

***BARONESS
ORCZY***

***THE EMPEROR'S
CANDLESTICKS***

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Baroness Orczy

The Emperor's Candlesticks

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Chapter I

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GAY, chic Vienna was *en fête*. What would you? Shrove Tuesday is the very last day, allowed by our Holy Mother the Church for revelry, before the long austere forty days of Lent, and if we do not make use of her full permission to enjoy ourselves, to the full extent of our capacity, we shall have nothing left to atone for to-morrow, when the good fathers place the cross of ashes on our foreheads, and bid us remember that dust we are, to dust return.

Therefore Vienna was drinking the overflowing cup of pleasure to-day; had been drinking in it in its gaily lighted streets and boulevards, and was now enjoying its last drops at the opera ball, the climax to a carnival that had been unusually brilliant this year.

And in the hall, where but two nights ago the harmonious discords of Wagner's "Nibelungen" had enchanted and puzzled a seriously-minded audience, to-night Pierrots and Pierrettes, Fausts and Marguerites, nymphs, fairies, gnomes and what-nots chased each other with merry cries and loud laughter, to the sweet tunes of Strauss' melodious, dreamy waltzes; while the boxes, each filled with spectators eager to watch, though afraid to mingle in the giddy throng, showed mysterious dominoes and black masks, behind which gleamed eyes rendered bright with suppressed excitement at the intoxicating spectacle below.

"Come down, fair domino, I know thee," whispered a richly dressed odalisque, whose jewelled mask could not

outshine the merry twinkle of her black eyes beneath. She had placed one dainty hand on the ledge of a pit tier box, in which two black dominoes had sat for some time, partially hidden by the half-drawn curtains, and had watched the gay throng beneath them for some half-hour or so, apparently unnoticed.

The taller of the two dominoes bent forward, trying to pierce the enterprising houri's disguise.

"Nay! if you know me, fair mask, come up to me, and let me renew an acquaintance that should have never been dropped!"

But she had once more disappeared as swiftly as she had come, and the black domino, whose curiosity was aroused, tried vainly to distinguish her graceful figure among the glitter of the moving crowd.

"I wonder our sober dresses succeeded in drawing that gay butterfly's attention," he said, turning to his companion, "and what her object was in speaking to me, if she did not mean to continue the *causerie*."

"Oh, it is the usual way with these gay Viennese *bourgeoisies*," replied his companion; "your Imperial Highness has been sitting too much in the shade of that curtain, and the odalisque thought your obvious desire to remain hidden an object of interest."

The taller domino now lent forward in the box, his opera-glass glued to his mask, eagerly scanning the crowd; but, though numerous Moorish and Turkish veiled figures passed backwards and forwards, he did not recognise the enterprising odalisque among them.

"Look not for the good that lies far away when the best is so close at hand," whispered a mocking voice, close to his elbow.

The black domino turned sharply round, just in time to catch hold of a little hand, which had crept round the column, that separated the box in which he was sitting, from the adjoining one.

"The best is still too far," he whispered; "is it unattainable?"

"Always try to obtain the best," replied the mocking voice, "even at the risk of scaling the inaccessible walls of an opera-box."

"I cannot get to thee, fair mask, without momentarily letting go this tiny hand, and it is never safe to let a bird, even for a moment, out of its cage."

"Black Domino, we often must risk the lesser to obtain the great," said the odalisque maliciously.

"I entreat your Imperial Highness to remain here," said the second domino imploringly; "you are here incognito: I am the only one in attendance on you Highness, and--"

"All the more reason why it should be possible, for one brief moment, for a Tsarevitch to do as he likes," retorted the taller domino laughingly.

And, before his companion had time to add another word of warning, the young man had, with the freedom which King Carnival always allows at such a time and in such places, climbed the ledge of the box, and scrambled with youthful alacrity into the one that contained his mysterious bright-eyed houri.

