REZANOV

By GERTRUDE ATHERTON

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XXIII.

Life was very gay for a fortnight. An hour after the comandante's surrender he had dispatched invitations to all the young folk of the Gente de Razon of Monterey, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles and San Diego, and to such of the older as would brave the long journeys. The Monterenos had arrived for the mission entertainment, and during the next few days the rest poured over the hills: De la Guerras, Ximenos, Estudillos, Carrillos, Estenegas, Morenos, Cotas, Estradas, Picos, Pachecos, Lugos, Ortegas, Alvarados, Bandinis, Peraltas, members of the Luis, Rodriguez, Lopez families, all of gentle blood, that made up the society of old California; as gay, arcadian, irresponsible, yet moral a society as ever fluttered over this planet. Every house in the Presidio and valley, every spare room at the Mission, opened to them with the exuberant hospitality of the country. The caballeros had their finest wardrobes of colored silks and embroidered botas, sombreros laden with silver, fine lawn and lace, jewel and sash, velvet serape for the chill of the late afternoon. The matrons brought their stiff robes of red and yellow satin, the girls as many flowered silks and lawns, mantillas and rebosos, as the family carretas would hold. The square of the Presidio was crowded from morning until midnight with the spirited horses of the country, prancing impatiently under the heavy Mexican saddle, heavier with silver, made a trifle more endurable by the blanket of velvet or cloth. No Californian walked a dozen rods when he had a horse to carry him.

But the horses were not always champing in the square. There was more than one bull-bear fight, and twice a week at least they carried their owners to the hills of the Mission ranch, or the rocky cliffs and gorges above Yerba Buena, the Indian servants following with great baskets of luncheon, perhaps roasting an ox whole in a trench. This the Californians called barbecue and the picnic merienda.

There was dancing day and night, the tinkling of guitars, flirting of fans. Rezanov vowed he would not have believed there were so many fans and guitars in the world, and suddenly remembered he had never seen Concha with either. The lady of his choice reigned supreme. Many had taken the long blistering journey for no other purpose than to see the famous beauty and her Russian; the engagement was as well known as if cried from the Mission top. The girls were surprised and delighted to find Concha sweet rather than proud, and envied her with amiable enthusiasm. The caballerhos, fewer in number, for most of the men in California at that period before a freer distribution of land were on duty in the army, artfully ignored the unavowed bond, but liked Rezanov when he took the trouble to charm them.

Khostov and Davidov watched the loading of the Juno with a lively regret. Never had they enjoyed themselves more, nor seen so many pretty girls in one place. Both had begun by falling in love with Concha, and altho they rebounded swiftly from the blow to their hopes, it happily saved them from a more serious dilemma; unwealthed and graceless as they were, they would have been regarded with little favor by the practical Californian father. As it was, their pleasures were unpoisoned by regrets or rebuff. When they were not flirting in the dance or in front of a lattice, receiving a lesson in Spanish behind the portly back of a duena, or clasping brown little fingers under cover of a fan when all eyes were riveted on the death struggle of a bull and a bear, they were playing cards and drinking in the officers' quarters; which they liked almost as well. It is true they sometimes paid the price in a cutting rebuke from their chief, but the rebukes were not as frequent as in less toward circumstances, and were generally followed by some fresh indulgence. This, they uneasily guessed, was not only the result of the equable state of his excellency's temper, but because he had a signal unpleasantness in store, and would not hazard their resignation. They had taken advantage of an imperial ukase to enter the service of the Russian-American company temporarily, and they knew that if they evaded any behest of Rezanov's their adventurous life in the Pacific would be over. Therefore, altho they resented his implacable will, they pulled with him in outward amity; and indeed there were few of the Juno's human freight that did not look back upon that California springtime as the episode of their lives, commonly stormy or monotonous, in which the golden tide flowed with least alloy. Even Langsdorff, altho impervious to female charms and with scientific thirst unslacked, enjoyed the Spanish fare and the society of the priests. The sailors received many privileges, attended bullfights and fandangos, loved and pledged, and were only restrained from emigration to the interior of this enchanted land of pretty girls and plentiful food by the knowledge of the sure and merciless vengeance of their chief. Had the rumor of war still held it might have been otherwise, but that raven had flown off to the limbo of its kind, and the comandante let it be known that deserters would be summarily captured and sent in irons to the Juno.

In the mind of Concha Arguello there was never a lingering doubt of the quality of that fortnight between the days of torturing doubts and acute emotional upheaval, and the sailing away of Rezanov. It was true that what he banteringly termed her romantic sadness possessed her at times, but it served as a shadow to throw into sharper relief an almost incredible happiness. If she seldom saw Rezanov alone there was the less to disturb her, and at least he was never far from her side. There were always the delight of unexpected moments unseen, whispered words in the crowd, the sense of complete understanding, broken now and again by poignant attacks of unreasoning jealousy, not only on her part but his; quite worth the reconciliation at the lattice, while Elena Castro, gentle duena, pitched her voice high and amused her husband so well he sought no opportunity for response.

