

GREAT CATHERINE

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The main difference between her and our modern Liberal Governments was that whereas she talked and wrote quite intelligently about Liberal principles before she was frightened into making such talking and writing a flogging matter, our Liberal ministers take the name of Liberalism in vain without knowing or caring enough about its meaning even to talk and scribble about it, and pass their flogging Bills, and institute their prosecutions for sedition and blasphemy and so forth, without the faintest suspicion that such proceedings need any apology from the Liberal point of view.

It was quite easy for Patiomkin to humbug Catherine as to the condition of Russia by conducting her through sham cities run up for the occasion by scenic artists; but in the little world of European court intrigue and dynastic diplomacy which was the only world she knew she was more than a match for him and for all the rest of her contemporaries. In such intrigue and diplomacy, however, there was no romance, no scientific political interest, nothing that a sane mind can now retain even if it can be persuaded to waste time in reading it up. But Catherine as a woman with plenty of character and (as we should say) no morals, still fascinates and amuses us as she fascinated and amused her contemporaries. They were great sentimental comedians, these Peters, Elizabeths, and Catherines who played their Tsarships as eccentric character parts, and produced scene after scene of furious harlequinade with the monarch as clown, and of tragic relief in the torture chamber with the monarch as pantomime demon committing real atrocities, not forgetting the indispensable love interest on an enormous and utterly indecorous scale. Catherine kept this vast Guignol Theatre open for nearly half a century, not as a Russian, but as a highly domesticated German lady whose household routine was not at all so unlike that of Queen Victoria as might be expected from the difference in their notions of propriety in sexual relations.

In short, if Byron leaves you with an impression that he said very little about Catherine, and that little not what was best worth saying, I beg to correct your impression by assuring you that what Byron said was all there really is to say that is worth

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saying. His Catherine is my Catherine and everybody's Catherine. The young man who gains her favor is a Spanish nobleman in his version. I have made him an English country gentleman, who gets out of his rather dangerous scrape, by simplicity, sincerity, and the courage of these qualities. By this I have given some offence to the many Britons who see themselves as heroes: what they mean by heroes being theatrical snobs of superhuman pretensions which, though quite groundless, are admitted with awe by the rest of the human race. They say I think an Englishman a fool. When I do, they have themselves to thank.

I must not, however, pretend that historical portraiture was the motive of a play that will leave the reader as ignorant of Russian history as he may be now before he has turned the page. Nor is the sketch of Catherine complete even idiosyncratically, leaving her politics out of the question. For example, she wrote bushels of plays. I confess I have not yet read any of them. The truth is, this play grew out of the relations which inevitably exist in the theatre between authors and actors. If the actors have sometimes to use their skill as the author's puppets rather than in full self-expression, the author has sometimes to use his skill as the actors' tailor, fitting them with parts written to display the virtuosity of the performer rather than to solve problems of life, character, or history. Feats of this kind may tickle an author's technical vanity; but he is bound on such occasions to admit that the performer for whom he writes is "the onlie begetter" of his work, which must be regarded critically as an addition to the debt dramatic literature owes to the art of acting and its exponents. Those who have seen Miss Gertrude Kingston play the part of Catherine will have no difficulty in believing that it was her talent rather than mine that brought the play into existence. I once recommended Miss Kingston professionally to play queens. Now in the modern drama there were no queens for her to play; and as to the older literature of our stage: did it not provoke the veteran actress in Sir Arthur Pinero's *Trelawny of the Wells* to declare that, as parts, queens are not worth a tinker's oath? Miss Kingston's comment on my suggestion, though more elegantly worded, was to the same effect; and it ended in my having to make good my advice by writing *Great Catherine*. History provided no other queen capable of standing up to our joint talents.

In composing such bravura pieces, the author limits himself only by the range of the virtuoso, which by definition far transcends the modesty of nature. If my Russians seem more Muscovite than any Russian, and my English people more insular than any Briton, I will not plead, as I honestly might, that the fiction has yet to be written that can exaggerate the reality of such subjects; that the apparently outrageous *Patiomkin* is but a timidly bowdlerized ghost of the original; and that *Captain Edstaston* is

no more than a miniature that might hang appropriately on the walls of nineteen out of twenty English country houses to this day. An artistic presentment must not condescend to justify itself by a comparison with crude nature; and I prefer to admit that in this kind my dramatic personae are, as they should be, of the stage stagey, challenging the actor to act up to them or beyond them, if he can. The more heroic the overcharging, the better for the performance.

In dragging the reader thus for a moment behind the scenes, I am departing from a rule which I have hitherto imposed on myself so rigidly that I never permit myself, even in a stage direction, to let slip a word that could bludgeon the imagination of the reader by reminding him of the boards and the footlights and the sky borders and the rest of the theatrical scaffolding, for which nevertheless I have to plan as carefully as if I were the head carpenter as well as the author. But even at the risk of talking shop, an honest playwright should take at least one opportunity of acknowledging that his art is not only limited by the art of the actor, but often stimulated and developed by it. No sane and skilled author writes plays that present impossibilities to the actor or to the stage engineer. If, as occasionally happens, he asks them to do things that they have never done before and cannot conceive as presentable or possible (as Wagner and Thomas Hardy have done, for example), it is always found that the difficulties are not really insuperable, the author having foreseen unsuspected possibilities both in the actor and in the audience, whose will-to-make-believe can perform the quaintest miracles. Thus may authors advance the arts of acting and of staging plays. But the actor also may enlarge the scope of the drama by displaying powers not previously discovered by the author. If the best available actors are only Horatios, the authors will have to leave Hamlet out, and be content with Horatios for heroes. Some of the difference between Shakespeare's Orlandos and Bassanios and Bertrams and his Hamlets and Macbeths must have been due not only to his development as a dramatic poet, but to the development of Burbage as an actor. Playwrights do not write for ideal actors when their livelihood is at stake: if they did, they would write parts for heroes with twenty arms like an Indian god. Indeed the actor often influences the author too much; for I can remember a time (I am not implying that it is yet wholly past) when the art of writing a fashionable play had become very largely the art of writing it "round" the personalities of a group of fashionable performers of whom Burbage would certainly have said that their parts needed no acting. Everything has its abuse as well as its use.

It is also to be considered that great plays live longer than great actors, though little plays do not live nearly so long as the worst of their exponents. The consequence is that the great

actor, instead of putting pressure on contemporary authors to supply him with heroic parts, falls back on the Shakespearean repertory, and takes what he needs from a dead hand. In the nineteenth century, the careers of Kean, Macready, Barry Sullivan, and Irving, ought to have produced a group of heroic plays comparable in intensity to those of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; but nothing of the kind happened: these actors played the works of dead authors, or, very occasionally, of live poets who were hardly regular professional playwrights. Sheridan Knowles, Bulwer Lytton, Wills, and Tennyson produced a few glaringly artificial high horses for the great actors of their time; but the playwrights proper, who really kept the theatre going, and were kept going by the theatre, did not cater for the great actors: they could not afford to compete with a bard who was not for an age but for all time, and who had, moreover, the overwhelming attraction for the actor-managers of not charging author's fees. The result was that the playwrights and the great actors ceased to think of themselves as having any concern with one another: Tom Robertson, Ibsen, Pinero, and Barrie might as well have belonged to a different solar system as far as Irving was concerned; and the same was true of their respective predecessors.

Thus was established an evil tradition; but I at least can plead that it does not always hold good. If Forbes Robertson had not been there to play Caesar, I should not have written Caesar and Cleopatra. If Ellen Terry had never been born, Captain Brassbound's Conversion would never have been effected. The Devil's Disciple, with which I won my cordon bleu in America as a potboiler, would have had a different sort of hero if Richard Mansfield had been a different sort of actor, though the actual commission to write it came from an English actor, William Terriss, who was assassinated before he recovered from the dismay into which the result of his rash proposal threw him. For it must be said that the actor or actress who inspires or commissions a play as often as not regards it as a Frankenstein's monster, and will have none of it. That does not make him or her any the less parental in the fecundity of the playwright.

To an author who has any feeling of his business there is a keen and whimsical joy in divining and revealing a side of an actor's genius overlooked before, and unsuspected even by the actor himself. When I snatched Mr Louis Calvert from Shakespeare, and made him wear a frock coat and silk hat on the stage for perhaps the first time in his life, I do not think he expected in the least that his performance would enable me to boast of his Tom Broadbent as a genuine stage classic. Mrs Patrick Campbell was famous before I wrote for her, but not for playing illiterate cockney flower-maidens. And in the case which is provoking me to all these impertinences, I am quite sure that Miss Gertrude

Kingston, who first made her reputation as an impersonator of the most delightfully feather-headed and inconsequent ingenues, thought me more than usually mad when I persuaded her to play the Helen of Euripides, and then launched her on a queenly career as Catherine of Russia.

It is not the whole truth that if we take care of the actors the plays will take care of themselves; nor is it any truer that if we take care of the plays the actors will take care of themselves. There is both give and take in the business. I have seen plays written for actors that made me exclaim, "How oft the sight of means to do ill deeds makes deeds ill done!" But Burbage may have flourished the prompt copy of Hamlet under Shakespeare's nose at the tenth rehearsal and cried, "How oft the sight of means to do great deeds makes playwrights great!" I say the tenth because I am convinced that at the first he denounced his part as a rotten one; thought the ghost's speech ridiculously long; and wanted to play the king. Anyhow, whether he had the wit to utter it or not, the boast would have been a valid one. The best conclusion is that every actor should say, "If I create the hero in myself, God will send an author to write his part." For in the long run the actors will get the authors, and the authors the actors, they deserve.

