

I knew exactly how she smiled, how she walked, with what dainty airs she turned her head to listen. I could imitate her slightest gestures, repeat her flute-like intonations, modulated like the warbling of a nightingale; I even owed to her the habit I had of passing the tip of my tongue over my upper lip. But what I could never find words to express was her turbulence of a spoiled child, the cajoling, almost familiar ways with which she glided into the heart of everyone and coolly installed herself there forever. She was a true, an exquisite Parisian, the widow of Prince Loubanoff—a widow of nineteen years, with her intact freshness of a young girl, and with eyes possessed as by an evil spirit with insatiable coquetry.

I would have given my life to kiss her hands. At home I had arrived at kneeling down to think of her. Certainly I was insane.

It was hinted that the princess was not a dragon of virtue, and ill-disposed tongues pretended that she was singularly capricious and perverse. But what could I hope from so grand a lady, I, most pitiable poet, when her beauty, her riches, her independence, drew around her a throng of the most powerful, the most illustrious adorers? It is true that since I had been presented to her, that is for six months, she had shown interest in me and never seemed annoyed to see me pale and tremble every time she spoke to me. She would allow, discreetly allow me to die of love for her, as she permitted the flowers that adorned her breast to die in exhaling their soul of perfume. That was all.

I had not yet eaten a quarter of my friend potatoes when I was obliged to pause in my repast. There was the rustle of a dress on the steps. I hid my cornucopia, and assuming the indifferent air of one who waits, I did not move. But as that rustling of silken draperies approached nearer, my heart beat more violently without any reason. A sort of instinct told me something my spirit could not know. Suddenly a radiant vision agitated my whole being; a form, a brilliance, a perfume familiar—beloved! I closed my eyes.

Then a golden voice said in my ear, "Ah, my dear poet, how delighted I am to meet you!"

I had barely time to slip my horn of friend potatoes into my coat pocket.

"Madam—I bless the chance!"

"I was thinking about you."

"Really!"

"I was going to write to you."

Unable to master my emotion I could only stammer incoherent phrases.

The princess, on the contrary, talked volubly and appeared enchanted with the meeting.

"They have sent me a Muscovite romance. I am enthusiastic over the music. You know Russian. I have counted on you to translate the words."

"I am at your service."

"Come quick; I will take you."

I opened my eyes very wide. "You will take me?"

The princess had drawn me to her carriage. She sprang lightly in, and making a place for me, "Come, get in," said she.

I was astounded. And thinking of what was in my coat pocket, "Oh, no, madam, I cannot—"

"Why not?"

"I did not expect—"

"How boyish you are!" she said, smiling. "Get in; I command you."

It was necessary to obey. An instant after I felt myself borne rapidly along. I was dizzy. My emotion was so great that I could not breathe. The princess doubtless perceived this, for again I saw her smile. Wishing to increase my confusion she leaned toward me.

"You were waiting for me just now?" she asked sweetly.

"Oh, no, madam, I swear to you—"

"Then what were you doing on the steps of the Baron de Lucques?"

What answer could be given? Could I own that I had taken refuge there to eat my fried potatoes? I blushed furiously without being able to think of the smallest fib, and the princess could only conclude that I had followed and waited for her. It did not appear to displease her, for she presently began again:

"Do you know it, sir, that I have great compliments to pay you? I have read all your poems, all, and I have found them very beautiful."

"Ah, madam, is it true?"

"Really, they have touched me. You will publish them?"

"Never."

"What, never? You will conceal them from the public."

"It is enough for me that you have read them."

"That is almost a declaration, sir," she cried; "your poems are all of love!"

I remained voiceless, but my eyes were so eloquent all that the princess had to lower hers.

"Ah, sir poets," she resumed, "what beautiful loves you have in your heads!"

"In our heads!" I cried. "Ah, madam, be persuaded that one never talks well of love except from his heart, and if I were a woman it seems to me that I could not be deceived."

The subject of conversation was not of a nature to make me find the time long. We reached the avenue d'Eylau as by enchantment. The carriage entered the courtyard and I helped the princess to leave it. I kept her little hand in mine as we went up the stairs, a vast staircase, mysterious like a temple, and covered with carpet where our footsteps made no sound. We had talked of nothing but love, and I was so full of my subject, I expressed myself with so much warmth, that a sweet intimacy was not slow to establish itself between us. We had ascended a dozen steps and found ourselves under the light of the candelabra when the young lady stopped.

"Then," she said in a low voice, "you, too, you love me?"

"That love is all my life, madam!"

"It is easy to say that one loves—but, the proof?"

"The proof?"

I still held the hand of the princess, who looked into my eyes as if to read my soul.

"Yes," she repeated, "the proof."

Had I the time to improvise an ardent plea, to tell her all I felt, to multiply words? It was impossible. I was wildly excited, a brilliant idea crossed my mind. And then her eyes were so alluring! Yielding to the irresistible temptation I caught her in my arms, and, for an instant, my lips sought hers.

At last they met! Oh, that was a kiss of despair; a supreme kiss wherein I seemed to lose my life! It was no longer the princess palpitating in my strong arms, but the beloved woman who thrilled at my touch and whose soul I drank. I do not know how long it lasted; we whirled upon the steps.

Then I saw the princess clinging to the gilded railing, very pale, her eyes closed. She held one hand on her breast and seemed no longer to breathe. As for me, I trembled like a criminal. When she opened her eyes she frowned at first, then her face softened and I saw that she tried to smile.

"You use singular arguments," she said in a light tone, from which it was impossible to divine what was passing in her mind.

At this moment we heard the sound of a door some one opened. The princess' waiting-maid came to tell her mistress that many callers waited her.

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