Then there was more than one excursion about the bay on the Juno, dinner on La Bellissima or Nuestra Senora de los Angeles, a long return after sundown that the southerners might appreciate the glory of the sunsets, when the blue of the waters was reflected in the lower sky, to melt into the pink fire above, and all the land swam in a pearly mist.

Once the comandante took twenty of his guests, a gay cavalcade, to his rancho, El Pilar, thirty miles to the south; a long valley flanked by the bay and the eastern mountains on the one hand, and a high range dense with forests of tall thin trees on the other. But the valley itself was less Californian than any part of the country Rezanov had seen. Smooth and flat and free of undergrowth and set with at least ten thousand oaks, it looked more like a splendid English park, long preserved, than the recent haunt of naked savages. There were deer and quail in abundance, here and there an open field of grain. Long beards of pale-green moss waved from the white oaks, wild flowers, golden red and pale blue, burst underfoot. There were hedges of sweetbrier, acres of lupins, purple and yellow. Altogether the ideal estate of a nobleman; and Rezanov, who had liked nothing in California so well, gave his imagination rein and saw the counterpart of the castle of his ancestors rise in the deep shade of the trees.

Don Jose's house was a long, rambling adobe, red tiled, with many bedrooms and one immense hall. Beyond was a chapel and a dozen outbuildings. Dinner was served in patriarchal style in the hall, the comandante—or El Padrone as he was known here—and his guests at the upper end of the table; below the salt, the vaqueros, their wives and children, and the humble friar who drove them to prayer night and morning. The friar wore his brown robes, the vaqueros their black and silver and red in honor of the company, their women glaring handkerchiefs of green or red or yellow about their necks, even pinned back and front on their shapeless garments; and affording a fine vegetable garden contrast to the delicate flowerbed surrounding the padrone.

There was a racetrack on the ranch and many fine horses. After siesta the company mounted fresh steeds and rode off to applaud the feats of the vaqueros, who not content with climbing the greased pole, wrenching the head of an unfortunate rooster from his buried body as they galloped by, submitting the tail of an oiled pig in full flight to the same indignity, gave when these and other native diversions were exhausted such exhibitions of riding and racing as have never been seen out of California. As lithe as willow wands, on slender horses as graceful as themselves, they looked like meteors springing thru space, and there was no trick of the circus they did not know by instinct and translated from gymnastics into poetry. Even Rezanov shared the excitement of the shouting, clapping Californians, and Concha laughed delightedly when his cap waved with the sombreros.

"I think you will make a good Californian in time," she said as they rode homeward.

"Perhaps," said Rezanov musingly. His eyes roved over the magnificent estate and at the moment they entered a portion of it that deepened to woods, so dense was the undergrowth, so thick the oak trees. Here there was but a glimpse, now and again, of the mountains swimming in the dark blue mist of the late afternoon, the moss waved thickly from the ancient trees; over even the higher branches of many rolled a cascade of small brittle leaves, with the tempting opulence of its poisonous sap. The path was very abrupt, cut where the immense spreading trees permitted, and Rezanov and Concha had no difficulty in falling away from the chattering excited company.

"Tell me your ultimate plans, Pedro mio," said Concha softly. "You are dreaming of something this moment beyond corn and treaties."

"Do you want that final proof?" he asked, smiling. "Well, if I could not trust you that would be the end of everything, and I know that I can. I have long regarded California as an absolutely necessary field of supplies, and since I have come here I will frankly say that could I, as the representative of the czar in all this part of the world, make it practically my own, I should be content in even a permanent exile from St. Petersburg. I could attract an immense colony here and in time import libraries and works of art, laying the foundation of a great and important city on that fine site about Yerba Buena. But now that these kind people have practically adopted me I cannot repay their hospitality by any overt act of hostility. I must be content either slowly to absorb the country, in which case I shall see no great result in my lifetime, or—and for this I hope—what with the mess Bonaparte is making of Europe every state may be at the other's throat before long, including Russia and Spain. At all events, a cause for rupture would not be far to seek, and it would need no instigation of mine to dispatch a fleet to these shores. In that case I should be sent with it to take possession in the name of the czar, and to deal with these simple, kind—and inefficient people, my dear girl—as no other Russian could. They cannot hold this country. Spain could not—would not, at all events, for she has not troops enough here to protect a territory half its size—hold it against even the 'Americans,' should they in time feel strong enough to push their way across the western wilderness. It is the destiny of this charming Arcadia to disappear; and did Russia forego an opportunity to appropriate a domain that offers her literally everything except civilization, she would be unworthy of her place among nations. Moreover—a beneficent triumph impossible to us otherwise—with a powerful and flourishing colony up and down this coast, and sending breadstuffs regularly to our other possessions in these waters until the natives, immigrants and exiles were healthy vitalized beings, it would be but a question of a few years before we should force open the doors of China and Japan." He caught Concha from her horse and strained her to him in the mounting ardor of his plunge down the future. "You must resent nothing," he cried. "You must cease to be a Spanish woman when you become my wife, and help me as only you can in those inevitable years I have mapped out; and not so much for myself as for Russia. My enemies have sought to persuade three sovereigns that I am a visionary, but I have already accomplished much that met with resentment and ridicule when I broached it. And I know my powers. I tingle with the knowledge of my ability to carry to a conclusion every plan I have thought worth holding when the ardor of conception was over. I swear to you that death alone—and I believe that nothing is further aloof—shall prevent my giving this country to Russia before five years have passed, and within another brief span the trade of China and Japan. It is a glorious destiny for a man, one man—to pass into history as the Russian of his century that has done most to add to the extent and the wealth and the power of his empire. Does that sound vainglorious, and do you resent it? You must not, I tell you, you must not."