Great Catherine was performed for the first time at the Vaudeville Theatre in London on the 18th November 1913, with Gertrude Kingston as Catherine, Miriam Lewes as Yarinka, Dorothy Massingham as Claire, Norman McKinnell as Patiomkin, Edmond Breon as Edstaston, Annie Hill as the Princess Dashkoff, and Eugene Mayeur and F. Cooke Beresford as Naryshkin and the Sergeant.

GREAT CATHERINE

THE FIRST SCENE

1776. Patiomkin in his bureau in the Winter Palace, St. Petersburg. Huge palatial apartment: style, Russia in the eighteenth century imitating the Versailles du Roi Soleil. Extravagant luxury. Also dirt and disorder.

Patiomkin, gigantic in stature and build, his face marred by the loss of one eye and a marked squint in the other, sits at the end of a table littered with papers and the remains of three or four successive breakfasts. He has supplies of coffee and brandy at hand sufficient for a party of ten. His coat, encrusted with diamonds, is on the floor. It has fallen off a chair placed near the other end of the table for the convenience of visitors. His court sword, with its attachments, is on the chair. His three-cornered hat, also bejewelled, is on the table. He himself

is half dressed in an unfastened shirt and an immense dressing-gown, once gorgeous, now food-splashed and dirty, as it serves him for towel, handkerchief, duster, and every other use to which a textile fabric can be put by a slovenly man. It does not conceal his huge hairy chest, nor his half-buttoned knee breeches, nor his legs. These are partly clad in silk stockings, which he occasionally hitches up to his knees, and presently shakes down to his shins, by his restless movement. His feet are thrust into enormous slippers, worth, with their crust of jewels, several thousand roubles apiece.

Superficially Patiomkin is a violent, brutal barbarian, an upstart despot of the most intolerable and dangerous type, ugly, lazy, and disgusting in his personal habits. Yet ambassadors report him the ablest man in Russia, and the one who can do most with the still abler Empress Catherine II, who is not a Russian but a German, by no means barbarous or intemperate in her personal habits. She not only disputes with Frederick the Great the reputation of being the cleverest monarch in Europe, but may even put in a very plausible claim to be the cleverest and most attractive individual alive. Now she not only tolerates Patiomkin long after she has got over her first romantic attachment to him, but esteems him highly as a counsellor and a good friend. His love letters are among the best on record. He has a wild sense of humor, which enables him to laugh at himself as well as at everybody else. In the eyes of the English visitor now about to be admitted to his presence he may be an outrageous ruffian. In fact he actually is an outrageous ruffian, in no matter whose eyes; but the visitor will find out, as everyone else sooner or later finds out, that he is a man to be reckoned with even by those who are not intimidated by his temper, bodily strength, and exalted rank.

A pretty young lady, Yarinka, his favorite niece, is lounging on an ottoman between his end of the table and the door, very sulky and dissatisfied, perhaps because he is preoccupied with his papers and his brandy bottle, and she can see nothing of him but his broad back.

There is a screen behind the ottoman.

An old soldier, a Cossack sergeant, enters.

THE SERGEANT [softly to the lady, holding the door handle].
Little darling honey, is his Highness the prince very busy?

VARINKA. His Highness the prince is very busy. He is singing out of tune; he is biting his nails; he is scratching his head; he is hitching up his untidy stockings; he is making himself disgusting and odious to everybody; and he is pretending to read state

papers that he does not understand because he is too lazy and selfish to talk and be companionable.

PATIOMKIN [growls; then wipes his nose with his dressing-gown]!!

VARINKA. Pig. Ugh! [She curls herself up with a shiver of disgust and retires from the conversation.]

THE SERGEANT [stealing across to the coat, and picking it up to replace it on the back of the chair]. Little Father, the English captain, so highly recommended to you by old Fritz of Prussia, by the English ambassador, and by Monsieur Voltaire (whom [crossing himself] may God in his infinite mercy damn eternally!), is in the antechamber and desires audience.

PATIOMKIN [deliberately]. To hell with the English captain; and to hell with old Fritz of Prussia; and to hell with the English ambassador; and to hell with Monsieur Voltaire; and to hell with you too!

THE SERGEANT. Have mercy on me, Little Father. Your head is bad this morning. You drink too much French brandy and too little good Russian kvass.

PATIOMKIN [with sudden fury]. Why are visitors of consequence announced by a sergeant? [Springing at him and seizing him by the throat.] What do you mean by this, you hound? Do you want five thousand blows of the stick? Where is General Volkonsky?

THE SERGEANT [on his knees]. Little Father, you kicked his Highness downstairs.

PATIOMKIN [flinging him down and kicking him]. You lie, you dog. You lie.

THE SERGEANT. Little Father, life is hard for the poor. If you say it is a lie, it is a lie. He FELL downstairs. I picked him up; and he kicked me. They all kick me when you kick them. God knows that is not just, Little Father!

PATIOMKIN [laughs ogreishly; then returns to his place at the table, chuckling]!!!

VARINKA. Savage! Boot! It is a disgrace. No wonder the French sneer at us as barbarians.

THE SERGEANT [who has crept round the table to the screen, and insinuated himself between Patiomkin's back and Varinka]. Do you think the Prince will see the captain, little darling?

PATIOMKIN. He will not see any captain. Go to the devil!

THE SERGEANT. Be merciful, Little Father. God knows it is your duty to see him! [To Varinka.] Intercede for him and for me, beautiful little darling. He has given me a rouble.

PATIOMKIN. Oh, send him in, send him in; and stop pestering me. Am I never to have a moment's peace?

The Sergeant salutes joyfully and hurries out, divining that Patiomkin has intended to see the English captain all along, and has played this comedy of fury and exhausted impatience to conceal his interest in the visitor.

VARINKA. Have you no shame? You refuse to see the most exalted persons. You kick princes and generals downstairs. And then you see an English captain merely because he has given a rouble to that common soldier. It is scandalous.

PATIOMKIN. Darling beloved, I am drunk; but I know what I am doing. I wish to stand well with the English.

VARINKA. And you think you will impress an Englishman by receiving him as you are now, half drunk?

PATIOMKIN [gravely]. It is true: the English despise men who cannot drink. I must make myself wholly drunk [he takes a huge draught of brandy.]

VARINKA. Sot!

The Sergeant returns ushering a handsome strongly built young English officer in the uniform of a Light Dragoon. He is evidently on fairly good terms with himself, and very sure of his social position. He crosses the room to the end of the table opposite Patiomkin's, and awaits the civilities of that statesman with confidence. The Sergeant remains prudently at the door.

THE SERGEANT [paternally]. Little Father, this is the English captain, so well recommended to her sacred Majesty the Empress. God knows, he needs your countenance and protec- [he vanishes precipitately, seeing that Patiomkin is about to throw a bottle at him. The Captain contemplates these preliminaries with astonishment, and with some displeasure, which is not allayed when, Patiomkin, hardly condescending to look at his visitor, of whom he nevertheless takes stock with the corner of his one eye, says gruffly]. Well?

EDSTASTON. My name is Edstaston: Captain Edstaston of the Light Dragoons. I have the honor to present to your Highness this

letter from the British ambassador, which will give you all necessary particulars. [He hands Patiomkin the letter.]

PATIOMKIN [tearing it open and glancing at it for about a second]. What do you want?

EDSTASTON. The letter will explain to your Highness who I am.

PATIOMKIN. I don't want to know who you are. What do you want?

EDSTASTON. An audience of the Empress. [Patiomkin contemptuously throws the letter aside. Edstaston adds hotly.] Also some civility, if you please.

PATIOMKIN [with derision]. Ho!

VARINKA. My uncle is receiving you with unusual civility, Captain. He has just kicked a general downstairs.

EDSTASTON. A Russian general, madam?

VARINKA. Of course.

EDSTASTON. I must allow myself to say, madam, that your uncle had better not attempt to kick an English officer downstairs.

PATIOMKIN. You want me to kick you upstairs, eh? You want an audience of the Empress.

EDSTASTON. I have said nothing about kicking, sir. If it comes to that, my boots shall speak for me. Her Majesty has signified a desire to have news of the rebellion in America. I have served against the rebels; and I am instructed to place myself at the disposal of her Majesty, and to describe the events of the war to her as an eye-witness, in a discreet and agreeable manner.

PATIOMKIN. Psha! I know. You think if she once sets eyes on your face and your uniform your fortune is made. You think that if she could stand a man like me, with only one eye, and a cross eye at that, she must fall down at your feet at first sight, eh?

EDSTASTON [shocked and indignant]. I think nothing of the sort; and I'll trouble you not to repeat it. If I were a Russian subject and you made such a boast about my queen, I'd strike you across the face with my sword. [Patiomkin, with a yell of fury, rushes at him.] Hands off, you swine! [As Patiomkin, towering over him, attempts to seize him by the throat, Edstaston, who is a bit of a wrestler, adroitly backheels him. He falls, amazed, on his back.]

VARINKA [rushing out]. Help! Call the guard! The Englishman is murdering my uncle! Help! Help!

