

The Clasp of Fire.

BY CARRIE E. GARRETT.



TWO men sat in the splendid library of the Orloff Palace, discussing with terrible solemnity certain papers which lay on a table before them. The pallor of their faces, their whispered talk, and the fact that the doors had been locked and the curtains closely drawn — all seemed to have deep significance in that troubled period when treason was rife in the empire, and the crown trembled between the contending claims of the Emperor and the Pretender.

Prince Boris, the older man, sat in the shadow, and the uncertain flashes of firelight revealed his face against the background of a purple curtain as pallid, withered, and with a certain malice twinkling in his rat-like black eyes. Age spoke eloquently in obesity, puffy eyelids, and leathery cheek, but he wore the gorgeous clothing of a young exquisite of that period, and his small rotund person sparkled with splendid jewels.

The face of the other man, Prince Orloff, was pale, earnest, resolute — in striking contrast to the mocking countenance of his companion. If these two men were leagued together in any undertaking, one instinctively felt that their motives were widely different. The one might be moved by a noble zeal for what he believed to be the right, but the other's impulse was almost certain to be one of private greed.

In another section of the library, but securely screened from this room, the Princess Helene sat languidly dictating letters to her secretary, Valdor. Her jeweler received orders for the resetting of certain pearls, her costumer for the creation of a robe of maize velvet, and numerous business, social, and even amorous communications were answered with a comprehensive brevity rare in a woman. The secretary wrote rapidly in a singular small, slanting hand, did not lift his eyes from the paper even during

pauses, and seemed unaware that the eyes of the princess were resting upon his face with a certain condescending admiration. His profile was noble, fine, severe. He had the creamy olive complexion of the Castilian, intensely dark eyes, and his hair and full beard were of a peculiar brownish gold color.

He was a newcomer in the Orloff household, and very little was known concerning his history. He had by an act of great daring saved the princess from being dragged to death by a runaway horse. He seemed needy, and much gold was offered him, but he firmly refused it, whereupon the princess imperiously ordered him to name some reward which he would accept. The result of all this was that he was employed as her highness' secretary — a degree higher in the social scale of the palace than the footmen, a little lower, perhaps, than the princess' confidential maid.

That she, a daughter of the house of Orloff, a Boyar, the names of whose ancestors were written in the Velvet Book — that she could feel the faintest ripple of personal interest in such a man — a menial in her household — would never have occurred to the Princess Helene. She scattered favors with a free and royal hand, but her inferiors must never forget for an instant the immeasurable distance between her and themselves. She approved the rare personal graces of her secretary in much the same fashion that a king might have remarked with pleasure a fine blush on the cheek of a scullery maid. She admired him as though he had been a handsome horse or dog. She would have laughed at the suggestion that there could be any danger in her giving free reign to such admiration.

Besides, the princess had been a very ice queen in her impassivity. Ambition was confessedly her only passion, and in the affairs of the heart she laughed at her facile victories and was merciless to the vanquished. She knew the power of her beauty — that strange dazzling fairness which is so potent to sway the passions of men, and she used it ruthlessly when it pleased her to do so, but she had that rare thing at twenty — a heart yet un-stirred. She had felt transient ripples of emotion in her early girlhood, had cherished some romantic dreams and fancies, but now she was a woman and regarded herself as cured of the petty follies of youth, of which she regarded love as the chiefest. She despised it as the plaything of fools, and gloried in her freedom

from its dominion. She was intensely proud, vain, and ambitious. Her life had been cloudless, brilliant, victorious, and she was a stranger to suffering. She had received everything and given nothing.

The guileless Lady Sophie, who was fathoms deep in love with a dashing officer in the Imperial Guards, wondered in her soul why her cousin Helene should be betrothed to such an ugly, withered, malicious old man as Prince Boris. One day she hinted as much to the princess, timidly, for it seemed very presumptuous for her to question the wisdom of so brilliant and wonderful a personage as Helene. The princess only laughed indulgently.

"The prince has certain great virtues," she said. "He has unbounded influence in the empire; he is fabulously rich and can give me a position second only to that of an empress. What more can a woman ask?"

"But — but, your happiness, *love* —" faltered the Lady Sophie, all her ideals trembling at such shocking heresy.