Concha had never seen him in such a mood. Altho he held her so closely that the horses were angrily biting each other, she felt that for once there was nothing personal in his ardor. His eyes were blazing, but they stared as if a great and prophetic panorama had risen in this silent wood, where the long faded moss hung as motionless as if by those quiet waters that even the most ardent must cross in time. She felt his heart beat as she had felt it before against her soft breast, but she knew that if he thought of her at all it was but as a part of himself, not as the woman he impatiently desired. But she was sensible of no restraint, either for herself or her race, which, indeed, she knew to be but a wayfarer in the wilderness engaged in a brief chimerical enterprise. For the first time she felt her individuality melt into, commingle with his; and when he lowered his gaze, still with that intensity of vision piercing the future, her own eyes reflected the impersonalities of his; and in time he saw it.

XXIV.

"We should all wear black for so mournful an occasion," said Rafaella Sal, spreading out her scarlet skirts.

"Father Abella is right. The occasion is sad enough without giving it the air of a funeral."

"Sad! Dios de mi alma! Will he return?"

Elena Castro shook her wise head. She was nearly twenty, and four years of matrimony had made her skeptical of man's capacity for romance. "Two years are long, and he will see many girls, and become one again of a life that's always more brilliant than our sun in May. His eyes will be dazzled, his mind distracted, full to the brim. To sit at table with the czar, to talk with him alone in his cabinet, to have for the asking audience of the pope of Rome and the king of Spain! Ay yi! Ay yi! Perhaps he will be made a prince when he returns to St. Petersburg and all the beautiful princesses will want to marry him. Can he remember this poor little California, and even our lovely Concha? I doubt! Valgame Dios, I doubt!"

"Concha has always been too fortunate," said Rafaella with a touch of spite, for years of waiting had tried her temper and the sun always freckled her nose. The flower of California stood on the corridor of the mission and before the church awaiting the guest of honor and his escort. A mass was to be said in behalf of the departing guests; the Juno would sail with the turn of the afternoon tide. Men and women were in their gayest finery, an exotic mass of color against the rough whitewashed walls, chattering as vivaciously as if the burden of their conversation were not regret for the chamberlain and his gay young lieutenants. Concha, alone, wore no color; her frock was white, her mantilla black. She stood somewhat apart, but altho she was pale she commanded her eyes to dwell absently on the shifting sand far down the valley, her haughty Spanish profile betraying nothing of the despair in her soul.

"Yes, Concha has always been too fortunate," repeated Rafaella. "Why should she be chosen for such destiny—to go to the Russian court and wear a train ten yards long of red velvet embroidered with gold, a white veil spangled with gold, a headdress a foot high set so thick with jewels her head will ache for a week—Madre de Dios! And we stay here forever with white walls, horsehair furniture, Baja California pearls and three silk dresses a year!"

"No one in all Russia will look so grand in court dress as our Conchita," said Elena loyally. "But I doubt if it is the dress and the state she thinks of losing today. She will not talk even to me of him—Ai yi! she grows more reserved every day, our Concha!—except to say she will wed him when he returns, and that I know, for did not I witness the betrothal? She only mocks me when I beg her to tell me if she loves him, languishes, or sings a bar of some one of our beautiful songs with ridiculous words. But she does. She did not sleep last night. Her room is next to mine. No, it is of Rezanov she thinks, and always. Those proud, silent girls, who jest when others would weep and use many words and must die without sympathy—they have tragedy in their souls, ay yi! And you think she is fortunate? True she is beautiful, she is La Favorita, she receives many boxes from Mexico, and she has won the love of this Russian. But—I have not dared to remind her—I remembered it only yesterday—she came into this world on the thirteenth of a month, and he into her life but one day before the thirteenth of another—new style! True, some might say that it was an escape, but if he came on the twelfth, it was on the thirteenth she began to love him—on the night of the ball; of that I am sure."

Rafaella shuddered and crossed herself. "Poor Concha! Perhaps in the end she will always stand apart like that. Truly she is not as others. I have always said it. Thanks be to Mary it was Luis that wooed me, not the Russian, for I might have been tempted. True his eyes are blue, and only the black could win my heart. But the court of St. Petersburg! Dios de mi vida! Did I lie awake at night and think of Concha Arguello in her velvet and jewels all over, I should hate her. But no—today—I cannot. Two years! Have I not waited six? It is eternity when one loves and is young."