The guard and the Sergeant rush in. Edstaston draws a pair of small pistols from his boots, and points one at the Sergeant and the other at Patiomkin, who is sitting on the floor, somewhat sobered. The soldiers stand irresolute.

EDSTASTON. Stand off. [To Patiomkin.] Order them off, if you don't want a bullet through your silly head.

THE SERGEANT. Little Father, tell us what to do. Our lives are yours; but God knows you are not fit to die.

PATIOMKIN [absurdly self-possessed]. Get out.

THE SERGEANT. Little Father—

PATIOMKIN [roaring]. Get out. Get out, all of you. [They withdraw, much relieved at their escape from the pistol. Patiomkin attempts to rise, and rolls over.] Here! help me up, will you? Don't you see that I'm drunk and can't get up?

EDSTASTON [suspiciously]. You want to get hold of me.

PATIOMKIN [squatting resignedly against the chair on which his clothes hang]. Very well, then: I shall stay where I am, because I'm drunk and you're afraid of me.

EDSTASTON. I'm not afraid of you, damn you!

PATIOMKIN [ecstatically]. Darling, your lips are the gates of truth. Now listen to me. [He marks off the items of his statement with ridiculous stiff gestures of his head and arms, imitating a puppet.] You are Captain Whatshisname; and your uncle is the Earl of Whatdyecallum; and your father is Bishop of Thingummybob; and you are a young man of the highest spr—promise (I told you I was drunk), educated at Cambridge, and got your step as captain in the field at the GLORIOUS battle of Bunker's Hill. Invalided home from America at the request of Aunt Fanny, Lady-in-Waiting to the Queen. All right, eh?

EDSTASTON. How do you know all this?

PATIOMKIN [crowing fantastically]. In er lerrer, darling, darling, darling, darling. Lerrer you showed me.

EDSTASTON. But you didn't read it.

PATIOMKIN [flapping his fingers at him grotesquely]. Only one eye, darling. Cross eye. Sees everything. Read lerrer inceince-istastaneously. Kindly give me vinegar borle. Green borle. On'y to sober me. Too drunk to speak porply. If you would be so kind, darling. Green borle. [Edstaston, still suspicious, shakes his head and keeps his pistols ready.] Reach it myself. [He reaches behind him up to the table, and snatches at the green bottle, from which he takes a copious draught. Its effect is appalling. His wry faces and agonized belchings are so heartrending that they almost upset Edstaston. When the victim at last staggers to his feet, he is a pale fragile nobleman, aged and quite sober, extremely dignified in manner and address, though shaken by his recent convulsions.] Young man, it is not better to be drunk than sober; but it is happier. Goodness is not happiness. That is an epigram. But I have overdone this. I am too sober to be good company. Let me redress the balance. [He takes a generous draught of brandy, and recovers his geniality.] Aha! That's better. And now listen, darling. You must not come to Court with pistols in your boots.

EDSTASTON. I have found them useful.

PATIOMKIN. Nonsense. I'm your friend. You mistook my intention because I was drunk. Now that I am sober—in moderation—I will prove that I am your friend. Have some diamonds. [Roaring.] Hullo there! Dogs, pigs: hullo!

The Sergeant comes in.

THE SERGEANT. God be praised, Little Father: you are still spared to us.

PATIOMKIN. Tell them to bring some diamonds. Plenty of diamonds. And rubies. Get out. [He aims a kick at the Sergeant, who flees.] Put up your pistols, darling. I'll give you a pair with gold handgrips. I am your friend.

EDSTASTON [replacing the pistols in his boots rather unwillingly]. Your Highness understands that if I am missing, or if anything happens to me, there will be trouble.

PATIOMKIN [enthusiastically]. Call me darling.

EDSTASTON. It is not the English custom.

PATIOMKIN. You have no hearts, you English! [Slapping his right breast.] Heart! Heart!

EDSTASTON. Pardon, your Highness: your heart is on the other side.

PATIOMKIN [surprised and impressed]. Is it? You are learned! You are a doctor! You English are wonderful! We are barbarians, drunken pigs. Catherine does not know it; but we are. Catherine's a German. But I have given her a Russian heart [he is about to slap himself again.]

EDSTASTON [delicately]. The other side, your Highness.

PATIOMKIN [maudlin]. Darling, a true Russian has a heart on both sides.

The Sergeant enters carrying a goblet filled with precious stones.

PATIOMKIN. Get out. [He snatches the goblet and kicks the Sergeant out, not maliciously but from habit, indeed not noticing that he does it.] Darling, have some diamonds. Have a fistful. [He takes up a handful and lets them slip back through his fingers into the goblet, which he then offers to Edstaston.]

EDSTASTON. Thank you, I don't take presents.

PATIOMKIN [amazed]. You refuse!

EDSTASTON. I thank your Highness; but it is not the custom for English gentlemen to take presents of that kind.

PATIOMKIN. Are you really an Englishman?

EDSTASTON [bows]!

PATIOMKIN. You are the first Englishman I ever saw refuse anything he could get. [He puts the goblet on the table; then turns again to Edstaston.] Listen, darling. You are a wrestler: a splendid wrestler. You threw me on my back like magic, though I could lift you with one hand. Darling, you are a giant, a paladin.

EDSTASTON [complacently]. We wrestle rather well in my part of England.

PATIOMKIN. I have a Turk who is a wrestler: a prisoner of war. You shall wrestle with him for me. I'll stake a million roubles on you.

EDSTASTON [incensed]. Damn you! do you take me for a prize-fighter? How dare you make me such a proposal?

PATIOMKIN [with wounded feeling]. Darling, there is no pleasing you. Don't you like me?

EDSTASTON [mollified]. Well, in a sort of way I do; though I don't know why I should. But my instructions are that I am to see the Empress; and—

PATIOMKIN. Darling, you shall see the Empress. A glorious woman, the greatest woman in the world. But lemme give you piece 'vice—pah! still drunk. They water my vinegar. [He shakes himself; clears his throat; and resumes soberly.] If Catherine takes a fancy to you, you may ask for roubles, diamonds, palaces, titles, orders, anything! and you may aspire to everything: field-marshal, admiral, minister, what you please—except Tsar.

EDSTASTON. I tell you I don't want to ask for anything. Do you suppose I am an adventurer and a beggar?

PATIOMKIN [plaintively]. Why not, darling? I was an adventurer. I was a beggar.

EDSTASTON. Oh, you!

PATIOMKIN. Well: what's wrong with me?

EDSTASTON. You are a Russian. That's different.

PATIOMKIN [effusively]. Darling, I am a man; and you are a man; and Catherine is a woman. Woman reduces us all to the common denominator. [Chuckling.] Again an epigram! [Gravely.] You understand it, I hope. Have you had a college education, darling? I have.

EDSTASTON. Certainly. I am a Bachelor of Arts.

PATIOMKIN. It is enough that you are a bachelor, darling: Catherine will supply the arts. Aha! Another epigram! I am in the vein today.

EDSTASTON [embarrassed and a little offended]. I must ask your Highness to change the subject. As a visitor in Russia, I am the guest of the Empress; and I must tell you plainly that I have neither the right nor the disposition to speak lightly of her Majesty.

PATIOMKIN. You have conscientious scruples?

EDSTASTON. I have the scruples of a gentleman.

PATIOMKIN. In Russia a gentleman has no scruples. In Russia we face facts.

EDSTASTON. In England, sir, a gentleman never faces any facts if they are unpleasant facts.

PATIOMKIN. In real life, darling, all facts are unpleasant. [Greatly pleased with himself.] Another epigram! Where is my accursed chancellor? these gems should be written down and recorded for posterity. [He rushes to the table: sits down: and snatches up a pen. Then, recollecting himself.] But I have not asked you to sit down. [He rises and goes to the other chair.] I am a savage: a barbarian. [He throws the shirt and coat over the table on to the floor and puts his sword on the table.] Be seated, Captain.

EDSTASTON Thank you.

They bow to one another ceremoniously. Patiomkin's tendency to grotesque exaggeration costs him his balance; he nearly falls over Edstaston, who rescues him and takes the proffered chair.

PATIOMKIN [resuming his seat]. By the way, what was the piece of advice I was going to give you?

EDSTASTON. As you did not give it, I don't know. Allow me to add that I have not asked for your advice.

PATIOMKIN. I give it to you unasked, delightful Englishman. I remember it now. It was this. Don't try to become Tsar of Russia.

EDSTASTON [in astonishment]. I haven't the slightest intention—

PATIOMKIN. Not now; but you will have: take my words for it. It will strike you as a splendid idea to have conscientious scruples—to desire the blessing of the Church on your union with Catherine.

EDSTASTON [racing in utter amazement]. My union with Catherine! You're mad.

PATIOMKIN [unmoved]. The day you hint at such a thing will be the day of your downfall. Besides, it is not lucky to be Catherine's husband. You know what happened to Peter?

EDSTASTON [shortly; sitting down again]. I do not wish to discuss it.

PATIOMKIN. You think she murdered him?

EDSTASTON. I know that people have said so.

PATIOMKIN [thunderously; springing to his feet]. It is a lie: Orloff murdered him. [Subsiding a little.] He also knocked my eye out; but [sitting down placidly] I succeeded him for all that. And [patting Edstaston's hand very affectionately] I'm sorry to say, darling, that if you become Tsar, I shall murder you.

