner or later."

"Your Majesty is fortunate," murmurs she.

Already he has listened to the story of the hour just passed, and thus, side by side, these two make their progress to the palace of St. Cloud.

"Zalka, why did you consent to this?" he asks, regarding her attentively.

"For the good of your empire, *ami Louis*. You love my empire, then?"

"As my life," she answers in a low tone. "And—*l'empire c'est moi*—oh, Zalka, Zalka!"

His head, for a wayward instant, closes over that one of hers which lies almost hidden in the folds of her mantle.

For an instant, while sweet music plays, while men and women and little children about them a welcome—while flowers arch above their heads, and while the twilight breeze, fresh off the perfuming fields, blows upon them, Louis Napoleon is a weak and loving man, as other men. Zalka, a woman, moved to a sad uplifting of her blue eyes, as other women.

The cortege has reached the palace. Lights flit hither and thither about the gardens. The fountains are playing and so is the band.

All is bustle and confusion as the Emperor and Empress alight and are presently conducted to their apartments.

Ere long they are alone and with a subtle spring Louis Napoleon is at her side.

"Zalka, you love me as I love you?"

She gazes out of the window by which she stands upon the darkening woods of Ville d'Arroy, she sees the thin curl of smoke ascending from some cottage far away. She hears the twitter of some sleepy little birds, and feels the dewy air upon her face.

There is a curious innate power in the woman that makes the man silent, breathless, motionless, enthralled, with idle hands and quivering lips.

What passes through her mind?

A morning long ago in June. A soldier turning the corner of the Rue Bayard—a girl bareheaded and with no stockings on her feet.