"They come," said Elena.

The cavalcade was descending the sandhills on the left, Rezanov in full uniform between the comandante and Luis Arguello and followed by a picked escort of officers from Presidio and fort. The Californians wore full-dress uniform of white and scarlet, Don Jose, a blue velvet serape, embroidered in gold with the arms of Spain.

As they dismounted Rezanov bowed ceremoniously to the party on the corridor, and they returned his salutation gravely, suddenly silent. He walked directly over to Concha.

"We will go in together," he said. "It matters nothing what they think. I kneel beside no one else."

And Concha, with the air of leading an honored guest to the banquet, turned and walked with him into the dark little church.

"Why did you not wear a white mantilla?" he whispered. "I do not like that black thing."

"I am not a bride. I knew we should kneel together—it would have been ridiculous. And I could not wear a colored reboso today."

"I should have liked to fancy we were here for our nuptials. Delusions pass, but are none the less sweet for that."

They knelt at the altar, the comandante, Dona Ignacia, Luis, Santiago, Rafaella Sal and Elena Castro just behind; the rest of the party, their bright garments shimmering vaguely in the gloom, as they listed; and enough fervent prayers went up to insure the health and safety of the departing guests for all their lives.

Rezanov, who had much on his mind, stared moodily at the altar until Concha, who had bowed her head almost to her knees, finished her supplication, when their eyes turned and met simultaneously. For a moment their brains did swim in the delusion that the priest with uplifted hands pronounced benediction upon their nuptials, that probation was over and union nigh. But Father Abella dismissed all with the same blessing, and they shivered as they rose and walked slowly down the church.

Dona Ignacia took her husband's arm and, muttering that she feared a chill, hurried the others before her. The priests had gone to the sacristy. Before they reached the door Rezanov and Concha were alone.

His hands fell heavily on her shoulders.

"Concha," he said, "I shall come back if I live. I make no foolish vows, so idle between us. There is only one power that can prevent our marriage in this church not later than two years from today. And altho I am in the very fulness of my health and strength, with my work but begun, and all my happiness in the future, and even to a less sanguine man it would seem that his course had many years to run, still have I seen as much as any man of the inconsequence of life, of the insignificance of the individual, his hopes, ambitions, happiness, and even usefulness, in the complicated machinery of natural laws. It may be that I shall not come back. But I wish to take with me your promise that if I have not returned at the end of two years or you have received no reason for my detention, you will believe that I am dead. There would be but one insupportable drop in the bitterness of death, the doubt of your faith in my word and my love. Are you too much of a woman to curb your imagination in a long unbroken silence?"

"I have learned so much that one lesson more is no tax on my faith. And I no longer live in a world of little things. I promise you that I shall never falter nor doubt."

He bent his head and kissed her for the first time without passion, but solemnly, as had their nuptials indeed been accomplished, and the greater mystery of spiritual union isolated them for a moment in that twilight region where the mortal part did not enter.

As they left the church they saw that all the Indians of the Mission and neighborhood, in a gala of color, had gathered to cheer the Russians as they rode away. Concha was to return as she had come, beside the carreta of her mother, and as Rezanov mounted his horse she stood staring with unseeing eyes on the brilliant animated scene. Suddenly she heard a suppressed sob, and felt a touch on her skirt. She looked around and saw Rosa, kneeling close to the church. For a moment she continued to stare, hardly comprehending, in the intense concentration of her faculties, that tangible beings, other than herself and Rezanov, still moved on the earth. Then her mind relaxed. She was normal in a normal world once more. She stooped and patted the hands clasping her skirts.

"Poor Rosa!" she said. "Poor Rosa!"

Over the intense green of islands and hills were long banners of yellow and purple mist, where the wild flowers were lifting their heads. The whole quivering bay was as green as the land, but far away the mountains of the east were pink. Where there was a patch of verdure on the sandhills the warm golden red of the poppy flaunted in the sunshine. All nature was in gala attire like the Californians themselves, as the Juno under full sail sped thru "The Mouth of the Gulf of the Farallones." Fort San Joaquin saluted with seven guns; the Juno returned the compliment with nine. The comandante, his family and guests, stood on the hill above the fort, cheering, waving sombreros and handkerchiefs. Wind and tide carried the ship rapidly out the straits. Rezanov dropped the cocked hat he had been waving and raised his field-glasses. Concha, as ever, stood a little apart. As the ship grew smaller and the company turned toward the Presidio, she advanced to the edge of the bluff. The wind lifted her loosened mantilla, billowing it out on one side, and as she stood with her hands pressed against her heart, she might, save for her empty arms, have been the eidolon of the Madonna di San Sisto. In her eyes was the same expression of vague arrested horror as she looked out on that world of menacing imperfections the blind forces of nature and man had created; her body was instinct with the same nervous, leashed, impotent energy.