But alas! for the waywardness and fickleness of the daughters of the East, no sooner had the black domino safely reached *terra firma* once more, after his perilous climb, than the swift opening and shutting of a door told him but too plain that the will-o'-the-wisp wished to evade him yet again.

What young man is there, be him prince or peasant, who would have allowed so mocking a game to be carried on at his expense. Nicholas Alexandrovitch, son and heir to the Tsar of all Russias, remembered only that he was twenty years of age, that he had come to the opera ball, accompanied by that dry old stick Lavrovski, with the sole purpose of enjoying himself incognito for once, and ... he started off in hot pursuit.

The passage behind the box was quite empty, but in the direction leading to the *foyer*, some fifty yards, distant, he distantly caught the sight of a swiftly disappearing figure, and the heels of the prettiest pair of Turkish slippers it had ever been his good fortune to see.

The *foyer* was, at that late hour of the night, a scene of the most motley, most picturesque confusion. Assyrian queens were walking arm in arm with John Bulls, Marguerites were coquetting unblushingly with gallants of some two centuries later, while Hamlets and Orthellos were indulging in the favourite Viennese pastime of hoisting their present partners on to the tallest pillars they could find, with a view to starving them out up there, into a jump some ten or twelve feet below, when they would perforce land into the outstretched arms of their delighted swains.

And very pretty these tall pillars looked, thus decorated with living, laughing, chatting figures of v Ivándières, Pierrettes-ay, and of sober Ophelias and languishing Isoldes. But the black domino heeded than not; darting hither and thither, taking no notice of cheeky sallies and rough *bousculades*, he pushed his way through the crowd towards one spot, close to the entrance, where a special little jewelled cap was fast disappearing through the wide open portals, that led into the gaily lighted place beyond.

The odalisque had evidently either repented of her audacious adventure, or was possessed of an exceptionally bold spirit, for without a moment's hesitation she ran down the stone steps, taking no further heed of the jesting crowd she was forced to pass through, or of the two or three idle masks who accosted her, and also started in pursuit.

Having reached the bottom of the steps she seemed to hesitate a moment, only a second perhaps—was it intentionally?—but that second gave Nicholas Alexandrovitch the chance he had for some time striven for; he overtook her, just as she laid her hand on the door of a *fiaker* which has drawn up, and lifting her off the ground as if she were a feather, he placed her inside, and sat down in front of her, hot and panting, while the coachman, without apparently waiting for any directions, drove off rapidly through the ever noisier and gayer crowd.

Chapter II

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ALL this had excited little or no attention among the bystanders. How should it? An opera ball teems with such episodes.

Two young people, one in pursuit of the other—a signal—a handy *fiaker*, *et voilà!* Who cares? Everybody is busy with his own affairs, his own little bits of adventure and intrigue.

Surely that grey domino over there, standing under one of the fine electric light chandeliers, could have no interest in the unknown odalisque and her ardent swain, for he made not the slightest attempt at pursuit; yet his eyes followed the fast disappearing *fiaker*, as long as it was recognisable amidst the crowd of vehicles and mummers. A young man he was; evidently not anxious to remain incognito, for he had thrown back the hood of his domino, and held the mask in his hand.

Yet though he thus, as it were, courted recognition, he visibly started as a soft musical voice, with the faintest vestige of foreign intonation, addressed him merrily.

"Why so moody, M. Volenski? Have Strauss' waltzes tired out your spirits, or has your donna eloped with a hated rival?"

The young man pulled himself together, and forced open his eyes and thoughts to wander away from the *fiaker*, which now appeared as a mere speck, to the graceful figure in front of him, who owned that musical voice and had called him by name.

"Madam Demidoff!" he said, evidently not pleasantly surprised.

"Herself," she replied, laughingly; "do not assume an astonishment, so badly justified. I am not a Viennese *grande dame*, and coming to an opera ball is not the most unpardonable of my eccentricities."