EDSTASTON [ironically returning the caress]. Thank you. The occasion will not arise. [Rising.] I have the honor to wish your Highness good morning.

PATIOMKIN [jumping up and stopping him on his way to the door]. Tut tut! I'm going to take you to the Empress now, this very instant.

EDSTASTON. In these boots? Impossible! I must change.

PATIOMKIN. Nonsense! You shall come just as you are. You shall show her your calves later on.

EDSTASTON. But it will take me only half an hour to—

PATIOMKIN. In half an hour it will be too late for the petit lever. Come along. Damn it, man, I must oblige the British ambassador, and the French ambassador, and old Fritz, and Monsieur Voltaire and the rest of them. [He shouts rudely to the door.] Varinka! [To Edstaston, with tears in his voice.] Varinka shall persuade you: nobody can refuse Varinka anything. My niece. A treasure, I assure you. Beautiful! devoted! fascinating! [Shouting again.] Varinka, where the devil are you?

VARINKA [returning]. I'll not be shouted for. You have the voice of a bear, and the manners of a tinker.

PATIOMKIN. Tsh-sh-sh. Little angel Mother: you must behave yourself before the English captain. [He takes off his dressing-gown and throws it over the papers and the breakfasts: picks up his coat: and disappears behind the screen to complete his toilette.]

EDSTASTON. Madam! [He bows.]

VARINKA [courtseying]. Monsieur le Capitaine!

EDSTASTON. I must apologize for the disturbance I made, madam.

PATIOMKIN [behind the screen]. You must not call her madam. You must call her Little Mother, and beautiful darling.

EDSTASTON. My respect for the lady will not permit it.

VARINKA. Respect! How can you respect the niece of a savage?

EDSTASTON [deprecatingly]. Oh, madam!

VARINKA. Heaven is my witness, Little English Father, we need someone who is not afraid of him. He is so strong! I hope you will throw him down on the floor many, many, many times.

PATIOMKIN [behind the screen]. Varinka!

VARINKA. Yes?

PATIOMKIN. Go and look through the keyhole of the Imperial bed-chamber; and bring me word whether the Empress is awake yet.

VARINKA. Fi donc! I do not look through keyholes.

PATIOMKIN [emerging, having arranged his shirt and put on his diamonded coat]. You have been badly brought up, little darling. Would any lady or gentleman walk unannounced into a room without first looking through the keyhole? [Taking his sword from the table and putting it on.] The great thing in life is to be simple; and the perfectly simple thing is to look through keyholes. Another epigram: the fifth this morning! Where is my fool of a chancellor? Where is Popof?

EDSTASTON [choking with suppressed laughter]!!!!

PATIOMKIN [gratified]. Darling, you appreciate my epigram.

EDSTASTON. Excuse me. Pop off! Ha! ha! I can't help laughing: What's his real name, by the way, in case I meet him?

VARINKA [surprised]. His real name? Popof, of course. Why do you laugh, Little Father?

EDSTASTON. How can anyone with a sense of humor help laughing? Pop off! [He is convulsed.]

VARINKA [looking at her uncle, taps her forehead significantly]!!

PATIOMKIN [aside to Varinka]. No: only English. He will amuse Catherine. [To Edstaston.] Come, you shall tell the joke to the Empress: she is by way of being a humorist [he takes him by the arm, and leads him towards the door].

EDSTASTON [resisting]. No, really. I am not fit—

PATIOMKIN. Persuade him, Little angel Mother.

VARINKA [taking his other arm]. Yes, yes, yes. Little English Father: God knows it is your duty to be brave and wait on the Empress. Come.

EDSTASTON. No. I had rather—

PATIOMKIN [hauling him along]. Come.

VARINKA [pulling him and coaxing him]. Come, little love: you can't refuse me.

EDSTASTON. But how can I?

PATIOMKIN. Why not? She won't eat you.

VARINKA. She will; but you must come.

EDSTASTON. I assure you—it is quite out of the question—my clothes—

VARINKA. You look perfect.

PATIOMKIN. Come along, darling.

EDSTASTON [struggling]. Impossible—

VARINKA. Come, come, come.

EDSTASTON. No. Believe me—I don't wish—I—

VARINKA. Carry him, uncle.

PATIOMKIN [lifting him in his arms like a father carrying a little boy]. Yes: I'll carry you.

EDSTASTON. Dash it all, this is ridiculous!

VARINKA [seizing his ankles and dancing as he is carried out]. You must come. If you kick you will blacken my eyes.

PATIOMKIN. Come, baby, come.

By this time they have made their way through the door and are out of hearing.

THE SECOND SCENE

The Empress's petit lever. The central doors are closed. Those who enter through them find on their left, on a dais of two broad steps, a magnificent curtained bed. Beyond it a door in the panelling leads to the Empress's cabinet. Near the foot of the bed, in the middle of the room, stands a gilt chair, with the Imperial arms carved and the Imperial monogram embroidered.

The Court is in attendance, standing in two melancholy rows down the side of the room opposite to the bed, solemn, bored, waiting for the Empress to awaken. The Princess Dashkoff, with two ladies, stands a little in front of the line of courtiers, by the Imperial chair. Silence, broken only by the yawns and whispers of the courtiers. Naryshkin, the Chamberlain, stands by the head of the bed.

A loud yawn is heard from behind the curtains.

NARYSHKIN [holding up a warning hand]. Ssh!

The courtiers hastily cease whispering: dress up their lines: and stiffen. Dead silence. A bell tinkles within the curtains. Naryshkin and the Princess solemnly draw them and reveal the Empress.

Catherine turns over on her back, and stretches herself.

CATHERINE [yawning]. Heigho-ah-yah-ah-ow-what o'clock is it? [Her accent is German.]

NARYSHKIN [formally]. Her Imperial Majesty is awake. [The Court falls on its knees.]

ALL. Good morning to your Majesty.

NARYSHKIN. Half-past ten, Little Mother.

CATHERINE [sitting up abruptly]. Potztausend! [Contemplating the kneeling courtiers.] Oh, get up, get up. [All rise.] Your etiquette bores me. I am hardly awake in the morning before it begins. [Yawning again, and relapsing sleepily against her pillows.] Why do they do it, Naryshkin?

NARYSHKIN. God knows it is not for your sake, Little Mother. But you see if you were not a great queen they would all be nobodies.

CATHERINE [sitting up]. They make me do it to keep up their own little dignities? So?

NARYSHKIN. Exactly. Also because if they didn't you might have them flogged, dear Little Mother.

CATHERINE [springing energetically out of bed and seating herself on the edge of it]. Flogged! I! A Liberal Empress! A philosopher! You are a barbarian, Naryshkin. [She rises and turns to the courtiers.] And then, as if I cared! [She turns again to Naryshkin.] You should know by this time that I am frank and original in character, like an Englishman. [She walks about restlessly.] No: what maddens me about all this ceremony is that I am the only person in Russia who gets no fun out of my being Empress. You all glory in me: you bask in my smiles: you get titles and honors and favors from me: you are dazzled by my crown and my robes: you feel splendid when you have been admitted to my presence; and when I say a gracious word to you, you talk about it to everyone you meet for a week afterwards. But what do I get out of it? Nothing. [She throws herself into the chair. Naryshkin deprecates with a gesture; she hurls an emphatic repetition at him.] Nothing!! I wear a crown until my neck aches: I stand looking majestic until I am ready to drop: I have to smile at ugly old ambassadors and frown and turn my back on young and handsome ones. Nobody gives me anything. When I was only an Archduchess, the English ambassador used to give me money whenever I wanted it—or rather whenever he wanted to get anything out of my sacred predecessor Elizabeth [the Court bows to the ground]; but now that I am Empress he never gives me a kopek. When I have headaches and colics I envy the scullerymaids. And you are not a bit grateful to me for all my care of you, my work, my thought, my fatigue, my sufferings.

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF. God knows, Little Mother, we all implore you to give your wonderful brain a rest. That is why you get headaches. Monsieur Voltaire also has headaches. His brain is just like yours.

CATHERINE. Dashkoff, what a liar you are! [Dashkoff curtsies with impressive dignity.] And you think you are flattering me! Let me tell you I would not give a rouble to have the brains of all the philosophers in France. What is our business for today?

NARYSHKIN. The new museum, Little Mother. But the model will not be ready until tonight.

CATHERINE [rising eagerly]. Yes, the museum. An enlightened capital should have a museum. [She paces the chamber with a deep sense of the importance of the museum.] It shall be one of the wonders of the world. I must have specimens: specimens, specimens, specimens.

NARYSHKIN. You are in high spirits this morning, Little Mother.

CATHERINE [with sudden levity]. I am always in high spirits, even

when people do not bring me my slippers. [She runs to the chair and sits down, thrusting her feet out.]

The two ladies rush to her feet, each carrying a slipper. Catherine, about to put her feet into them, is checked by a disturbance in the antechamber.

PATIOMKIN [carrying Edstaston through the antechamber]. Useless to struggle. Come along, beautiful baby darling. Come to Little Mother. [He sings.]

March him baby,
Baby, baby,
Lit-tle ba-by bumpkins.

VARINKA [joining in to the same doggerel in canon, a third above]. March him, baby, etc., etc.

