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# THE ACE OF CLUBS.

A ROMANCE OF RUSSIA AND SIBERIA.

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## CHAPTER II.

Alexander Wernin was 60 years old. He was a senator, Counselor of State and a knight of many orders. He had an income of 100,000 rubles a year and only one daughter, the fair Jana, who was to inherit his whole fortune.

Wernin was a favorite. Court and devoted heart and soul to the Emperor. In every reform or innovation he saw revolutionary tendencies and believed firmly that since the French Revolution of 1789 the reign of the Antichrist had begun. His respect for the hierarchy of the civil service was very extraordinary, subordination and etiquette were to him Christian virtues. As soon as he saw a Privy Councillor he rose; a General he accompanied bareheaded to his carriage in the bitterest cold, and always bared his head when any one uttered the name of the Czar in his presence. He required, however, something like it from his inferiors, also, for himself; he called every inferior officer by his Christian name and only became respectful with Privy Councillors. He often repeated the words: "In my eyes no one is anybody who is not a Counselor of State or a Colonel."

The only exception he made was in behalf of the surroundings of the Czar. Whenever he appeared at Court—and this occurred quite often—he bowed even to the lackeys who wore the imperial livery. In spite of these eccentricities Alexander Wernin was one of the best men in the world, courageous, noble, ever ready to help others and benevolent. He won the love and esteem of all who came in close contact with him.

Jana, his only daughter, whom he loved with his whole heart, was in every sense of the word a spoiled child, and the enormous fortune of her father enabled her to gratify every whim. Gradually she came to tyrannize over him entirely; he never ventured to check her in her caprices and he trembled at a look from her. Jana did not look at all like a fair daughter of the North. In her dark eyes, overshadowed by heavy, black brows, every moment flashes of impatience or wrath would shine forth; her gestures were quick, passionate, full of life and energy. Her beauty was enchanting, and everybody soon recognized in her the omnipotent woman, before whom all in the house knelt down. And Jana was, by nature, not bad at all; there was nothing devilish in her eyes as in those of George Sand's heroines; when she was at rest her features reflected the satisfaction of a Queen whose every wish is silently fulfilled by her subjects. Wrath was not infrequent, but it was short-lived. Her heart was good and her joy greatest when she could make others happy. Unhappily, she, the object of continuous policy, became so proud that when she conferred a benefit she felt that her presence

Christian name, "you are in love with me, are you not?"

The young man blushed, then turned pale, and was barely able to fold his hands as if in silent prayer.

"I love you also," continued Jana, and her voice, which was generally icy cold, became of a sudden soft and gentle. "Will you make me your wife?"

Count Lanin fell on his knees overwhelmed by his unexpected good fortune, kissed the hem of her dress and was so rejoiced and so deeply moved that the haughty beauty did not repeat having given him such vigorous encouragement.

The next day Jana informed her father of her engagement. The Councillor was unable to oppose any wish of his daughter, and moreover, Lanin possessed all that could be desired in a son-in-law and was certainly an excellent match. Alexander Wernin gave his consent most willingly.

As Jana knew only one will and that her own, and as she never liked to wait, she determined to have the wedding at once. Wernin knew no difficulties and no impediments when his daughter's wish was made known to him, and he turned everything upside down in the house in preparation for the wedding on the following Sunday.

On Tuesday Lanin was already busy sending out invitations, which he did very methodically, having gone through all the cards of friends and acquaintances, selecting those to be favored and now appending their names to engraved invitations. Lanin paused for a moment in this occupation. Examining one card which evidently caused him great surprise, he read it once more, laughed aloud and asked, showing it to his betrothed:

"Who might this be?"

Jana raised her eyes and said smiling:

"I must see the name; I cannot read it from here."

"Onophri Schelm, Privy Councillor, Head of Division in the Ministry of the Interior, Knight of the Order of St. Stanislas, I. Class of the Order of St. Ann, &c., President of the Society for the Protection of Animals, &c., Caravan street, 35."

Jana laughed aloud.