XXV

The white rain clouds, rolling as ever like a nervous intruder over the great snow peaks behind the steep hills black with forest that rose like a wall behind the little settlement of Sitka, parted for a moment and the sun, a coy disdainful guest, flung a glittering mist over what Nature had intended to be one of the most enchanting spots on earth, until, in a fit of ill temper—with one of the gods, no doubt—she gave it to Niobe as a permanent outlet for her discontent. When it does not rain at Sitka it pours, and when once in a way she draws a deep breath of respite and lifts her grand and glorious face to the sun, in pathetic gratitude for dear infrequent favor, comes a wild flurry of snow or a close white fog from the inland waters; and like a great beauty condemned to wear a veil thru life she can but stare in dumb resentment thru the folds, consoling herself with the knowledge that could the world but see it must surely worship. Perhaps, who knows? she really is a frozen goddess, condemned to the veil for infidelity to him imprisoned in the great volcano across the sound—who sends up a column of light once in a way to dazzle her shrouded eyes, and failing that batters her with rock and stone like any lover of the slums. One day he spat forth a rock like a small hill, and big enough to dominate the strip of lowland at least, standing out on the edge of the island like a guard at the gates, and never a part of the alien surface. Between this lofty rock and the forest was the walled settlement of New Archangel, that Baranhov, the dauntless, had wrested from the bloodthirsty Kolosh but a short time since and purposed to hold in the interest of the Russian-American company. His log hut, painted like the other buildings with a yellow ochre found in the soil, stood on the rock, and his glass swept the forest as often as the sea.

As Rezanov, on the second of July, thirty-one days after leaving San Francisco, sailed into the harbor with its hundred bits of volcanic woodland weeping as ever, he gave a whimsical sigh in tribute to the gay and ever-changing beauties of the southern land, but was in no mood for sentimental reminiscence. Natives, paddling eagerly out to sea in their bidarkas to be the first to bring in good news or bad, had given him a report covering the period of his absence that filled him with dismay. There had been deaths from scurvy; one of the largest ships belonging to the company had been wrecked and the entire cargo lost; of a hunting party of 300 Aleuts in 140 bidarkas, which had gone from Sitka to Kadiak in November of the preceding year, not one had arrived at its destination, and there was reason to believe that all had been drowned or massacred; and the Russians and Aleuts at Behring's bay settlement had been exterminated by one of the native tribes.

But the Juno was received with salvos of artillery from the fort, and cheered by the entire population of the settlement, crowded on the beach. Baranhov, looking like a monkey with a mummy's head in which only a pair of incomparably shrewd eyes still lived, his black wig fastened on his bald red-fringed pate with a silk handkerchief tied under his chin, stood, hands on hips, shaking with excitement and delight. The bearded long-haired priests, in full canonicals of black and gold, were beside the chief-manager, ready to escort the chamberlain to the chapel at the head of the solitary street, where the bells were pealing and a mass of thanksgiving was to be said for his safe return.

But it was some time before Rezanov could reach the chapel or even exchange salutations with Baranhov. As he stepped on shore he was surrounded, almost hustled by the shouting crowd of Russians—many of them convicts—Aleuts and Sitkans, who knelt at his feet, endeavored to kiss his hands, his garments, in their hysterical gratitude for the food he had brought them. For the first time he felt reconciled to his departure from California, and Concha's image faded as he looked at the tearful faces of the diseased, ill-nourished wretches who gave their mite of life that he might live as became a great noble of the Russian empire. But altho he tingled with pleasure and was deeply moved, he by no means swelled with vanity, for he was far too clear-sighted to doubt he had done more than his duty, or that his duty was more than begun. He made them a little speech, giving his word they should be properly fed hereafter, that he would make the improvement of their condition as well as that of all the employees of the company thruout this vast chain of settlements on the Pacific, the chief consideration of his life; and they believed him and followed him to the chapel rejoicing, reconciled for once to their lot.

After the service Rezanov went up to the hut of the chief manager, a habitation that leaked in winter and summer, and was equally deficient in light, ventilation and order. But Baranhov, in the sixteen years of his exile, had forgotten the bare lineaments of comfort, and devoted his days to advancing the interests of the company, his nights, save when sleep overcame him, to potations that would have buried an ordinary man under Alaskan snows long before. But Baranhov had fourteen years more of good service in him, and rescued the company from insolvency again and again, nor ever played into the hands of marauding foreigners; with brain on fire he was shrewder than the soberest.

He listened with deep satisfaction to the chamberlain's account of his success with the Californians and his glowing pictures of the country, nodding every few moments with emphatic approval. But as the story finished his wonderful eyes were two bubbling springs of humor, and Rezanov, who knew him well, recrossed his legs nervously.

"What is it?" he asked. "What have I done now? Remember that you have been in this business for sixteen years, and I one——"

"How many measures of corn did you say you had brought, excellency?"

"Two hundred and ninety-four," replied Rezanov proudly.