"Happiness is a fable," the princess said with disdain. "As for love, I know nothing of it. It seems to have power over the hearts of most women, but I have never felt it."

"Helene," said the Lady Sophie solemnly, with the prescience of experience, "some day you will love — *terribly*."

Prince Boris, conscious that he had no graces of mind or person wherewith to charm his betrothed bride, sought to dazzle her with jewels. Sparkling diamonds and ropes of pearls he laid at the feet of the princess, in acknowledgment of which she flung him an occasional gracious speech or rare smile. She knew how to make her favors precious to her lovers.

To-day he brought her a curious golden clasp so thickly set with fine rubies that it seemed to burn like a coal of fire as it lay in her small white hand.

"There is only one other like it," the prince said, "and that is among the crown jewels. His highness allowed me to have it copied before he left to go on that strange expedition into the Caucasus. He regards it as a talisman and always carries it about his person. It is known as the 'Clasp of Fire.'"

"I am delighted with it," the princess said, "both on account of its beauty and its history. I thank you, prince."

He bent low over her hand and kissed it lingeringly, for it was rare that he received even such small crumbs of favor. He wished very much to talk to her at this propitious moment, and looked impatiently at the secretary. As it happened, he had never before seen this recent appendage to the household, and he shot a keen glance at the handsome head of the stranger whose back was turned to him.

"Send the fellow away, my princess," he said in an audible whisper, bending over her.

The princess started, an angry blush burned in her cheek, and she looked quickly at the secretary, but his face was calm, impassive, bent over the papers on the desk before him. The only reply she gave her lover was a haughty shake of her head. At this moment the secretary arose with averted face.

"Will madam excuse me?" he asked quietly.

"No," she replied coolly; "there are more letters."

The secretary resumed his place and the prince turned away, a white rage creeping over his features.

"Will you ride with me to-day?" he asked in a quivering voice, controlling his anger.

"Not to-day, prince," was the reply in an indescribable tone of cool negligence.

The white wrath in his face changed to a violent crimson, he drew himself up as tall as nature would allow him, and walked out of the room with the swelled strut of an enraged turkey cock.

The princess leaned back in her chair and smiled with conscious power — with the tolerance with which one might regard the useless anger of a punished child. She was accustomed to lashing her lovers into a rage as a salutary measure. She was like a lovely and mischievous child with that faint sparkle of malicious laughter in her eyes, the color on her cheek just dying off to a pale blush.

Glancing toward the secretary, she saw that he was regarding her with a strange, melancholy gaze. It was so prolonged and steady that unconsciously her face burned under it and her lashes drooped to hide a certain faltering of her eyes which were usually so tranquil. In an instant, however, those eyes were flashing with anger.

"You forget yourself, M. Valdor," she said in a tone of haughty rebuke.

"Pardon, noble princess," he said, and his tone was rather that of a courtier than an inferior. "Yours would seem to be a radiant destiny, and yet — I was wondering whether you are — happy."

She looked at him in complete astonishment. That her secretary — a servant in her house — should presume to discuss her happiness, her destiny!

An indefinable change had come over the face of the secretary. There seemed to be a newly found dignity and power in his presence which she felt uneasily but could not understand. The eyes bent upon her — stern yet tender — seemed to control her as though by a spell and to still upon her lips the angry words she was about to utter. She shook off this feeling, however, and rose from her seat.

"Enough," she said with authority, though her voice trembled slightly. "You saved my life and I am not ungrateful, but you must know that I never permit liberties from any one."

The secretary rose also and bowed profoundly, yet did not quail at her rebuke.

"If your highness is ever so slightly in my debt for that service," he said gravely, "grant me this recompense. Permit me to read your horoscope — not in the signs of the zodiac, but in that open page where the soul's ideals are written. Even through the glamour of matchless beauty one may read in the face of the Princess Helene the signs of exalted pride and boundless ambition — the signs of a restless spirit yet unsubdued by pain or love."

The princess, listening against her will, her dignity outraged, trembled and stood at bay. She shrank, half scared, and a wave of color swept over her face as the secretary bent nearer, his eyes dangerously tender and his voice low and impassioned.

"Your destiny is love," he whispered. "Your ambitions will be as so many lifeless stones in your path. As love only can make you happy, so love only can make you wise or good."

"And where did you learn all this, most wise seer?" she asked, with an effort to shake off the lethargy which seemed to be creeping over her.