"He is one of my adorers, who last Saturday asked my hand through the agency of a very high personage. When father brought me his card he said very solemnly: 'This is a man recommended to us from high places; and if Lanin did not have our word he would not be a man to be despised. At all events, we must be careful not to offend him and I shall at once go to the Minister and tell him that Mr. Schelm came too late. Monday I shall call on Mr. Schelm himself.'"

"Do you know this admirer?" asked Lanin.

"I never saw him," answered Jana. "To tease father, I asked him if my unknown worshipper was handsome and young. 'He is not 40 yet,' was the answer, and has already secured a high position; he looks very well, too, when he puts on all his order and decorations. To punish father for saying this, I forbade his going to the Minister, and told him to use nothing but empty excuses. He wanted to make excuses," continued Jana, laughing merrily. "but I did not let him get his breath, so that, to this day, he has no idea what sort of a man he is or how I care in the least."

"What a student who had that died law. He was an excellent sort of man. Perhaps it is a good thing that he died."

"What a man!" repeated Lanin.

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Lanin was hesitating, but Jana frowned and he quickly did as he was bid.

"What is now to be done with his visiting card?" he asked, after having copied it exactly.

"Throw it into the fire," she said eagerly, "even his memory shall perish. A man whom I never saw in all my life, who did not even condescend to appear in person as a suitor for my hand, he dared to ask my hand. I have indeed a right to be angry!"

Lanin tossed the card into the fire and rang a bell.

"Now I have done with the first list of invitations," he said, turning to Jana, "may I send them off at once?"

Jana consented, and the Count handed to the servant a pile of letters to be carried to the Post Office; then he sat down near Jana and looked enraptured into her eyes.

"When I see, my love," he said in a whisper, "how you treat other mortals, I wonder and rejoice at my own great good fortune. I love you, not merely because you are delightfully enchanting, witty, wise, and fair, but also because you are conscious of yourself and respect yourself."

She pressed his hand.

"I seem cold to you, perhaps, Vladimir, but believe me, I can love! Hear in mind, my darling, all my life I have been spoiled and flattered. Thus I probably overestimate myself; but, at all events, I demand to be loved passionately, alone and above all others. For him who loves me thus—and you, Vladimir, I think, are capable of doing so—for him I am ready to make every sacrifice and to surrender everything. It is not difficult to love, surrounded with almost regal luxury as we are, but I sometimes feel as if I wish my dream was fulfilled!"

"What dream, dear heart?" asked Lanin.

"I sometimes see you, in my dreams, alone, forsaken and unhappy. I see you in a far-off country, in a hut, hopeless and almost despairing. I step into the poor, wretched hut, but not in rich dresses and full of joy, not, as now surrounded by flatterers and admirers, but fatigued by a long journey and in rage. And yet I am fair and you love me still. You were despairing mainly because you thought you would never see me again. My presence makes the hut look beautiful to your eyes; I bring you new hope, happiness, the best consolation, and I am myself happy. Oh, so happy!"

Lanin fell on his knees before her and covered her snow-white hand with ardent kisses. Tears were in his eyes as he cried: "Jana, do not say such things or you will drive me mad with sheer happiness. I could almost wish to be unhappy, to find you near me, to live for you and in you, and then to die at your feet, but I cannot imagine your living in such a condition. Luckily, it is all a dream," he added, smiling, "an idle dream, that can never be realized, for if you should ever follow me to foreign lands it could only be to Paris or London when I am appointed Secretary of Legation!"

At this moment the doors opened and Wernin entered, dressed in his gala uniform and covered with stars and orders. He shook hands with Lanin, kissed his daughter and said:

"Your obedient father reminds you that this is the last of the three days during which your last admirer was not to be mentioned, and I was forbidden to make my excuses to the Minister. You see how your slave obeys you, but longer I dare not wait!"

"Dear father," replied Jana, "do what you like, I set you free. So that was the Minister of the Interior? Count Perowski was kind enough to be interested in my fate. I am exceedingly obliged to him!"

You are forever jesting child, because you do not know what life is. You do not know what trifles may suddenly become of the utmost importance. People who hold the rudder must never be offended!"