"Yes! but alone?"

"Not alone," she rejoined, still merry, "since you are here to protect me from my worst perils, and lend me a helping hand in the most dire difficulties."

"Allow me to start on these most enviable functions by finding your carriage for you," he said, a trifle absently.

She bit her lip, and tried a laugh, but this time there was a *souçon* of harshness in the soft foreign notes.

"Ah, Iván, how you must reckon on my indulgence, that you venture so unguardedly on so ungallant a speech!"

"Was it ungallant?"

"Come, what would your judgement be on a young man, one of our *jeunesse dorée*, who, meeting a lady at the opera ball, offers, after the first two minutes, to find her carriage for her."

"I should deem it to be an unpardonable sin, and punishable by some nameless tortures, if that lady happens to be Madam Demidoff," he said, striving to make banal speeches to hide his evident desire for immediate retreat.

She looked at his keenly for a minute, then sighed a quick, impatient little sigh.

"Well, call my carriage, Iván; I will not keep you, you obviously have some pressing engagement."

"The Cardinal--" he began clumsily.

"Ah! his Eminence requires your attention at so late an hour?" she said, still a little bitterly.

"his Eminence is leaving Vienna to-morrow and there are still many letters to answer. I shall probably be writing most of the night through."

She appeared content with this explanation, and while Volenski gave directions to one of the gorgeous attendants stationed outside the house to call Madam Demidoff's carriage, she resumed the conversation in a more matter-of-fact tone.

"his Eminence will be glad of a holiday after the trying diplomatic business of the past few weeks; and you, M. Volenski, I feel sure have also earned a few days repose.

"The Cardinal certainly has given me two or three weeks' respite, while he himself goes to Tyrol for the benefit of his health."

"And after that?"

"We meet at Petersburg, where his Eminence has an important memorial to submit to his Majesty the Tsar."

"You yourself, madame--"

"Yes, I shall probably be there before you both arrive, and thus have the honour of welcoming his Eminence in person. But here is my carriage. It is 'au revoir,' then, M. Volenski, not 'adieu,' luckily for you," she added once more coquettishly, "for had it been a longer parting I should have found it hard to forgive your not even calling to leave a bit of pasteboard with my concierge."

He had given her his arm, and was leading her down the wide stone stairs, trying all the while not to appear relieved that the interview was at last over, and his faro companion

on the way to leaving him alone with his anxieties and agitation.

"Good-night, Iván," she said, after she had helped her into her carriage, and wrapped her furs round her.

Long after her coachman had started she leant her head out of the window, and watched him, as long as she could distinguish his grey domino among the crowd; there was a wistful look on her face, also a frown, perhaps of self contempt. Then, when the carriage had left the opera house, with all its gaiety and tumult, behind, and she no longer could see Iván Volenski's figure at the foot of the wide stone stairs, she seemed to dismiss with an impatient sigh and a shrug any little touch of sentiment that may have lurked in her thoughts, and it was an impassive, slightly irritable *grande dame* who alighted out of the little elegant *coupé*, under the portico of one of the finest houses on the Kolowrátring.

"Send Eugen to me in my boudoir at once," she said to the footmen, who preceded her upstairs. "If he is from home, one of you sit up till he comes in; if he is asleep, he must be wakened forthwith."

She seemed too agitated to sit down, though the arm-chairs in her luxurious boudoir stood most invitingly by. She was pacing up and down the room, listening for every footstep. Far from her was all touch of sentiment, all recollection of the figure in the grey domino whom she had called Iván, and who seemed all but too eager to be rid of her.

What she had seen to-night, not half hour ago, had mystified her beyond expression. She (and of this she felt

convinced), was the only person, with the exception of old Count Lavrovski, and the one confidential valet, who, in this city, knew that in the guise of that black domino was the heir to the Russian throne.