EDSTASTON [trying to make himself heard]. No, no. This is carrying a joke too far. I must insist. Let me down! Hang it, will you let me down! Confound it! No, no. Stop playing the fool, will you? We don't understand this sort of thing in England. I shall be disgraced. Let me down.

CATHERINE [meanwhile]. What a horrible noise! Naryshkin, see what it is.

Naryshkin goes to the door.

CATHERINE [listening]. That is Prince Patiomkin.

NARYSHKIN [calling from the door]. Little Mother, a stranger.

Catherine plunges into bed again and covers herself up. Patiomkin, followed by Varinka, carries Edstaston in: dumps him down on the foot of the bed: and staggers past it to the cabinet door. Varinka joins the courtiers at the opposite side of the room. Catherine, blazing with wrath, pushes Edstaston off her bed on to the floor: gets out of bed: and turns on Patiomkin with so terrible an expression that all kneel down hastily except Edstaston, who is sprawling on the carpet in angry confusion.

CATHERINE. Patiomkin, how dare you? [Looking at Edstaston.] What is this?

PATIOMKIN [on his knees, tearfully]. I don't know. I am drunk. What is this, Varinka?

EDSTASTON [scrambling to his feet]. Madam, this drunken ruffian—

PATIOMKIN. Thas true. Drungn ruffian. Took dvantage of my being drunk. Said: take me to Lil angel Mother. Take me to beauff Empress. Take me to the grea'st woman on earth. Thas whas he he said. I took him. I was wrong. I am not sober.

CATHERINE. Men have grown sober in Siberia for less, Prince.

PATIOMKIN. Serve em right! Sgusting habit. Ask Varinka.

Catherine turns her face from him to the Court. The courtiers see that she is trying not to laugh, and know by experience that she will not succeed. They rise, relieved and grinning.

VARINKA. It is true. He drinks like a pig.

PATIOMKIN [plaintively]. No: not like pig. Like prince. Lil Mother made poor Patiomkin prince. Whas use being prince if I mayn't drink?

CATHERINE [biting her lips]. Go. I am offended.

PATIOMKIN. Don't scold, Lil Mother.

CATHERINE [imperiously]. Go.

PATIOMKIN [rising unsteadily]. Yes: go. Go bye bye. Very sleepy. Berr go bye bye than go Siberia. Go bye bye in Lil Mother's bed [he pretends to make an attempt to get into the bed].

CATHERINE [energetically pulling him back]. No, no! Patiomkin! What are you thinking of? [He falls like a log on the floor, apparently dead drunk.]

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF. Scandalous! An insult to your Imperial Majesty!

CATHERINE. Dashkoff: you have no sense of humor. [She steps down to the door level and looks indulgently at Patiomkin. He gurgles brutishly. She has an impulse of disgust.] Hog. [She kicks him as hard as she can.] Oh! You have broken my toe. Brute. Beast. Dashkoff is quite right. Do you hear?

PATIOMKIN. If you ask my pi-pinion of Dashkoff, my pipinion is that Dashkoff is drunk. Scanlous. Poor Patiomkin go bye bye. [He relapses into drunken slumbers.]

Some of the courtiers move to carry him away.

CATHERINE [stopping them]. Let him lie. Let him sleep it off. If he goes out it will be to a tavern and low company for the rest

of the day. [Indulgently.] There! [She takes a pillow from the bed and puts it under his head: then turns to Edstaston: surveys him with perfect dignity: and asks, in her queenliest manner.] Varinka, who is this gentleman?

VARINKA. A foreign captain: I cannot pronounce his name. I think he is mad. He came to the Prince and said he must see your Majesty. He can talk of nothing else. We could not prevent him.

EDSTASTON [overwhelmed by this apparent betrayal]. Oh! Madam: I am perfectly sane: I am actually an Englishman. I should never have dreamt of approaching your Majesty without the fullest credentials. I have letters from the English ambassador, from the Prussian ambassador. [Naively.] But everybody assured me that Prince Patiomkin is all-powerful with your Majesty; so I naturally applied to him.

PATIOMKIN [interrupts the conversation by an agonized wheezing groan as of a donkey beginning to bray]!!!

CATHERINE [like a fishfag]. Schweig, du Hund. [Resuming her impressive royal manner.] Have you never been taught, sir, how a gentleman should enter the presence of a sovereign?

EDSTASTON. Yes, Madam; but I did not enter your presence: I was carried.

CATHERINE. But you say you asked the Prince to carry you.

EDSTASTON. Certainly not, Madam. I protested against it with all my might. I appeal to this lady to confirm me.

VARINKA [pretending to be indignant]. Yes, you protested. But, all the same, you were very very very anxious to see her Imperial Majesty. You blushed when the Prince spoke of her. You threatened to strike him across the face with your sword because you thought he did not speak enthusiastically enough of her. [To Catherine.] Trust me: he has seen your Imperial Majesty before.

CATHERINE [to Edstaston]. You have seen us before?

EDSTASTON. At the review, Madam.

VARINKA [triumphantly]. Aha! I knew it. Your Majesty wore the hussar uniform. He saw how radiant! how splendid! your Majesty looked. Oh! he has dared to admire your Majesty. Such insolence is not to be endured.

EDSTASTON. All Europe is a party to that insolence, Madam.

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF. All Europe is content to do so at a respectful distance. It is possible to admire her Majesty's policy and her eminence in literature and philosophy without performing acrobatic feats in the Imperial bed.

EDSTASTON. I know nothing about her Majesty's eminence in policy or philosophy: I don't pretend to understand such things. I speak as a practical man. And I never knew that foreigners had any policy: I always thought that policy was Mr. Pitt's business.

CATHERINE [lifting her eyebrows]. So?

VARINKA. What else did you presume to admire her Majesty for, pray?

EDSTASTON [addled]. Well, I-I-I-that is, I-[He stammers himself dumb.]

CATHERINE [after a pitiless silence]. We are waiting for your answer.

EDSTASTON. But I never said I admired your Majesty. The lady has twisted my words.

VARINKA. You don't admire her, then?

EDSTASTON. Well, I-naturally-of course, I can't deny that the uniform was very becoming-perhaps a little unfeminine-still-

Dead silence. Catherine and the Court watch him stonily. He is wretchedly embarrassed.

CATHERINE [with cold majesty]. Well, sir: is that all you have to say?

EDSTASTON. Surely there is no harm in noticing that er-that er-[He stops again.]

CATHERINE. Noticing that er-? [He gazes at her, speechless, like a fascinated rabbit. She repeats fiercely.] That er-?

EDSTASTON [startled into speech]. Well, that your Majesty was-was-[soothingly] Well, let me put it this way: that it was rather natural for a man to admire your Majesty without being a philosopher.

CATHERINE [suddenly smiling and extending her hand to him to be kissed]. Courtier!

EDSTASTON [kissing it]. Not at all. Your Majesty is very good. I have been very awkward; but I did not intend it. I am rather stupid, I am afraid.

CATHERINE. Stupid! By no means. Courage, Captain: we are pleased. [He falls on his knee. She takes his cheeks in her hands: turns up his face: and adds] We are greatly pleased. [She slaps his cheek coquettishly: he bows almost to his knee.] The petit lever is over. [She turns to go into the cabinet, and stumbles against the supine Patiomkin.] Ach! [Edstaston springs to her assistance, seizing Patiomkin's heels and shifting him out of the Empress's path.] We thank you, Captain.

He bows gallantly and is rewarded by a very gracious smile. Then Catherine goes into her cabinet, followed by the princess Dashkoff, who turns at the door to make a deep courtsey to Edstaston.

VARINKA. Happy Little Father! Remember: I did this for you. [She runs out after the Empress.]

Edstaston, somewhat dazed, crosses the room to the courtiers, and is received with marked deference, each courtier making him a profound bow or curtsey before withdrawing through the central doors. He returns each obeisance with a nervous jerk, and turns away from it, only to find another courtier bowing at the other side. The process finally reduced him to distraction, as he bumps into one in the act of bowing to another and then has to bow his apologies. But at last they are all gone except Naryshkin.

EDSTASTON. Ouf!

PATIOMKIN [jumping up vigorously]. You have done it, darling. Superbly! Beautifully!

EDSTASTON [astonished]. Do you mean to say you are not drunk?

PATIOMKIN. Not dead drunk, darling. Only diplomatically drunk. As a drunken hog, I have done for you in five minutes what I could not have done in five months as a sober man. Your fortune is made. She likes you.

EDSTASTON. The devil she does!

PATIOMKIN. Why? Aren't you delighted?

EDSTASTON. Delighted! Gracious heavens, man, I am engaged to be married.

PATIOMKIN. What matter? She is in England, isn't she?

EDSTASTON. No. She has just arrived in St. Petersburg.

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF [returning]. Captain Edstaston, the Empress is robed, and commands your presence.

EDSTASTON. Say I was gone before you arrived with the message. [He hurries out. The other three, too taken aback to stop him, stare after him in the utmost astonishment.]

NARYSHKIN [turning from the door]. She will have him knouted. He is a dead man.

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF. But what am I to do? I cannot take such an answer to the Empress.

PATIOMKIN. P-P-P-P-P-W-W-W-W-W-rrrrrr [a long puff, turning into a growl!] [He spits.] I must kick somebody.

NARYSHKIN [flying precipitately through the central doors]. No, no. Please.