"It is written in your face," he said, "which is beautiful but cold. Your soul is asleep, Princess Helene. Who shall awaken it?"

How did it happen? Who can tell? Not a word more was spoken, but the small, soft hand of Princess Helene, blazing with the jewels of Prince Boris, the hand of a Boyar, whose name was written in the Velvet Book—the hand that disdained love and craved only power, lay unresistingly in the firm clasp of the secretary.

"You love me?" he whispered. And compellingly he drew her close into his arms and kissed her.

At this the spell was suddenly and violently broken. Whatever subtle and powerful means he had used to subdue the princess to his will, the touch of the first lover's kiss upon her lips aroused with a quick shock all her sleeping energies. Her senses awoke with a keen realization of her mad folly and of the utter and amazing audacity of the man who had dared for a moment to forget who she was. Despising herself for her weakness, her anger burned the more hotly toward her tempter.

"Insolent!" she stammered in a voice hoarse with excitement, and she struck him from her with a passionate gesture. "Slave! Dog! I will have you whipped!"

She broke out sobbing in her terrible anger, the kiss burned upon her lips, and she writhed at the ineffaceable disgrace of it.

"Why do you torture yourself?" the secretary asked compassionately, as if to a wayward child. "You love at last. Yield yourself to it and you will be happier than you can dream."

Maddened at his cool insolence, she sprang toward the door, but he had anticipated this movement and placed himself where he could prevent her leaving the room. Her first impulse was to scream, but her pride shrunk from making a scene which might involve an exposure of her own folly. So she stood irresolute—flushed, trembling, and more beautiful than ever.

"You shall suffer for this outrage," she cried in a stifled voice.

"You also will suffer," he said with some sadness. "When the time comes, remember I would have spared you a part of your punishment, but you have chosen to defy me. Farewell, Princess Helene. No, give me your hand. I will have it! It is useless to resist!"

But she did resist with all her strength, her eyes blazing and her cheeks burning like an insulted queen.

"Very well," he said with cool determination. "You will not give me your hand. I will *take* a better adieu!"

He caught her in his arms and held her firmly for an instant, smiling at her useless resistance. "My beautiful rebel!" he exclaimed. "Must I punish you too?" By some wild impulse which she could not resist, she yielded to him for an instant; then wrenching herself from him she screamed for help.

In an instant startled voices were heard in the corridor, the door was flung violently open, and Prince Boris entered the room with hurried alarm, followed by Prince Orloff, Lady Sophie, and her lover, Lieutenant Ivan. Servants came running and clustered at the doors, but these were quickly shut out.

"This man has been insolent to me!" the princess exclaimed in a loud trembling voice, in answer to the hurried questions poured upon her, and she pointed to the secretary who stood facing them all, pale, but composed and majestic in bearing.

"Insolent!" exclaimed several voices in horror.

Prince Orloff strode wrathfully toward the offender, but he was too late. Prince Boris had flown at the secretary and begun to pummel him violently, without, however, making much impression. The secretary bore this treatment with singular passiveness, merely warding off the blows.

The prince danced around his tall adversary in an ecstasy of rage.

"Down on your knees! Dog!" he exclaimed, eager to distinguish himself in the presence of the princess by avenging her wrongs, and in his frantic efforts to reduce the secretary to an attitude of abasement, he dragged at his clothing in a most unscientific manner, and actually succeeded in tearing off his outer garment — a dark green coat.

Now the secretary wore under this coat a white linen blouse and across his breast was a ribbon fastened with a golden clasp set with rubies. When Prince Boris caught sight of the jewel, he fairly stuttered in his excitement.

"Look, look!" he cried out, pointing to the clasp on the secretary's breast. "The fellow is a common thief. He has stolen the ruby clasp which I gave to the Princess Helene."

"No!" the princess said in a clear voice. "I have the clasp here in my hand."

It was Lieutenant Ivan who suddenly started forward, his mouth opening in indescribable horror. He seized the valiant and perspiring prince by the arm and shouted in a loud terrified voice:—

"Great God! Can you not see? It is the EMPEROR!"