He had been spoken to by a forward masque, disguised as an odalisque; that was neither surprising nor unusual at carnival time, when every description of forwardness is not only permissible, but encouraged. The Tsarevitch, with youthful impetuosity, had followed, forgetting his rank and the dangers that always surround his position, and both he and the odalisque had disappeared into a *fiaker*, which Madame Demidoff felt convinced had been there ready waiting for them, and driven off, without apparently any directions being given to the coachman.

"Come in,!" she said, much relieved, as a discreet footstep, and a rap at the door caught her ear, still on the alert. She took up a cigarette from a little case that lay close to her hand; she felt it would calm her nerves, and steady her voice.

A man entered—flat-nosed, high cheek-boned Russian of the lower classes, whose low forehead betokened an absence of what is usually called intellectuality, but whose piercing, cold, grey eyes, deeply sunk between the thinnest of lids, spoke of cunning and alacrity. A useful man, no doubt. Madame Demidoff seemed more calm the moment she spoke to him.

"Eugen," she said, "listen to me, for something very mysterious has happened at the opera ball to-night, and there is some work you must do for me now, at once, and also during the course of to-morrow.

"The Tsarevitch went to the opera ball to-night disguised as a black domino.... Yes! he was in Vienna.... Incognito.... No one knew it.... The whole thing was foolish in the extreme, and I am beginning to fear some foul agency must have been at work, he was decoyed from his opera-box by a woman dressed as an odalisque ... in red and gold, I think ... no matter the description... There were hundreds in that guise at the opera. Nicholas Alexandrovitch followed her; a *fiaker* was waiting for them; he jumped in, and it drove off at great rapidity towards the old town."

"Yes, *barina*?"

For she had paused a moment to collect her thoughts before giving him her final directions.

"You must find out for me first whether the Tsarevitch has returned to his hotel, and if not, what steps Count Lavrovski is taking to discover the key to the mystery. You must dog the old man's every footstep, and if he goes to the police, or sends any telegraphic message across to Petersburg, you must apprise me of it at once. Moreover, both outside the opera house, at the *fiaker* stations, and at the various railways, you must glean what scraps of information you can relating to the flying odalisque and domino, or the *fiaker* that drove them. I leave by the express for Petersburg to-morrow at midnight; you must come and tell me what you have learnt in the early part of the evening."

She dismissed him now, and when once more alone she sat and thought over the occurrences of to-night. Then it was that and anon the wistful look—almost of yearning, that rendered her aristocratic face so sweet and tender—crept into her eyes; but when it came, the impatient little sigh and

self-contemptuous frown invariably accompanied it. Surely this worldly woman, this elegant *grande dame*, would not allow even the faintest vestige of sentiment to creep up among her recollections of the gay carnival ball, more especially as that sentiment was evidently directed towards one who--

"Ah me!" Madame Demidoff sighed again, threw away her cigarette, and rang for her maid, all with the idea of putting an end to any more thinking that night.

Chapter III

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As soon as Iván Volenski lost sight completely of Madame Demidoff's carriage, he, with a sigh of relief, retraced his steps up the wide stairs of the opera house, and joined a couple of dominoes, who, dressed like himself in uniform grey, stood isolated among the groups of masks that encumbered the entrance to the *foyer*. Together all three began sauntering in the direction of the Kolowátring.

They walked on in silence for some time, smoking cigarettes and pushing their way through the crowd as best they could.

On the Ringstrasse the scene was as gay as ever; laughing groups of masks in bands of a score or so occupying the whole width of the street made progress somewhat difficult. But the three grey dominoes seemed in no great hurry; they exchanged jests where repartee was expected of them, and mixed with the crowd where it was impossible to avoid it.

