

"You have only to order me, your majesty," faltered the girl. "You have only to order, I will obey."

The king seemed to rouse himself from a reverie.

"Order you, mademoiselle?" he said at last. "Why, it is the last thing before heaven! that I should wish to do. Come let us talk for a moment of something else. Those are beautiful pearls you are wearing."

Nenia glanced down at the jewels shining on her white throat and smiled. "They were given to me, sire," she said lightly.

"Ah! a handsome gift. By whom?" interrupted the king, with an air of interest—"if I may inquire?" he added graciously.

"By the Duchess Marie Elizabeth, sire."

The monarch nodded. "Ah, it was she, I remember, who introduced you to our court. Is it not so?"

"Yes, your majesty," was the response. "I owe much to her highness."

"And I am profoundly grateful to her," said the king, and mademoiselle, it is because I know that her interest in you says everything for your understanding that I appeal to you—to your higher self. You must know—and he leant forward and took her hand—"you must know that a marriage between my son and yourself is out of the question, yet I do not blame him for being blind. Therefore, it is to you that I come. Mademoiselle, you must leave us—for a time. The prince is young; he is uncertain—like our times; and in these days more than ever the acts of kings are watched more closely than of old. Will you do this for me? I ask it as a friend, for I wish to be your friend."

The girl withdrew her hand quickly, though the king endeavoured to retain it, and she sank back in her chair, while there was that in her countenance suggesting one who looked for the direct and most melancholy news.

"Have I asked too much of you?" said the king, sympathetically. "Perhaps," he went on, gravely, "much sorrow would be spared you in the years which are to come. Mademoiselle, if you love my son—and you do love him—you will consent."

The girl burst into tears. For a moment the king looked at her, communing with himself, wondering whether he was right in the step he was taking, for, after all, life was life, and where the gray shadow of grief could be avoided was it not right to do so?

"No, sire," she said at last; "it is right. You have not demanded too much."

"And you will forgive me?" he said, with an attempt at gallantry. "You will pardon what I have done?"

"I have nothing to forgive, sire. It shall be as you wish," she said, mournfully.

"Thank you," he said, earnestly. "I will go away," she said, tearfully—"I will go away. As that is my duty, it shall be done."

"You are greater than us all," exclaimed the king, and he rose and took her hand and kissed it. "I owe you much."

But the girl was transformed.

"Will it be so easy?" she said, rising. "The prince loves me, sire. He has told me that many times. If I go away he will follow me, I fear."

"No, for the prince will not forget duty, and duty bids him remain."

"It shall be as you wish, sire. When will it please you that I shall go?"

"It does not please me at all. It is only stern necessity."

"To-night?"

"No, no, no; not to-night," he replied, with energy.

"To-morrow, then?" she said with an appearance of calmness.

"It is still too soon. Do not let there be haste. It would defeat our ends—and then, it is not that I wish you to go. You are called away, remember."

"Yes, sire, I understand," she said, simply.

The king accompanied the girl to the entrance of the apartment.

"I beg you to believe," he said in farewell, "that I am and shall always be your friend. You believe that?"

The girl stifled a sob. "Yes," she said, mournfully, "you are right—and—and I believe."

As the king turned away he murmured softly: "Mieux vaut mourir."

III.

Less than an hour after Nenia had left the king the prince was at the appoint-

ed meeting place, a small *londoir* off the main corridor; but the girl did not appear, and, after waiting impatiently for twenty minutes he quitted the chamber, anxiety written deeply on his brow.

"She promised," he mused. "She promised."

He glanced up and down the corridor. He did not see her; at one end he saw two officers talking, and he made a move in their direction, when the sound of hurrying footsteps behind him made him turn. A page came up to him breathlessly.

"Highness," he said, "I have a letter." "From whom?" asked the prince, sharply, taking the missive. "Ah! this will explain," and he turned away to conceal his agitation as he tore open the letter and read; that which he read caused him to change colour and then glance round in alarm.