His disguise cast aside, the master of the situation stood like a statue, with his arms folded, the jewel burning on the breast of his white blouse. Not one in that room but was bent low in homage, in submission, and terror. The dropping of a pin might have been heard in the dead and ominous silence. His majesty's stern and pitiless eye rested on the Princes Orloff and Boris who knelt at his feet, their faces livid, the sweat of agony standing on their foreheads.

"So you see, I did *not* go into the Caucasus, Prince Boris," the Emperor said mockingly to the cringing prince. "I preferred to stay here and unravel your secrets."

The wretched man bowed lower and was silent.

"And you, too," and there was more of sad reproach than anger in the Emperor's voice as he turned to the despairing Prince Orloff.

"Sire —" he began.

"It is too late," said the Emperor solemnly.

A moment later, by a signal, the Orloff Palace was crowded with armed men and the Emperor gave orders for the disposition of the prisoners.

"Princes Orloff and Boris to be removed to the Vámbéry prison, to await their trial for high treason.

"The Princess Helene and the Lady Sophie to be removed to the imperial palace and confined there at the Emperor's pleasure.

"Lieutenant Ivan to be removed to the military prison."

The Princess Helene bent her proud head at the feet of the Emperor, and with pallid cheek and broken voice begged to be allowed to follow her father to prison, but this petition was peremptorily refused.

"Sire," said the unhappy Orloff, made bold by the sight of his daughter's suffering, "I entreat your majesty not to punish the innocent with the guilty. My daughter and the Lady Sophie are

entirely innocent. So also is Lieutenant Ivan. I implore your majesty to spare these young people."

"Full justice shall be done both to the innocent and the guilty," the Emperor said sternly, and he motioned the guards to lead the prisoners away.

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Six months elapsed. The despairing and remorseful Prince Orloff died in prison, and by the Emperor's permission his daughter was with him in his last moments. Prince Boris was to be banished for life and his vast wealth confiscated to the crown. Lieutenant Ivan and Lady Sophie were cleared of any implication, but the latter voluntarily shared her cousin's imprisonment in the palace.

Of all the prisoners, only the Princess Helene's fate was yet undecided, and as the Emperor had at last gone on that expedition into the Caucasus, where there was to be a battle for the crown, there was no certainty when she would learn what would become of her.

Strange lessons had the haughty princess learned in these six months — lessons of vanquished pride, of bitter shame, and grief, and the slow misery of patience. At first she was like a mad thing in her agony, beating herself against the walls of her prison, cursing her fate and praying for death. But when day after day passed and nothing came of her struggles, she sank into a sort of stupor of despair and wept wearily and hopelessly. Her father's death came as a last crushing blow. Everything that made life dear — honor, station, wealth — had been swept away. Her proud head drooped and her splendid young beauty grew wan and dim.

As to the love which had swept over her life for one brief moment, she dared not think of it. Had he played with her, had he deliberately won her heart only to conquer her? Had she (and oh, this was an agonized thought!) — had she all unconsciously *won* the heart of her sovereign and by her own act lost it forever? She remembered now the vague sweet pleasure which she had felt at his mere presence, and a thousand other intangible signs which she in her blindness had failed to recognize as the beginning of love.

She awaited the return of the Emperor. What would be his vengeance on the daughter of the fallen Orloff, the daughter of a conspirator against the crown, the betrothed wife of a traitor?

Her prison was a splendid one. She was surrounded with all the luxuries befitting her rank, but she was not permitted to leave her apartments or to communicate with any one. In the palace of the Emperor, which was a small world in itself and a very gay and populous one, her isolation was complete. But she had a precious little comforter in the Lady Sophie with her irrepressible gaiety and her proneness to see the sunny side of things. Yet she was a child—one to whom it was impossible for the princess to reveal the real depths of her despair—the despair of a proud woman who first tastes humiliation.

The Pretender's claims had been suddenly cancelled by his death in the conflict. The Emperor returned from his expedition with victory on his banner, his enemies silenced forever.

The Princess Helene was commanded to appear before her sovereign at noon on the day after his arrival at the palace.

Who shall say what were her emotions as she obeyed the summons? She was about to kneel as a suppliant for mercy—at the feet of a man who had been her servant, upon whom she had heaped indignities, and whose love she had spurned. But even in this hour, her native pride reared itself as a crest, she shook off her apathy of despair, and hid her broken spirit behind a haughty and rebellious mien. She was attired in one of her most splendid gowns, and excitement lent brilliancy to her beauty.