"A provision that exceeds my most sanguine hopes. The only thing that mitigates my satisfaction is that there is not a mill in the settlement to grind it."

Rezanov sprang to his feet with a violent exclamation, his face very red. There was no one whose good opinion he valued as he did that of this brilliant, dissipated, disinterested old genius; and he felt like a schoolboy. But altho he started for the door, he recovered half way, and, reseating himself, joined in the laughter of the little man who was rocking back and forth on his bench, his weazened leg clasped against his shrunken chest.

"How on earth was I to know all your domestic arrangements?" he said testily. "God knows I found them limited enough last winter, but it never occurred to me there was any mysterious process involved in converting corn into meal. Is it quite useless, then?"

"Oh, no, we can boil or roast it. It will dispose of what teeth we have left, but that will serve the good purpose of reminding us always of your excellency's interest in our welfare."

Rezanov shrugged his shoulders. "Give the corn to the natives. It is farinaceous at all events. And you can have nothing to say against the flour I have brought, and the peas, beans, tallow, butter, barley, salt and salted meats—in all to the value of twenty-four thousand Spanish dollars."

The chief manager's head nodded with the vigor and rapidity of a mechanical toy. "It is a Godsend, a Godsend. If you did no more than that you would have earned our everlasting gratitude. It will make us over, give us renewed courage in this cursed existence. Are you not going to get me out of it?"

Rezanov shook his head with a smile. "Literally you are the whole company. As long as I live here you stay—altho when I reach St. Petersburg I shall see that you receive every possible reward and honor."

Baranhov lifted his shoulders to his ears in quizzical resignation. "I suppose it matters little where the last few years left me are spent, and I can hang the medals on the walls to console me when I have the rheumatism, and shout my titles from the top of the fort when the Kolosh are yelling at the barricades."

"You must make yourself more comfortable," said Rezanov emphatically. "You are wrong to carry your honesty and enthusiasm to the point of living like the promuschleniki. Take enough of their time to build you a comfortable dwelling, and I will send you, on my own account, far more substantial rewards than orders and titles. Build a big house, for that matter. I shall be here more or less—when I am not in California." And he told Baranhov of his proposed marriage with the daughter of Don Jose Arguello.

The chief manager listened to this confidence with an even livelier satisfaction than to the list of the Juno's cargo.

"We shall have California yet," he cried, his eyes snapping like live coals under the black thatch of wig. "Absorption or the bayonet. It matters little. Ten years from now and we will have a line of settlements as far south as San Diego. My plan was to feel my way down the northern coast of California with a colony, which should buy a tract of land from the natives and engage immediately in otter hunting—somewhere between Cape Mendocino and Drake's bay. The Spanish have no settlements above San Francisco and are too weak to drive us out. They would rage and bluster and do nothing. Then quietly push forward, building forts and ships. But you have taken hold in the grand manner and will accomplish in ten years what would have taken me fifty. Marry this girl, use your advantage over the entire family—whose influence I well know—and that great personal power with which the Almighty has been so lavish, and you will have the whole weakly garrisoned country under your foot before they know where they are, and the Russian settlers pouring in. Spain cannot come to the rescue while this devil Bonaparte is alive, and he is young, and like yourself a favorite of destiny. Those damned Bostonians inherit the grabbing instincts of the too paternal race they have just rejected, but there are thousands of miles of desert between California and their own western outposts, hundreds of savage tribes to exterminate. By the time they were in a position to attempt the occupation of California we should be so securely entrenched they would either let us alone or send troops that would be half dead by the time they reached us. As to ships, we could soon build enough at Okhotsk and Petropaulovsky for our purpose. For the matter of that, if your gifted tongue impressed the czar with the riches of California there would always be war ships on her coast." He leaned forward and caught the strong shoulders above him in hands that looked like a tangle of baked nerves, and shook them vigorously. "You are a great boy!" he said with a sort of quizzical solemnity. "A great boy. This damned, God-forsaken, pestilential, demoralizing, brutalizing factory for enriching a few with the very life blood and vitals of thousands that will suffer and starve and never be heard of" (all his language cannot be recorded) "will make two or three reputations by the way. Mine will be one, altho I'll get nothing else. Shelikov is safe; but you will have a monument. Well, God bless you. I grudge you nothing. Not even the happiness you deserve and are bound to have—for when all is said and done, Rezanov, you are a lucky dog, a lucky dog! Any man may see that, even when these infernal snows have left him with but half an eye. To quarrel with a destiny like yours would be as wise as to protest because California is warm and fertile, while this infernal north is like living in a refrigerator with the deluge to vary the monotony. Now let us get drunk!"

But Rezanov laughingly extricated himself, and sending a message to Davidov and Khostov to come to him immediately, walked toward the tent he had ordered erected on the edge of the settlement; only the worst of weather drove him indoors in these half-civilized communities.

As he was passing the chapel, followed again by the employees of the company, to whom he had granted a holiday, he suddenly found his hand taken possession of, and looked up to see himself confronted by a dissipated-looking person in plain clothes. His hand became so limp that it was dropped as if it had put forth a sting, and he narrowed his eyes and demanded with a bend of his mouth that brought the blood to the face of the intruder:

"And who are you, may I ask?"