The sumptuous houses and gorgeously decorated shops on either side were illuminated with many coloured lights, changing this midnight hour into light as broad as day. On the balconies, gaily festooned with flowers, groups of onlookers gazed on the animated scene below, whilst every now and then, from some opened windows, dreamy waltzes and weird *csárdás* mingled with the noisy street cries and laughter, telling of aristocratic balls and parties, where the King Carnival was courted with equal mirth if somewhat less

exuberance and noise. Sometimes the groups of mummers would stop beneath some of these windows and watch the bejewelled figures flitting to-and-fro, and listen to the soft cadences of the gipsy music—the one thing Hungarian, the Viennese cannot bring themselves to despise.

But the three dominoes did not pause long, amidst this gay and bustling scene, nor did the brilliant lighted Ring appear to have any attraction for them, for presently they turned into a side street, uninviting and dark though it seemed; and being free to walk more rapidly, soon left the sounds of merry laughter and revelry far behind them.

Still they walked on in silence, not heeding now the few muffled masks that passed them with a laugh and jest, on their way towards the gayer part of the city.

With these few exceptions the streets they now crossed were completely deserted; no illuminations from the windows proclaimed the reign of King Carnival, no sound of dreamy waltz music lent a touch of merriment to the dismal, stone-paved courtyards that yawned drearily on either side.

Into one of these the three dominoes presently turned, and, with out waiting to reply to the *concierge's* challenge as to whom they were seeking at so late an hour, they found their way to the back stone staircase, which was but dimly lighted by a hanging lamp, that flickered in the draught, and threw weird shadows on the steps. Having reached the second flight, one of the dominoes gave a peculiar rhythmic knock on one of the doors facing him, which after a few moments was thrown open, while an anxious voice asked:

"Is that you, Baloukine?"

"Yes," replied the domino, "with Iván and Serge; let us in."

The room which they had now entered, furnished with an attempt at comfort, half as an office, and half as a smoking lounge, was filled with some twelve or fourteen men, of all ages, and apparently, judging from their clothes, of very mixed social positions; while four or five of them, collarless, and probably shirtless, wore working jackets and clumsy boots, some wore beautifully cut dress-clothes and spotless linen, with a flower in the button-hole, and one elderly man, with a pointed grey beard, and handsome, aristocratic features, wore two or three decorations fastened to his coat.

All, however, whether peer or peasant, seemed on the best of terms together, and smoking pipes and cigarettes of peace and fraternity.

"What news?" asked half a dozen voices, as the new arrivals divested themselves of their grey dominoes, and shook hands with those sitting around.

"The best."

"Where is he?" asked a voice.

"In Mirkovitch's *fiaker* with Maria Stefanowna."

"And presently?"

"Mirkovitch's guest at No 21, Heumarkt."

The questions and answers followed each other in rapid succession; the tension of suspense had evidently been great, the relief at the news most obviously welcome, for a sigh of satisfaction seemed to rise in unison from a dozen heaving, oppressed chests.

"And Mirkovitch?" asked one of the older men.

"He will be here anon."

"As soon as *he* is safe under lock and key."

"Then he is in our power?"

"Absolutely."

"Did Lavrovski attempt to follow him?"

"Not till it was too late, and the *fiaker* out of sight. He fell into the trap, without a shadow of suspicion."

There was a pause now; evidently much had to be thought of and serious points considered, for during the next ten minutes not a sound disturbed the stillness of the room, save the crackling of burning logs in the wide chimney, and one or two whispered questions and rapidly given answers.

Then a heavy tread was heard in the passage outside, the same rhythmical knock on the door, while a gruff voice said:

"Mirkovitch."

A Herculean man, some six foot three in height, with long grey hair thrown back from a massive forehead, and piecing grey eyes, half-hidden under a pair of bushy eyebrows, now joined the group of smokers, greeting them all but with two words:

"All safe."

"Prisoner?"

"Safely in my house; no windows, only a skylight. No chance of discovery, and less of escape."

"And Maria Stefenowna?"

"Did her part splendidly; he suspected nothing till he heard the door locked behind him."

"Did he speak?"

"Only to call himself a fool, which remark was obvious."