THE PRINCESS DASHKOFF [throwing herself recklessly in front of Patiomkin as he starts in pursuit of the Chamberlain]. Kick me. Disable me. It will be an excuse for not going back to her. Kick me hard.

PATIOMKIN. Yah! [He flings her on the bed and dashes after Naryshkin.]

THE THIRD SCENE

In a terrace garden overlooking the Neva. Claire, a robust young English lady, is leaning on the river wall. She turns expectantly on hearing the garden gate opened and closed. Edstaston hurries in. With a cry of delight she throws her arms round his neck.

CLAIRE. Darling!

EDSTASTON [making a wry face]. Don't call me darling.

CLAIRE [amazed and chilled]. Why?

EDSTASTON. I have been called darling all the morning.

CLAIRE [with a flash of jealousy]. By whom?

EDSTASTON. By everybody. By the most unutterable swine. And if we do not leave this abominable city now: do you hear? now; I shall be called darling by the Empress.

CLAIRE [with magnificent snobbery]. She would not dare. Did you tell her you were engaged to me?

EDSTASTON. Of course not.

CLAIRE. Why?

EDSTASTON. Because I didn't particularly want to have you knouted, and to be hanged or sent to Siberia myself.

CLAIRE. What on earth do you mean?

EDSTASTON. Well, the long and short of it is—don't think me a coxcomb, Claire: it is too serious to mince matters—I have seen the Empress; and—

CLAIRE. Well, you wanted to see her.

EDSTASTON. Yes; but the Empress has seen me.

CLAIRE. She has fallen in love with you!

EDSTASTON. How did you know?

CLAIRE. Dearest: as if anyone could help it.

EDSTASTON. Oh, don't make me feel like a fool. But, though it does sound conceited to say it, I flatter myself I'm better looking than Patiomkin and the other hogs she is accustomed to. Anyhow, I daren't risk staying.

CLAIRE. What a nuisance! Mamma will be furious at having to pack, and at missing the Court ball this evening.

EDSTASTON. I can't help that. We haven't a moment to lose.

CLAIRE. May I tell her she will be knouted if we stay?

EDSTASTON. Do, dearest.

He kisses her and lets her go, expecting her to run into the house.

CLAIRE [pausing thoughtfully]. Is she—is she good-looking when you see her close?

EDSTASTON. Not a patch on you, dearest.

CLAIRE [jealous]. Then you did see her close?

EDSTASTON. Fairly close.

CLAIRE. Indeed! How close? No: that's silly of me: I will tell mamma. [She is going out when Naryshkin enters with the Sergeant and a squad of soldiers.] What do you want here?

The Sergeant goes to Edstaston: plumps down on his knees: and takes out a magnificent pair of pistols with gold grips. He proffers them to Edstaston, holding them by the barrels.

NARYSHKIN. Captain Edstaston: his Highness Prince Patiomkin sends you the pistols he promised you.

THE SERGEANT. Take them, Little Father; and do not forget us poor soldiers who have brought them to you; for God knows we get but little to drink.

EDSTASTON [irresolutely]. But I can't take these valuable things. By Jiminy, though, they're beautiful! Look at them, Claire.

As he is taking the pistols the kneeling Sergeant suddenly drops them; flings himself forward; and embraces Edstaston's hips to prevent him from drawing his own pistols from his boots.

THE SERGEANT. Lay hold of him there. Pin his arms. I have his pistols. [The soldiers seize Edstaston.]

EDSTASTON. Ah, would you, damn you! [He drives his knee into the Sergeant's epigastrium, and struggles furiously with his captors.]

THE SERGEANT [rolling on the ground, gasping and groaning]. Owgh! Murder! Holy Nicholas! Owwwgh!

CLAIRE. Help! help! They are killing Charles. Help!

NARYSHKIN [seizing her and clapping his hand over her mouth]. Tie him neck and crop. Ten thousand blows of the stick if you let him go. [Claire twists herself loose: turns on him: and cuffs him furiously.] Yow-ow! Have mercy, Little Mother.

CLAIRE. You wretch! Help! Help! Police! We are being murdered. Help!

The Sergeant, who has risen, comes to Naryshkin's rescue, and grasps Claire's hands, enabling Naryshkin to gag her again. By

this time Edstaston and his captors are all rolling on the ground together. They get Edstaston on his back and fasten his wrists together behind his knees. Next they put a broad strap round his ribs. Finally they pass a pole through this breast strap and through the waist strap and lift him by it, helplessly trussed up, to carry him off. Meanwhile he is by no means suffering in silence.

EDSTASTON [gasping]. You shall hear more of this. Damn you, will you untie me? I will complain to the ambassador. I will write to the Gazette. England will blow your trumpery little fleet out of the water and sweep your tinpot army into Siberia for this. Will you let me go? Damn you! Curse you! What the devil do you mean by it? I'll-I'll-I'll- [he is carried out of hearing].

NARYSHKIN [snatching his hands from Claire's face with a scream, and shaking his finger frantically]. Agh! [The Sergeant, amazed, lets go her hands.] She has bitten me, the little vixen.

CLAIRE [spitting and wiping her mouth disgustedly]. How dare you put your dirty paws on my mouth? Ugh! Psha!

THE SERGEANT. Be merciful, Little angel Mother.

CLAIRE. Do not presume to call me your little angel mother. Where are the police?

NARYSHKIN. We are the police in St Petersburg, little spitfire.

THE SERGEANT. God knows we have no orders to harm you, Little Mother. Our duty is done. You are well and strong; but I shall never be the same man again. He is a mighty and terrible fighter, as stout as a bear. He has broken my sweetbread with his strong knees. God knows poor folk should not be set upon such dangerous adversaries!

CLAIRE. Serve you right! Where have they taken Captain Edstaston to?

NARYSHKIN [spitefully]. To the Empress, little beauty. He has insulted the Empress. He will receive a hundred and one blows of the knout. [He laughs and goes out, nursing his bitten finger.]

THE SERGEANT. He will feel only the first twenty and he will be mercifully dead long before the end, little darling.

CLAIRE [sustained by an invincible snobbery]. They dare not touch an English officer. I will go to the Empress myself: she cannot know who Captain Edstaston is—who we are.

THE SERGEANT. Do so in the name of the Holy Nicholas, little beauty.

CLAIRE. Don't be impertinent. How can I get admission to the palace?

THE SERGEANT. Everybody goes in and out of the palace, little love.

CLAIRE. But I must get into the Empress's presence. I must speak to her.

THE SERGEANT. You shall, dear Little Mother. You shall give the poor old Sergeant a rouble; and the blessed Nicholas will make your salvation his charge.

CLAIRE [impetuously]. I will give you [she is about to say fifty roubles, but checks herself cautiously]– Well: I don't mind giving you two roubles if I can speak to the Empress.

THE SERGEANT [joyfully]. I praise Heaven for you, Little Mother. Come. [He leads the way out.] It was the temptation of the devil that led your young man to bruise my vitals and deprive me of breath. We must be merciful to one another's faults.

THE FOURTH SCENE

A triangular recess communicating by a heavily curtained arch with the huge ballroom of the palace. The light is subdued by red shades on the candles. In the wall adjoining that pierced by the arch is a door. The only piece of furniture is a very handsome chair on the arch side. In the ballroom they are dancing a polonaise to the music of a brass band.

Naryshkin enters through the door, followed by the soldiers carrying Edstaston, still trussed to the pole. Exhausted and dogged, he makes no sound.

NARYSHKIN. Halt. Get that pole clear of the prisoner. [They dump Edstaston on the floor and detach the pole. Naryshkin stoops over him and addresses him insultingly. Well! are you ready to be tortured? This is the Empress's private torture chamber. Can I do anything to make you quite comfortable? You have only to mention it.

EDSTASTON. Have you any back teeth?

NARYSHKIN [surprised]. Why?

EDSTASTON. His Majesty King George the Third will send for six of them when the news of this reaches London; so look out, damn your eyes!

NARYSHKIN [frightened]. Oh, I assure you I am only obeying my orders. Personally I abhor torture, and would save you if I could. But the Empress is proud; and what woman would forgive the slight you put upon her?

EDSTASTON. As I said before: Damn your eyes!

NARYSHKIN [almost in tears]. Well, it isn't my fault. [To the soldiers, insolently.] You know your orders? You remember what you have to do when the Empress gives you the word? [The soldiers salute in assent.]

Naryshkin passes through the curtains, admitting a blare of music and a strip of the brilliant white candlelight from the chandeliers in the ballroom as he does so. The white light vanishes and the music is muffled as the curtains fall together behind him. Presently the band stops abruptly: and Naryshkin comes back through the curtains. He makes a warning gesture to the soldiers, who stand at attention. Then he moves the curtain to allow Catherine to enter. She is in full Imperial regalia, and stops sternly just where she has entered. The soldiers fall on their knees.

CATHERINE. Obey your orders.

The soldiers seize Edstaston, and throw him roughly at the feet of the Empress.

CATHERINE [looking down coldly on him]. Also [the German word], you have put me to the trouble of sending for you twice. You had better have come the first time.

EDSTASTON [exsuffocate, and pettishly angry]. I haven't come either time. I've been carried. I call it infernal impudence.

CATHERINE. Take care what you say.

EDSTASTON. No use. I daresay you look very majestic and very handsome; but I can't see you; and I am not intimidated. I am an Englishman; and you can kidnap me; but you can't bully me.

