

"And the bees will no longer contend for the possession of my lovely rose," replied Cyrill; and with an affectionate farewell he took his leave of the young man.

As Werner passed in front of the porter's lodge he caught a glimpse of a female form which rose suddenly from the window and drew back into the obscurity of the chamber. Was that not the form of Eurikleia? And why did she strive to hide herself from him? Much disquieted and perplexed in mind the youth returned to the dining hall. He almost repented of having given the promise which the Abbot with his persuasive eloquence and paternal interest had so easily and, as he now said to himself, in an ebullition of youthful, inconsiderate weakness, succeeded in obtaining from him.

VII.

THE shades of evening had gathered round the convent, and soon a deep solemn silence prevailed in the court-yards and cloisters. Nothing broke the calm of the mountain solitude but the noisy revelry of the hunting party in their night quarters in the dining hall. Lights were still burning in the porter's lodge and through the little windows the women could be seen actively engaged in making preparations for the morrow. Provisions were being cooked, rice was being washed, and fowls plucked and made ready for the spit, while the hot and steaming loaves, of which Sebastianus had ordered an extra number to be baked, were ranged in rows and piled one upon the other on the dressers and tables, and a plentiful supply of the light wine of the convent was stowed away in stone jars or portly looking wine flasks. Old Kloantza, with that cowed look upon her face which seems natural to the Bulgarian peasant, her bent figure and her crawling gait, her wrinkled, sunburnt face and red, bleared eyes, looked, as she moved slowly to and fro in the narrow little room, like some old witch or sorceress of the Danube legends. She muttered incoherent words to herself, as the aged are wont to do, as she went up and down occupied with her household duties, and the flickering, unsteady light cast her shadow on the whitewashed wall in weird and grotesque forms. In cross and cankered tones she ceased not to find fault with her bustling handmaid, the Roumanian Floriana, who although no longer young, was by no means withered or ill-looking, but still bore traces of youthful beauty. Eurikleia, who had recovered from her swoon, and looked none the worse for her mishap, beyond being a trifle pale, which rather added to than diminished her charms, was busily helping her hostess. But her thoughts were far away. A tumult of feeling was within her breast. She felt as if she had been living since yesterday in a dream. She was no longer the courageous maiden who, with a fearless disregard of all danger, had bravely confronted the Turkish soldier and done battle for her honour and her freedom. She was no longer the same being since she had felt the kiss of the handsome young Frank upon her lips and under the influence of uncontrollable emotion, had returned it. She had to close her eyes for very shame when she thought of it, and at times a vague terror came over her, and she trembled, she who had never yet known fear, before the sense of an overpowering danger which threatened her.

A passionate, irresistible outgoing of her whole nature had drawn her towards Werner, so soon as she found in this unknown the helper, the protector she had expected so long, a man who, without thinking of himself, had bravely faced danger for her, one who, with the knightly spirit of another clime and of another age, had espoused the cause of a defenceless maiden. She had hoped this from Ilia when she promised to become his bride. She had promised Ilia to become his under a condition, and this condition Ilia, in the joy and rapture of successful love, had unhesitatingly agreed to, and as soon as they were married they were to depart from this land to another beyond the Danube, a land in which no Turks dwell. He was ready to promise this and much more. Everything which she asked from him. Good Ilia! He little suspected the feelings he excited in the young girl's heart when, in hesitating accents, and with all the timidity of the shrinking Bulgarian nature, he explained to her that in this land lay his possessions, in this land he must live as his fathers before him had done. In vain Eurikleia strove to bring him back to other and more manly resolutions. Every time that she had broached the subject, he had suffered his head to sink upon his breast, and answered in a half-audible voice that what was impossible could never become possible and that Eurikleia must yield to the inevitable as he himself had been compelled to do. Once again as they spoke together in the house of Popovich of the dangers which threatened their love from the orders of the Pasha, Eurikleia had urged him to become a man, to put an end to these humiliating and dishonouring terrors and to flee with her. And when, even then, he answered as he had done before, then all the pent-up feelings of her heart burst their bonds and she broke forth against him in passionate and scornful upbraidings. She told him that the man who could not or would not defend his betrothed bride against the insults of a Turkish gendarme was not worthy of her. The man, was a base coward who was not ready to leave everything, to dare everything, to save his betrothed from such dangers. And then, all of a sudden, Werner had appeared and told her and Ilia that he would protect and defend them at whatever risk to himself. She had reached him her hand and she still felt the pressure of his kiss! Such an one should he be, so should he think and act, to whom Eurikleia was prepared to give her heart for ever. And yet she had seen Ilia step up to her, push the stranger aside with angry gesture, felt him raise her from the ground and heard him declare resolutely that he would defend her, and that Eurikleia was his bride and belonged to him alone. And then a thrill had gone through her heart and the blood coursed like liquid fire through her veins. Then a voice seemed to say reproachfully to her: "Thou hast misjudged Ilia, thou hast treated him badly. For a stranger, an unknown who will, perhaps, betray and abandon thee

to-morrow, thou art willing and ready to betray and abandon thy bridegroom, the friend of thy youth!"