But he need not have imagined that his action was an object of scrutiny by any one in the world, for the little page had interpreted a gesture of the heir to the throne as a sign of dismissal, and had fled back to his post at the ball-room portal, so that the prince was alone—alone, indeed, for a crushing sense of his hopeless solitude was borne in upon him as the words of the note wrote themselves deeply on the tables of his mind. "Dear and noble friend, I have been recalled to my duty, and now bid you farewell forever. This is my duty. Will you not know yours?"

The prince moved like a man in a trance to the open window, gazing out at the dreamy splendour of the summer night, the scented garden, the velvet darkness, the lustrous stars.

"I will marry her," he muttered, "aye, even if it costs me the throne."

When Nenia quitted the king's cabinet she remained a moment in melancholy hesitation, dreading lest she should encounter Paul at that moment of the crisis when her newly formed resolution might be shaken.

"I dare not meet him," she murmured—"I dare not!" She started, trembling violently, for a footstep was to be heard in the grey dusk far down the corridor where the coloured light from the ball lamps did not penetrate.

But it was only the tread of a guard, and reassured on that point she proceeded to a chamber where she knew writing materials would be at hand, subsequently addressing herself to a page.

"By the morning," she mused, "I must be far away," and for the moment her soul was filled with a certain delicious sense of excitement, of something akin to pleasure—for was she not serving him whom she loved?—though the feeling was dulled as she thought wistfully that he would soon forget, and that the memory of her would swiftly be but as a dream of the night—nothing more.

The music sounded far away now, for she had advanced quickly down the left main corridor, intending to gain the gardens, to stop suddenly, however, feeling that she was in imminent peril because of something besides the now faint "Valse Bleue" that fell upon her listening ear.

IV.

The voices she heard came nearer and nearer, and Nenia glided as softly as a phantom, into the curtained security of a tiny alcove, feeling, as she waited in an agony of suspense, her heart go thump, thump, and fearful lest the tense, pent-up excitement which held her might be manifested in some way to those who were coming slowly to the spot where she was concealed. But the white hand which held the curtain was not to be seen by those who passed, and no suspicion fell upon the small recess of any watcher who might be there. Was not the court dancing that night, mindful of anything but treachery from within?

"It is for to-night," said one of those who were approaching. "Our triumph is assured. Have no fear. To-morrow the old dynasty will be restored."

Nenia strained to hear all, knowing, though, but too well that one false move and death instantaneous and without mercy would be her lot, for that which she heard proved to her, that some event of greater moment than a brilliant fête was likely to occur that night, and as she heard she trembled.

All the details of her own life, and though they were, fleeting to tears, faded off into the far grey distance, seeming to have lost importance, to be

heretofore of significance now, because of those words which fell on her ear.

"The price is great, certainly," and in a low, *traffante*, "but so also is the risk."

"True, there is the risk. Well, I have risked all before, and so have you, and the new king will know how to handsomely reward those who have raised him to the throne. You are not going to hang back now?"

"No, no."

"That is well."

"He will be accepted, then?" mused the other. "You have no doubt?" "Surely he will be. He comes of a great race which once reigned. Have no fear on that score. The blow once struck and this Sigismund laid low, who is there, think you, to face the new order of things?"

"The prince," hazarded the second speaker.

"Ah! he is engaged in other matters, and ere he has come to his senses the power will have been seized for good and all. No, all will go well for our project; the people, they say, are loyal. Well, they will be loyal to the new as to the old, and to-morrow, Victor, our master will be proclaimed as king."

"And—" began hesitatingly the one who was listening.

His companion broke in decisively. "To-night, in a couple of hours' time, there will be but one officer at the king's door. You or I will see to it that he is rendered harmless, and then it will be the turn of the king. Come, comrade, come."

The speakers were moving away now, the voices becoming an indistinct murmur, and Nenia parted the curtains of the alcove and gazed after them, while a shudder went through her at the thought that ere another sun had risen in the heavens an abominable tragedy might be enacted in that place—a tragedy which would fill the entire world with horror and loathing, and relegate the country she loved to the *bloague* of barbarism once more.