Jana interrupted him: "You can take my excuses, too, when you call on the Count and on Schelm: I have just played a good trick on the head of the division!"

Old Wernin was almost beside himself.

"You are not in earnest, I hope, when you say that. You surely were not childish enough to offend a man who has never done you any harm?"

"That frivolity that would be!"

"He has done me no harm, you say, father?"

"A man who dares ask for my hand through his Minister, without knowing me, without ever having entered our house?"

"What a man!" repeated Lanin.

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Who does he think I am? Dear father, you almost make me angry."

"For four years Mr. Schelm has been at every ball given in our house and two years ago he hinted at his intentions, although so obscurely that I took it but for general politeness."

"Then, I suppose, he belongs to the ugly old men who play whist during the ball or watch our dancing from afar off. Al! the greater is his guilt."

"He is neither very old nor very ugly. The Minister was kind enough to come in person and solicit your hand. I was not at home. To-day I shall explain the matter, and I beg you will not cause me any new anxiety with your frivolity."

"But, dear father," said Jana laughing heartily, "I did not dream of jesting with you. In answer to his demand for my hand I have sent Mr. Schelm an invitation to my wedding, giving him carefully all the titles on his ridiculous card."

"Did she really do that?" asked Councillor Wernin.

"Certainly, Councillor," replied Lanin, smiling, "and we have actually committed that crime."

Old Wernin turned very pale.

"Foolish, impudent children!" he exclaimed. "Do you know who that man Schelm is? Do you know that from his office in the Ministry of the Interior he disposes of our fortunes and our lives? Do you know that he decides questions which we dare not allude to in conversation? You all tremble when you hear the head of the gendarmes mentioned. Well, Schelm is a hundred times more dangerous than Count Orloff. Do your duty to the Czar and to Russia, and you need not fear the high officials. But tremble when those subordinate people approach you who have such formidable powers in their hands; tremble when you hear their names mentioned! This man Schelm disposes of an equal power with the head of the gendarmes, but it is hidden, mysterious, and he is capable of using his power readily to gratify his ambition and his revenge. You laugh! I tell you, if you have wounded his self-love, we are lost! No money, no influence, can save us from ruin!"

Jana did not mind her father's ominous forebodings in the least.

"He must be a Chamberlain," she said, ironically, "or you would not esteem him so highly. How is it that this title is not on his card?"

Perhaps for the first time in his life the old man cast a stern look at his daughter.

"My child," he said very seriously, "your jests are out of place here. Now Schelm is not a Chamberlain; he does not even hold a high place, but his power is great. I am not a Liberal, and I do not despise the men who are necessary in order to watch over the life of his Majesty and who honorably do their duty. I know Schelm too little to say what sort of a man he is, but his hatred fills me with apprehension for you, my child, my dearest Jana—here the poor old man's eyes filled with tears and he pressed his daughter to his breast. "I tremble for you, Vladimir, and for my own child."

The young diplomat, who had silently listened to the old man's words, looked proudly up and said:

"Fear not, Councillor, for us! My life is blameless. I am loyal to my Emperor and always shall be. I fear nothing, but against vile calumny the influence of my uncle, the Adjutant of his Majesty the Emperor, will protect me."

"And if he were the Adjutant of St. Nicholas himself he could not protect you against Schelm's denunciation! Do you hear that, young Hotspur?"

Never had the Councillor shown such excitement—never had he uttered the names of the Emperor and of St. Nicholas in such a way. Jana became at last aware that her ill-timed jest might find result in evil consequences, and as in the depths of her heart she loved her father dearly, she stepped up to him, kissed him tenderly and said:

"Be calm, I beseech you, dear father! If this Mr. Schelm holds such a high position he cannot be a fool. He must see the real meaning of our invitation and look upon it as a poor joke."

"Schelm is a vain, ugly and malicious man," replied Wernin, "forgetting what he had just said. 'He makes all the greater pretensions because he feels how little he deserves them. Perhaps it would be better for you if you had conspired against the Czar, than to indulge in such a dangerous jest. But this is no time for complaints—"