NARYSHKIN. Remember to whom you are speaking.

CATHERINE [violently, furious at his intrusion]. Remember that dogs should be dumb. [He shrivels.] And do you, Captain, remember that famous as I am for my clemency, there are limits to the

patience even of an Empress.

EDSTASTON. How is a man to remember anything when he is trussed up in this ridiculous fashion? I can hardly breathe. [He makes a futile struggle to free himself.] Here: don't be unkind, your Majesty: tell these fellows to unstrap me. You know you really owe me an apology.

CATHERINE. You think you can escape by appealing, like Prince Patiomkin, to my sense of humor?

EDSTASTON. Sense of humor! Ho! Ha, ha! I like that. Would anybody with a sense of humor make a guy of a man like this, and then expect him to take it seriously? I say: do tell them to loosen these straps.

CATHERINE [seating herself]. Why should I, pray?

EDSTASTON. Why! Why! Why, because they're hurting me.

CATHERINE. People sometimes learn through suffering. Manners, for instance.

EDSTASTON. Oh, well, of course, if you're an ill-natured woman, hurting me on purpose, I have nothing more to say.

CATHERINE. A monarch, sir, has sometimes to employ a necessary, and salutary severity—

EDSTASTON [Interrupting her petulantly]. Quack! quack! quack!

CATHERINE. Donnerwetter!

EDSTASTON [continuing recklessly]. This isn't severity: it's tomfoolery. And if you think it's reforming my character or teaching me anything, you're mistaken. It may be a satisfaction to you; but if it is, all I can say is that it's not an amiable satisfaction.

CATHERINE [turning suddenly and balefully on Naryshkin]. What are you grinning at?

NARYSHKIN [falling on his knees in terror]. Be merciful, Little Mother. My heart is in my mouth.

CATHERINE. Your heart and your mouth will be in two separate parts of your body if you again forget in whose presence you stand. Go. And take your men with you. [Naryshkin crawls to the door. The soldiers rise.] Stop. Roll that [indicating Edstaston] nearer. [The soldiers obey.] Not so close. Did I ask you for a

footstool? [She pushes Edstaston away with her foot.]

EDSTASTON [with a sudden squeal]. Agh!!! I must really ask your Majesty not to put the point of your Imperial toe between my ribs. I am ticklesome.

CATHERINE. Indeed? All the more reason for you to treat me with respect, Captain. [To the others.] Begone. How many times must I give an order before it is obeyed?

NARYSHKIN. Little Mother: they have brought some instruments of torture. Will they be needed?

CATHERINE [indignantly]. How dare you name such abominations to a Liberal Empress? You will always be a savage and a fool, Naryshkin. These relics of barbarism are buried, thank God, in the grave of Peter the Great. My methods are more civilized. [She extends her toe towards Edstaston's ribs.]

EDSTASTON [shrieking hysterically]. Yagh! Ah! [Furiously.] If your Majesty does that again I will write to the London Gazette.

CATHERINE [to the soldiers]. Leave us. Quick! do you hear? Five thousand blows of the stick for the soldier who is in the room when I speak next. [The soldiers rush out.] Naryshkin: are you waiting to be knouted? [Naryshkin backs out hastily.]

Catherine and Edstaston are now alone. Catherine has in her hand a sceptre or baton of gold. Wrapped round it is a new pamphlet, in French, entitled L'Homme aux Quarante Ecus. She calmly unrolls this and begins to read it at her ease as if she were quite alone. Several seconds elapse in dead silence. She becomes more and more absorbed in the pamphlet, and more and more amused by it.

CATHERINE [greatly pleased by a passage, and turning over the leaf]]. Ausgezeichnet!

EDSTASTON. Ahem!

Silence. Catherine reads on.

CATHERINE. Wie komisch!

EDSTASTON. Ahem! ahem!

Silence.

CATHERINE [soliloquizing enthusiastically]. What a wonderful author is Monsieur Voltaire! How lucidly he exposes the folly of

this crazy plan for raising the entire revenue of the country from a single tax on land! how he withers it with his irony! how he makes you laugh whilst he is convincing you! how sure one feels that the proposal is killed by his wit and economic penetration: killed never to be mentioned again among educated people!

EDSTASTON. For Heaven's sake, Madam, do you intend to leave me tied up like this while you discuss the blasphemies of that abominable infidel? Agh!! [She has again applied her toe.] Oh! Oo!

CATHERINE [calmly]. Do I understand you to say that Monsieur Voltaire is a great philanthropist and a great philosopher as well as the wittiest man in Europe?

EDSTASTON. Certainly not. I say that his books ought to be burnt by the common hangman [her toe touches his ribs]. Yagh! Oh don't. I shall faint. I can't bear it.

CATHERINE. Have you changed your opinion of Monsieur Voltaire?

EDSTASTON. But you can't expect me as a member of the Church of England [she tickles him] –agh! Ow! Oh Lord! he is anything you like. He is a philanthropist, a philosopher, a beauty: he ought to have a statue, damn him! [she tickles him]. No! bless him! save him victorious, happy and glorious! Oh, let eternal honors crown his name: Voltaire thrice worthy on the rolls of fame! [Exhausted.] Now will you let me up? And look here! I can see your ankles when you tickle me: it's not ladylike.

CATHERINE [sticking out her toe and admiring it critically]. Is the spectacle so disagreeable?

EDSTASTON. It's agreeable enough; only [with intense expression] for heaven's sake don't touch me in the ribs.

CATHERINE [putting aside the pamphlet]. Captain Edstaston, why did you refuse to come when I sent for you?

EDSTASTON. Madam, I cannot talk tied up like this.

CATHERINE. Do you still admire me as much as you did this morning?

EDSTASTON. How can I possibly tell when I can't see you? Let me get up and look. I can't see anything now except my toes and yours.

CATHERINE. Do you still intend to write to the London Gazette about me?

EDSTASTON. Not if you will loosen these straps. Quick: loosen me. I'm fainting.

CATHERINE. I don't think you are [tickling him].

EDSTASTON. Agh! Cat!

CATHERINE. What [she tickles him again].

EDSTASTON [with a shriek]. No: angel, angel!

CATHERINE [tenderly]. Geliebter!

EDSTASTON. I don't know a word of German; but that sounded kind. [Becoming hysterical.] Little Mother, beautiful little darling angel mother: don't be cruel: untie me. Oh, I beg and implore you. Don't be unkind. I shall go mad.

CATHERINE. You are expected to go mad with love when an Empress deigns to interest herself in you. When an Empress allows you to see her foot you should kiss it. Captain Edstaston, you are a booby.

EDSTASTON [indignantly]. I am nothing of the kind. I have been mentioned in dispatches as a highly intelligent officer. And let me warn your Majesty that I am not so helpless as you think. The English Ambassador is in that ballroom. A shout from me will bring him to my side; and then where will your Majesty be?

CATHERINE. I should like to see the English Ambassador or anyone else pass through that curtain against my orders. It might be a stone wall ten feet thick. Shout your loudest. Sob. Curse. Scream. Yell [she tickles him unmercifully].

EDSTASTON [frantically]. Ahowyou!!!! Agh! oh! Stop! Oh Lord! Ya-a-a-ah! [A tumult in the ballroom responds to his cries].

VOICES FROM THE BALLROOM. Stand back. You cannot pass. Hold her back there. The Empress's orders. It is out of the question. No, little darling, not in there. Nobody is allowed in there. You will be sent to Siberia. Don't let her through there, on your life. Drag her back. You will be knouted. It is hopeless, Mademoiselle: you must obey orders. Guard there! Send some men to hold her.

CLAIRE'S VOICE. Let me go. They are torturing Charles in there. I WILL go. How can you all dance as if nothing was happening? Let me go, I tell you. Let-me-go. [She dashes through the curtain, no one dares follow her.]

CATHERINE [rising in wrath]. How dare you?

CLAIRE [recklessly]. Oh, dare your grandmother! Where is my Charles? What are they doing to him?

EDSTASTON [shouting]. Claire, loosen these straps, in Heaven's name. Quick.

CLAIRE [seeing him and throwing herself on her knees at his side]. Oh, how dare they tie you up like that! [To Catherine.] You wicked wretch! You Russian savage! [She pounces on the straps, and begins unbuckling them.]

CATHERINE [conquering herself with a mighty effort]. Now self-control. Self-control, Catherine. Philosophy. Europe is looking on. [She forces herself to sit down.]

EDSTASTON. Steady, dearest: it is the Empress. Call her your Imperial Majesty. Call her Star of the North, Little Mother, Little Darling: that's what she likes; but get the straps off.

CLAIRE. Keep quiet, dear: I cannot get them off if you move.

CATHERINE [calmly]. Keep quite still, Captain [she tickles him.]

EDSTASTON. Ow! Agh! Ahowyow!

CLAIRE [stopping dead in the act of unbuckling the straps and turning sick with jealousy as she grasps the situation]. Was THAT what I thought was your being tortured?

CATHERINE [urbanely]. That is the favorite torture of Catherine the Second, Mademoiselle. I think the Captain enjoys it very much.

CLAIRE. Then he can have as much more of it as he wants. I am sorry I intruded. [She rises to go.]