The man threw back his head defiantly. "I am Lieutenant Sookin of the imperial navy of Russia," he said in a loud defiant tone.

"And I am chamberlain of the Russian court and commander of all Ameriea," replied Rezanov coolly. "Now go to your quarters, dress yourself in your uniform, and present your report to me an hour hence."

The officer, concentrating in his injected eyes all the lively hatred and jealousy of his service for the Russian-American company in this region where it reigned supreme and cared no more for the admiralty than for some native chieftain covered with shells and war paint, glared at its plenipotentiary as if calling upon his deeper resources of insolence; but the steady contemptuous gaze of the man who had dealt with his kind often and successfully overcame his sodden spirit and he turned sulkily and slouched off to his quarters to console himself with more brandy. Rezanov shrugged his shoulders and went on to his tent.

There was no furniture in it as yet, and he was obliged to receive Davidov and Khostov standing, but this he preferred. They followed him almost immediately, apprehensive and nervous, and before speaking he looked at them for a moment with his strong penetrating gaze. He well knew the power of his own personality, and that it was immeasurably enhanced by the fact that of all with whom he had to do in these benighted regions his will alone was never weakened by liquor. These young men, clever, highbred, with an honorable record not only in Russia but in England and America, looked upon a hilarious night as the just reward of work well done by day. Brandy was debited to their account by the "bucket" (a bucket being a trifle less than two gallons), and they found little fault with life. But it gave a commanding spirit like Rezanov's an advantage which they did not underestimate for a moment; and they alternately hated and worshiped him.

"I think you have an inkling of what I am going to ask you to do." The chamberlain brought out the euphemism with the utmost suavity. "I have made up my mind not to leave the indignity to which Russia was subjected last year by Japan without such punishment as it is in my power to inflict at present. It was my intention to build a flotilla here, but owing to the diseased condition and reduced numbers of the employees, that was impossible, and I shall be obliged to content myself with the Juno and the Avos, whose keel, as you know, was laid in November, and is no doubt finished long since. These I shall fit with armaments in Okhotsk. I shall place the enterprise I have spoken of in your charge, sailing with you from Sitka five days hence. From Okhotsk I desire that you proceed to the Japanese settlements in the lower Kurile islands, take possession of them and bring all stores and as many of the inhabitants as the vessels will accommodate, to Sitka, where Baranhov will see that they are comfortably established on that large island in the harbor—which we shall call Japonsky—and converted into good servants of the company. The excuse for this enterprise is that those islands were formally taken possession of by Shelikov; and altho abandoned later, the fact remains that the Russian flag was the first to float over them. The stores captured may not be worth much and the islands are of no particular use to us, but it is wise that Japan should have a taste of Russian power; and the consequences may be salutary in more ways than one. I hope you will do me this great favor, for there is no one of your tried probity and skill to whom I can trust so delicate an enterprise. I am doing it wholly upon my own responsibility, for altho I wrote tentatively to the czar on this subject before I sailed for California, it is not yet time for a reply. However, I take the consequences upon my own shoulders. You shall not suffer in any way, for your orders are to obey mine while you remain in these waters."

He paused a moment and then suddenly smiled into the unresponsive faces before him. He held out his hand and shook their limp ones warmly.

"Let me thank you here for all your inestimable services in the past, and particularly during our late hazardous voyages. Be sure that whether you succeed in this enterprise or not, your rewards shall be no less for what you have already done. I shall make it a personal matter with the czar. You shall have promotion and a substantial increase in pay, besides the orders and imperial thanks you so richly deserve. Lest anything happen to me on my homeward journey, I shall write to St. Petersburg before I leave."

The lieutenants, overcome as ever when he chose to put forth his full powers, assured him of their fidelity and, if with misgivings, vowed to mete vengeance to the Japanese. And altho their misgivings were not unfounded, and they paid a high price in suffering and mortification, they accomplished their object and in due course received the rewards the chamberlain had promised them.

They did not retire, and Rezanov, seeing their sudden hesitation and embarrassment, felt a sudden thrill of apprehension.

"What is it?" he demanded. "What has happened?"

"Life has moved slowly in Sitka during your absence, excellency," replied Davidov. "There has been little work done on the Avos. It will not be finished for a month or six weeks."