As she emerged into the corridor one thought, and one only, animated her mind. While as the consciousness came to her that she might be able to unmask these plotters in time it was as if the temporarily closed doorways of imagination, leading to the fairest spring times had swung back once more on their hinges, enabling her to see ahead a vision which she feared had been blotted out forever.

She hesitated a moment longer, wondering whether her plan would succeed, and then turned and sped swiftly down the corridor till she reached the wide hall where passages led off right and left, stopping every now and again to listen, to make sure that she was not pursued, and with the anxious inquiry coming again and again—would they admit her to see the king? They might refuse to believe her story, regard her merely as a hysterical woman who followed her profession in real life as well as in the *fitur* world of the stage.

"But they must—they shall believe!" she said to herself, and with that conviction strong within her she gained a door leading to the royal apartments, and spoke to the captain of the guard.

"Impossible," said the officer, after listening to her story with wonderment depicted on his handsome face.

"It must be," she exclaimed.

"But I tell you his majesty has retired. He will see no one to-night."

"Yet," she said, excitedly, "my message is urgent."

"As are my orders," said the officer of the guard, shortly.

"You do not understand. This," she cried, pleadingly—and she caught at the captain's arm—"is an affair of life and death. You will win praise, not blame, for ignoring my orders and allowing me to pass."

"Ah! you are an actress, mademoiselle," said the officer, and his left hand played with his mustache as he looked down at the girl, "and I had the honour of seeing you perform to-night, little thinking that you would reserve a scene later on for me. It is finely played!"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she cried, and a sob

of anguish stuck in her throat. "I am not acting now. The king is in deadly peril, and you can save him."

"If his majesty is in danger I will save him," was the response. "That is what I am here for. No one passes here. My august master will be safe."

"What I say is the truth," she said, huskily. "But see," and as a flash of recollection came to her she slipped from off her finger the ring the sovereign had given to her that night but a few hours before. Look! it is his majesty's ring. It will show you that I am true."

The captain gazed at the white hand more than at the ring, with its radiating points of light, and then nodded his head as he made way.

"Mademoiselle," he said, "I will conduct you to his majesty," and he raised the curtain before the door so that the girl might pass.

They traversed two apartments, and then the captain stopped.

"Wait here," he said, quietly, and then he passed out of sight through an arched doorway, leaving Nenia devoured by impatience, though it was not for long.

She gazed at a picture of an old-time battle, and then the young captain returned.

"Please follow me," he said, and a minute later the girl found herself in the presence of the king, who was not playing cards that night, but was alone in a library like apartment, seemingly prepped in deep meditation, walking up and down, his hands behind him.

His majesty made a sign to the captain to leave the apartment, and then she told her story, while the king gravely listened.

"You ask me to believe that there are intriguers in this palace who intend to take my life?" he said at last, incredulously. "You do not seem to be aware that there are guards here."

"Sire," she cried, "I implore you to believe!"

"Is it not all a comedy?"

"No, no!"

"And yet—"

"Ah! you will believe me if I tell you who I am—you will credit a member of my house, even if you deride a girl who acts on the stage?"

"But then," he said, wonderingly, "who are you?"

"I am Pauline of Verestadt," she replied, proudly. "My family is noble, but it had fallen upon sad days. It was to help it that I hid my identity and worked, trying to win back that which my race had lost."

She stopped speaking, and stood petrified by what she saw—something which the king did not see—for at the further end of the apartment the bright coloured tapestry moved slightly, and the girl remained fascinated, unable to remove her eyes.

"Pauline of Verestadt," said the king, musingly; and as the girl maintained silence he looked at her inquiringly. "What ails you?" he asked.

"Nothing, sire."

"But you are as pale as death."

"It is—," she began. "It is—"

And she stopped again, for the tapestry moved slightly again behind the king, and the girl stood spellbound, wondering what she should do, fearing that if she gave the alarm the would-be assassins would accomplish their end ere help could come. And as she watched more keenly than before, she saw a hand slowly appear and begin to softly part the hangings. Why could she not speak—

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