Such was the current of her thoughts this evening as she busied herself along with Kloantza and Floriana about the preparations of to-morrow. She listened in silence to the easy chatter of the Roumanian, and the songs which, from time to time she sang at the full pitch of her clear and ringing voice, neither did she heed the sly allusions which Floriana, womanlike, failed not to make to the peculiar circumstances of her arrival at the monastery, the persecutions of the Pasha, and her too evident inclination for the handsome young stranger.

It was growing late when the door turned upon its creaking hinges and old Sebastianus entered.

"Wilt thou never have done singing?" he called in cross, bullying tones to the Wallachian while he pushed the heavy wooden bolt into its place. "Dost thou know that evening bell has rung? One would think that thou wast trying to attract suitors to thy window with that stupid singing of thine. Outside there, the foolish Bulgarian bridegroom is sitting on the stones. A pretty fellow, truly. I wish the girl joy who lets Ilia Michalovitch lead her home as a wife. He is brooding over the courage which he lacks. They are dogs, these Michalovitchs. Cowardice runs in their blood. My father could have told something about that, if they had not shot him dead, like so many assassins, hidden behind a hedge. It is there that these people are courageous. Come now," he roared, turning to old Kloantza, "what art thou still doing here? Give me a glass of arrack and then get to bed. Thou wilt have to be a-foot to-morrow before sunrise." And as he slowly sipped his arrack he related how he had got everything ready for to-morrow's hunt: the peasants had been directed to take post behind the convent, and then, spreading themselves out in a wide half-circle, drive the game towards the mountains, and each hunter had his place assigned him.

"And where have you stationed the handsome young stranger, the friend of the Greek?" asked Floriana curiously and femininely, and with a roguish twinkle in her eyes at the same time.

"Why, dost thou want to make up to him, Floriana?" said the old man, as he pinched her cheek with a clumsy attempt at gallantry. "He is placed at the very end of the line of hunters, at the corner just up there on the big rock yonder. If thou wilt speak with him, Floriana, thou wilt find him there, if the little Greek there, who is looking so sharply at me, does not scratch thine eyes out for thee."

And, so saying, he made a pretence of passing his arm round Eurikleia's waist. But the Greek evaded his embrace, and laughing and chattering good humouredly he disappeared along with Kloantza in the room behind, whilst Floriana sought her bed in the garret upstairs, and Eurikleia lay down to rest upon the coverlet spread for her upon the floor. After a short quarter of an hour all was still in the porter's lodge; nothing but the heavy breathing of the sleepers broke the silence of the night. Then Eurikleia rose quietly from her couch, pushed back the bolt softly and stepped forth into the open air. A dark form rose from the pile of stones lying in front of Sebastianus' door. "Ilia," whispered Eurikleia.

"I was waiting for thee," answered the Bulgarian, and his voice was strangely firm and resolute in the calm, quiet night.

"Poor Ilia! I was seeking for thee. I had to speak with thee. But what art thou doing here with a gun in thine hand?"

"Am I not thy bridegroom, Eurikleia? I am here to guard this threshold."

"I did thee injustice, Ilia. Thou hast both courage and strength, wilt thou pardon me?"

With a quick and vigorous arm Ilia drew his bride towards him and pressed her to his breast.

"I am ready," he said in a resolute tone, "wilt thou flee with me?"

With a half suppressed cry of joy Eurikleia broke from his embrace, "Now? Immediately?"

"No;" answered Ilia slowly and speaking in a grave and measured tone of voice, "not immediately, not to-night, but to-morrow," and his hand grasped tightly the gun, a long double-barrel. "I am going to hunt like the others. My friend, Stefanus, who lives yonder behind the monastery, has lent me his gun. I must also shoot something, Eurikleia, so that we may be able to live for the first few days over yonder, in the big city beyond the Danube, for as a poor man Ilia goes forth with Eurikleia."

He broke off suddenly, and leading Eurikleia back to the door he added. "We have no time, Eurikleia—but to-morrow after the hunt we will leave."

"But the Turk?" Ilia made no reply.

"But Demir Keran?"

Ilia was silent a moment, then he squeezed her hand in token of farewell, and said in a low tone:

"Let me care for that. Demir Keran will allow it. To-morrow we leave this land. Good night!"

He lingered as if irresolute upon the last step. His fingers still played about the barrels of the gun. Then looking steadily into the eyes of his bride: "Eurikleia," continued he, "Eurikleia, dream of no other to-night, but him who to-morrow shall lead thee away as his bride."

Again he broke off. Once more his fingers caressed the gun, and he added slowly, averting his face from Eurikleia:

"It is a double-barrel which Stefanus has lent me."

He gently pushed the Greek within the house, listened until the bolt was thrust into its place, and then sat down again upon the heap of stones, the gun between his knees.

(To be continued.)