EDSTASTON [catching her train in his teeth and holding on like a bull-dog]. Don't go. Don't leave me in this horrible state. Loosen me. [This is what he is saying: but as he says it with the train in his mouth it is not very intelligible.]

CLAIRE. Let go. You are undignified and ridiculous enough yourself without making me ridiculous. [She snatches her train

away.]

EDSTASTON. Ow! You've nearly pulled my teeth out: you're worse than the Star of the North. [To Catherine.] Darling Little Mother: you have a kind heart, the kindest in Europe. Have pity. Have mercy. I love you. [Claire bursts into tears.] Release me.

CATHERINE. Well, just to show you how much kinder a Russian savage can be than an English one though I am sorry to say I am a German) here goes! [She stoops to loosen the straps.]

CLAIRE [jealously]. You needn't trouble, thank you. [She pounces on the straps: and the two set Edstaston free between them.] Now get up, please; and conduct yourself with some dignity if you are not utterly demoralized.

EDSTASTON. Dignity! Ow! I can't. I'm stiff all over. I shall never be able to stand up again. Oh Lord! how it hurts! [They seize him by the shoulders and drag him up.] Yah! Agh! Wow! Oh! Mmmmm! Oh, Little Angel Mother, don't ever do this to a man again. Knout him; kill him; roast him; baste him; head, hang, and quarter him; but don't tie him up like that and tickle him.

CATHERINE. Your young lady still seems to think that you enjoyed it.

CLAIRE. I know what I think. I will never speak to him again. Your Majesty can keep him, as far as I am concerned.

CATHERINE. I would not deprive you of him for worlds; though really I think he's rather a darling [she pats his cheek].

CLAIRE [snorting]. So I see, indeed.

EDSTASTON. Don't be angry, dearest: in this country everybody's a darling. I'll prove it to you. [To Catherine.] Will your Majesty be good enough to call Prince Patiomkin?

CATHERINE [surprised into haughtiness]. Why?

EDSTASTON. To oblige me.

Catherine laughs good-humoredly and goes to the curtains and opens them. The band strikes up a Redowa.

CATHERINE [calling imperiously]. Patiomkin! [The music stops suddenly.] Here! To me! Go on with your music there, you fools. [The Redowa is resumed.]

The sergeant rushes from the ballroom to relieve the Empress of the curtain. Patiomkin comes in dancing with Yarinka.

CATHERINE [to Patiomkin]. The English captain wants you, little darling.

Catherine resumes her seat as Patiomkin intimates by a grotesque bow that he is at Edstaston's service. Yarinka passes behind Edstaston and Claire, and posts herself on Claire's right.

EDSTASTON. Precisely. [To Claire.] You observe, my love: "little darling." Well, if her Majesty calls him a darling, is it my fault that she calls me one too?

CLAIRE. I don't care: I don't think you ought to have done it. I am very angry and offended.

EDSTASTON. They tied me up, dear. I couldn't help it. I fought for all I was worth.

THE SERGEANT [at the curtains]. He fought with the strength of lions and bears. God knows I shall carry a broken sweetbread to my grave.

EDSTASTON. You can't mean to throw me over, Claire. [Urgently.] Claire. Claire.

VARINKA [in a transport of sympathetic emotion, pleading with clasped hands to Claire]. Oh, sweet little angel lamb, he loves you: it shines in his darling eyes. Pardon him, pardon him.

PATIOMKIN [rushing from the Empress's side to Claire and falling on his knees to her]. Pardon him, pardon him, little cherub! little wild duck! little star! little glory! little jewel in the crown of heaven!

CLAIRE. This is perfectly ridiculous.

VARINKA [kneeling to her]. Pardon him, pardon him, little delight, little sleeper in a rosy cradle.

CLAIRE. I'll do anything if you'll only let me alone.

THE SERGEANT [kneeling to her]. Pardon him, pardon him, lest the mighty man bring his whip to you. God knows we all need pardon!

CLAIRE [at the top of her voice]. I pardon him! I pardon him!

PATIOMKIN [springing up joyfully and going behind Claire, whom he raises in his arms]. Embrace her, victor of Bunker's Hill. Kiss

her till she swoons.

THE SERGEANT. Receive her in the name of the holy Nicholas.

VARINKA. She begs you for a thousand dear little kisses all over her body.

CLAIRE [vehemently]. I do not. [Patiomkin throws her into Edstaston's arms.] Oh! [The pair, awkward and shamefaced, recoil from one another, and remain utterly inexpressive.]

CATHERINE [pushing Edstaston towards Claire]. There is no help for it, Captain. This is Russia, not England.

EDSTASTON [plucking up some geniality, and kissing Claire ceremoniously on the brow]. I have no objection.

VARINKA [disgusted]. Only one kiss! and on the forehead! Fish. See how I kiss, though it is only my horribly ugly old uncle [she throws her arms round Patiomkin's neck and covers his face with kisses].

THE SERGEANT [moved to tears]. Sainted Nicholas: bless your lambs!

CATHERINE. Do you wonder now that I love Russia as I love no other place on earth?

NARYSHKIN [appearing at the door]. Majesty: the model for the new museum has arrived.

CATHERINE [rising eagerly and making for the curtains]. Let us go. I can think of nothing but my museum. [In the archway she stops and turns to Edstaston, who has hurried to lift the curtain for her.] Captain, I wish you every happiness that your little angel can bring you. [For his ear alone.] I could have brought you more; but you did not think so. Farewell.

EDSTASTON [kissing her hand, which, instead of releasing, he holds caressingly and rather patronizingly in his own]. I feel your Majesty's kindness so much that I really cannot leave you without a word of plain wholesome English advice.

CATHERINE snatching her hand away and bounding forward as if he had touched her with a spur]. Advice!!!

PATIOMKIN. Madman: take care!

NARYSHKIN. Advise the Empress!!

THE SERGEANT. Sainted Nicholas!

VARINKA. Hoo hoo! [a stifled splutter of laughter].

EDSTASTON [following the Empress and resuming kindly but judicially]. After all, though your Majesty is of course a great queen, yet when all is said, I am a man; and your Majesty is only a woman.

CATHERINE. Only a wo— [she chokes].

EDSTASTON [continuing]. Believe me, this Russian extravagance will not do. I appreciate as much as any man the warmth of heart that prompts it; but it is overdone: it is hardly in the best taste: it is really I must say it—it is not proper.

CATHERINE [ironically, in German]. So!

EDSTASTON. Not that I cannot make allowances. Your Majesty has, I know, been unfortunate in your experience as a married woman—

CATHERINE [furious]. Alle Wetter!!!

EDSTASTON [sentimentally]. Don't say that. Don't think of him in that way. After all, he was your husband; and whatever his faults may have been, it is not for you to think unkindly of him.

CATHERINE [almost bursting]. I shall forget myself.

EDSTASTON. Come! I am sure he really loved you; and you truly loved him.

CATHERINE [controlling herself with a supreme effort]. No, Catherine. What would Voltaire say?

EDSTASTON. Oh, never mind that vile scoffer. Set an example to Europe, Madam, by doing what I am going to do. Marry again. Marry some good man who will be a strength and support to your old age.

CATHERINE. My old—[she again becomes speechless].

EDSTASTON. Yes: we must all grow old, even the handsomest of us.

CATHERINE [sinking into her chair with a gasp]. Thank you.

EDSTASTON. You will thank me more when you see your little ones round your knee, and your man there by the fireside in the winter evenings—by the way, I forgot that you have no fireside here in spite of the coldness of the climate; so shall I say by the

stove?

CATHERINE. Certainly, if you wish. The stove by all means.

EDSTASTON [impulsively]. Ah, Madam, abolish the stove: believe me, there is nothing like the good old open grate. Home! duty! happiness! they all mean the same thing; and they all flourish best on the drawing-room hearthrug. (Turning to Claire.) And now, my love, we must not detain the Queen: she is anxious to inspect the model of her museum, to which I am sure we wish every success.

CLAIRE [coldly]. I am not detaining her.

EDSTASTON. Well, goodbye [wringing Patiomkin's hand, goo-oo-oodbye, Prince: come and see us if ever you visit England. Spire View, Deepdene, Little Mugford, Devon, will always find me. [To Yarinka, kissing her hand.] Goodbye, Mademoiselle: goodbye, Little Mother, if I may call you that just once. [Varinka puts up her face to be kissed.] Eh? No, no, no, no: you don't mean that, you know. Naughty! [To the Sergeant.] Goodbye, my friend. You will drink our healths with this [tipping him].

THE SERGEANT. The blessed Nicholas will multiply your fruits, Little Father.

EDSTASTON. Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

He goes out backwards, bowing, with Claire curtsying, having been listened to in utter dumbfoundedness by Patiomkin and Naryshkin, in childlike awe by Yarinka, and with quite inexpressible feelings by Catherine. When he is out of sight she rises with clinched fists and raises her arms and her closed eyes to Heaven. Patiomkin: rousing himself from his stupor of amazement, springs to her like a tiger, and throws himself at her feet.

PATIOMKIN. What shall I do to him for you? Skin him alive? Cut off his eyelids and stand him in the sun? Tear his tongue out? What shall it be?

CATHERINE [opening her eyes]. Nothing. But oh, if I could only have had him for my—for my—for my—

PATIOMKIN [in a growl of jealousy]. For your lover?

CATHERINE [with an ineffable smile]. No: for my museum.