Then, had the young man been possessed by a not infrequent mood, they would have glowed with a sense of just satisfaction. Rezanov felt himself turn so white that he wheeled about and left the tent. A month or six weeks! And the speed and safety of his journey across Siberia depended upon his making the greater part of it before the heavy autumn rains swelled the rivers and flooded the swamps. Winter or summer the journey from Okhotsk to St. Petersburg might be made in four months; with the wealth and influence at his command, possibly less; but in the deluge between he was liable to detentions lasting nearly as long again, to say nothing of illness caused by inevitable exposure. He stood staring at the palisades for many minutes. The separation must be long enough, the dangers numerous enough if he started withing the week, but at least he had in a measure accustomed himself to the idea of not seeing Concha again for "the best part of two years," and the sanguineness of his temperament had led him to hope that the time might be reduced to eighteen months. If he delayed too long, only by means of an unprecedented run of good fortune would he reach St. Petersburg but a month behind his calculations. And the chances were in favor of four, or three at the best! Never since the morning that the real nature of his feeling for Concha had declared itself had he yearned toward her as at that moment; never since the dictum of what she called their "tribunal" had he so rebelled against the long delay. And yet he hesitated. To leave Japan unpunished for the senseless humiliations to which it had subjected Russia in his person was not to be thought of, and yet did he leave without seeing the Avos finished, the two boats supplied with armaments at Okhotsk, and under way before he started across Siberia, he knew it was doubtful if the expedition took place before his return; in that case might never take place, for these two young men might have drifted elsewhere, and he knew of no one else to whom he could entrust such a commission. In spite of their idiosyncrasies he could trust them implicitly—up to a certan point. That point involved keeping them in sight until exactly the right moment and leaving nothing to their executive which could be certainly accomplished by himself alone. Did he sail five days hence on the Juno, one of the officers would be exposed for an indeterminate time to the temptations of Okhotsk, the ship, perhaps, at the mercy of some sudden requirement of the company. His authority was absolute when enforced in person, but it was a proverb west of the Ural: "God reigns and the czar is far away." If the Juno were wanted, the manager at Okhotsk would argue that two years was a period in which an ardent servant of the company could find many an excuse to justify its seizure.

And here in Sitka it was doubtful if the work on the Avos proceeded at all. Baranhov was not in sympathy with the enterprise against the Japanese, fearing the consequences to himself in the event of the czar's disapproval, and resenting the impressment of the promuschleniki into a service that deprived him of their legitimate work. Moreover, altho he loved Rezanov personally, he had enjoyed supreme power in the wilderness too long not to chafe under even the temporary assumption of authority by his hign-handed superior. With the best of intentions Davidov could make little headway against the passive resistance of the chief manager, and those intentions would be weakened by the consolations the company so generously afforded.

The result was hardly open to doubt. If he left Sitka before the completion of the Avos, Russia would go unavenged for the present. Or himself? Rezanov, sanguine and imaginative as he was, even to the point of creating premises to rhyme with ends, was very honest fundamentally. He turned abruptly on his heel, and calling to the officers that he would announce his decision on the morrow, ordered the sentry to open the gate and passed out of the enclsure.

He crossed the clearing and entered the forest. The warlike tribes themselves had trodden paths thru the dense undergrowth of young trees and ferns. Rezanov, despite Baranhov's warning, had tramped the forest many times. It was the one thing that reconciled him to Sitka, for there are few woods more beautiful. In spite or because of the incessant rains, it is pervaded by a rich golden gloom, the result of the constant rotting of the brown and yellow bark, not only on the prostrate trees, but of the many killed by crowding and unable to seek the earth with the natural instinct of death. And above, the green of hemlock and spruce was perennially fresh and young, glistening and fragrant. Here and there was a small clearing where the clans had erected their ingenious and hideous totem poles, out of place in the ancient beauty of the wood.

The ferns brushed his waist, the roar of the river came to his ears, the forest had never looked more primeval, more wooing to a man burdened with civilization, but Rezanov gave it less heed than usual, altho he had turned to it instinctively. He was occupied with a question to which nature would turn an aloof disdainful ear. Was his own wounded vanity at the root of his desire to humiliate Japan? Russia was too powerful, too occupied, for the present at least, greatly to care that her overtures and presents had been scorned. Upon her ambassador had fallen the full brunt of that wearisome and incomparably mortifying experience, and unfortunately the ambassador happened to be one of the proudest and most autocratic men in her empire. No man of Rezanov's caliber but accommodates that sort of personal vanity that tenaciously resents a blow to the pride of which it is a part, to the love of power it feeds. As well expect a lover without passion, a state without corruption. Rezanov finally shrugged his shoulders and admitted the impeachment, but at the same time he recognized that the desire for vengeance still held, and that the tenacity of his nature, a tenacity that had been no mean factor in the remodeling of himself from a voluptuous young sprig of nobility into one of the most successful business men and subjugators of other men that the Russian empire could show, was not likely to weaken when its very roots had been stiff with purpose for fifteen months. Power had been Rezanov's ruling passion for many years before he met Concha Arguello, and altho it might mate very comfortably with love, it was not to be expected that it would remain submerged beyond the first enthusiasm, nor even assume the position of the "party of the second part."

(To Be Continued.)

OVER THE WIRE.

Town Topics.

Edith—Have you demanded an apology from Harold for calling you a prevaricator?

Willie—No, but I shall—just as soon as the shiftless fellow puts in a telephone.

Hunyadi János

The Best Natural Laxative Water for sluggish bowels. Brings relief in the natural easy way.