It was not a meek penitent who knelt before the Emperor. It was a rebel—wounded and snared—but a rebel still. And he recognized this fact and hardened his heart against her.

The audience chamber was one of the most gorgeous rooms in the palace. Seated in a throne-like chair elevated on a dais, dressed in imperial robes, and surrounded by all the trappings of state, it was difficult to fancy that this dark, stern, princely looking man and the deferential secretary Valdor were one and the same.

The Emperor surveyed his regal-looking prisoner with an air of business-like composure, which was more cutting than any he could have assumed, for it bespoke indifference.

"You were betrothed to Prince Boris, I believe?" he said without preamble or greeting of any kind.

She merely bowed in assent. The fact that he ignored her rank and her sex struck home like a hot iron, but she made no sign.

"You know that the prince is to be exiled and his wealth confiscated?"

She bowed again.

"Stripped of honor and everything material, it seems cruel to deprive him of the consolation of love," the Emperor said mockingly and with meaning.

All her efforts for composure could not conceal the deadly whiteness which spread over her face at the significance of these words.

"A true woman will not desert her lover even in poverty and disgrace," the Emperor continued pitilessly. "She will love him all the more in adversity, will share his exile, and comfort him for the loss of friends and fortune."

"Your majesty would not compel me to marry Prince Boris!" she exclaimed, and there was indignant agony and reproach in her voice, and her proud eyes burned with tears.

"But why not?" the Emperor said, smiling with gentle irony. "Has your love for him been utterly swept away because of the change in his fortunes? Is the love of woman so mutable — so inconstant as this?"

"I will choose death a thousand times rather than such a fate!" she said with passionate misery.

"You forget," the Emperor said severely, "that if it is my will that you shall marry him, there is no choice for you but to obey. The prince must be punished, but I would not separate true lovers. You shall share his exile."

He turned away from her as though the interview were over. But with a low cry she had thrown herself at his feet in an agony of supplication.

"I implore your majesty to command my death!" she said wildly.

"I shall not punish you with death," he said coldly, "for I believe you to be innocent of aught save arrogant pride and thorough heartlessness. We do not punish these with death, despicable as they are."

She bent her head humbly at these cruel words and was silent. She tasted at that moment a punishment more bitter, perhaps, than any which his hand could have dealt her.

“You craved only wealth and power,” the Emperor continued sternly. “For these you betrothed yourself to a man utterly unworthy of your love or respect — a man whom you knew to be a mean, false knave. When for an instant love seemed to cross your path, you struck it away with contempt because you thought it was obscure and promised you no honors or treasure. What should be the punishment of such a woman, Princess Helene?”

Her eyes were raised to his with a passionate appeal in their sorrowful depths, as though praying dumbly for mercy.

“Answer me!” he said, and in his severe countenance there was no sign of relenting.

“Death were a welcome punishment,” she said, with quivering lip. “I entreat your majesty to pardon my past errors and put an end to my misery.”

“You never loved Prince Boris?” he said after a moment’s pause.

“Never, Sire.” And her head drooped in shame.

“Whom do you love?”

She was silent.

“Speak!” he said imperiously. “What does your heart say?”

“It says that I have ever despised Prince Boris,” she cried passionately, “that I despise myself still more, that —” she paused with an appealing look.

“That what?”

“Sire —”

“I am waiting.”

“I crave your majesty’s pardon,” she said humbly, “but a woman may not always speak as her heart dictates.”

“She may if she is bidden to do so by her sovereign,” he said pointedly.

She blushed and trembled at the implied command, struggled visibly with embarrassment, and tried to speak. Not by word or look did he aid her in this conflict with pride, but stood gravely waiting.

“If I have been so mad and vain as to dare to love your

majesty," she said with painful effort, "I have done so hopelessly."

"Helene!" said the Emperor, and she lifted her eyes with quick amaze at the change in his voice. The sternness had vanished from his face, and he was regarding her with a look of grave tenderness. He took her hand, and she arose and stood before him, trembling, hoping wildly, yet fearing.

"You were ever a rebel," he said. "You refuse to obey me and marry Prince Boris. Very well. Know that it is dangerous to defy the Emperor of the realm. You shall marry either the exiled prince" —

And he paused, smiled, and knelt suddenly at her feet

— "Or Valdor!"

