

Helen Simpson



*Saraband for
Dead Lovers*

Helen Simpson

Saraband for Dead Lovers



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338096234

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[FOREWORD](#)

[I - DUCHESS SOPHIA](#)

[II - SOPHIA-DOROTHEA](#)

[III - CLARA VON PLATEN](#)

[THE END](#)

FOREWORD

[Table of Contents](#)

Everyone knows, who has tried it, that history will not fit into fiction without some little adjustment here and there, a tampering with the letter in order that the spirit may have a better chance. Such adjustments have been made throughout this book, and may easily be discovered by the historian; but I hope he will not find that violence has been done to any essential truth.

I - DUCHESS SOPHIA

Table of Contents

AQUILINA. Tell him I am gone to Bed: Tell him I am not at Home;
tell him
I've better Company with me, or any thing; tell him in short I
will not
see him, the eternal troublesome vexatious Fool:--

MAID. But Madam! He's here already, just enter'd the Doors.

--*Venice Preserv'd*. Act III, Scene I.

(I)

"I send with all speed," wrote Elizabeth-Charlotte, Duchesse d'Orléans, tucked away in her little room surrounded by portraits of ancestors, "to wish you, my dearest aunt and Serene Highness, joy of the recent betrothal. It will redound to the happiness of Hanover and Zelle. It links two dominions which have long possessed for each other the affection natural to neighbours, but which now may justly embrace as allies. It appears to me that no arrangement could well be more suitable, and I offer to the high contracting parties my sincerest wishes for a continuance of their happiness."

The Duchess smiled grimly, dashed her quill into the ink, and proceeded in a more homely manner.

"Civilities apart, What in heaven's name is the Duke of Hanover about? This little Sophie-Dorothée will never do; she is not even legitimate, and as for her mother, you know as well as I do that Eléonore d'Olbreuse is nothing better than a French she-poodle to whom uncle George William of

Zelle treated himself when he was younger, I will not say more foolish, and has never been able to get rid of since. What, with all respect, was your husband thinking of to bring French blood into a decent German family, and connected with the English throne, too! In brief, my dearest aunt, all this is a mystery to me. I can only presume that it was concluded over your head, and that money played the chief role. Men, men, men! Clink a thaler in their ear, and hold a carrot in front of a donkey, and forward both animals go, with never a blink, down God knows what precipice. I do beg of you to write me such details as you have time for, and to accept my honest hope that a business so ill-judged may not lead to disaster."

This letter, reaching the Duchess of Hanover immediately after the wedding, made no very pleasant reading, even allowing for Charlotte's well-known trick of looking on the gloomier side of all new relationships, and particularly of marriage. Its sting lay in the assumption which permitted the writer to criticise the whole affair with freedom, and to goad the Duchess under cover of her Duke.

The fact was, the whole match was of Duchess Sophia's making; but with what agonies of troubled pride, what angry tears!

To begin with, the girl Sophia-Dorothea was not exactly illegitimate. She had been legitimised some six years before as a result of a bargain struck between her father and his brother Ernest Augustus, now Duke of Hanover, then Bishop of Osnabruck; after which the official marriage of a morganatic wife with her ducal husband took place before the wondering eyes of their daughter, aged ten, who almost

at once was swept into the matrimonial whirlpool with a princeling of Wolfenbüttel. True, this was only a betrothal, and the young man was carried off by a cannon-ball soon after; but it showed that the Frenchwoman's daughter need not go begging for suitors.

The Court of Hanover, holding aloof from these indecent proceedings, hurt in the very core of its pride by this admission of a half-commoner to the privileges of rank, turned away its eyes, while its ears remained alert for scandalous gossip. There was little enough, and that little ill-founded. The Frenchwoman was faithful to her Duke, and though tongues made the most of a letter from a Court page found among the twelve-year-old Dorothea's lesson books, such jejune displays of depravity were not satisfying. The Court of Hanover, besides, had problems of conduct peculiarly its own.

The Duke's mistress, Clara von Platen; what, for instance, of her? She was a part of the State furniture. The Duchess ignored her. The fashion in mistresses had been set by France and England; they were necessities of the time, they diverted, at some expense, kings' minds from serious matters; they were decorative often, and kept the arts alive for their service. But Platen troubled political waters. Duchess Sophia shrugged, and wrote high-spirited letters in three languages mocking such impudent creatures, together with other contemporary vexing trifles. One thing alone she did not mock. She set theologians jousting, she stirred philosophies with her chocolate-spoon, but genealogy was her God, and she would have no lack of reverence there. Her mother had been Bohemia's lovely ramshackle

wandering queen, her brother Rupert grew gouty and sullen, a pensioner on the bounty of his English nephew Charles. Perhaps the Duke's mistress had never in her life known such straits of poverty and humiliation as, in her early days, had the Duke's wife. She knew the worth of money, did Duchess Sophia, having lacked it in youth, but it weighed light against blood. Baroness Platen, a backstairs influence, could not impinge upon the consciousness of Duchess Sophia. The Duchess of Zelle, risen by letters patent and the fondness of a fool to pseudo-royalty, did so impinge. Dignity was hurt by her continuing to breathe under her husband's roof, twenty miles away. How maintain brotherly relations with the Duke of Zelle, while continuing to treat his wife as--Sophia's own phrase--a little clot of dirt? How count upon his help in war while refusing the necessary civil interchanges of gifts and visits? How forestall in practice his wife's manoeuvres while in theory omitting to observe her existence? Duchess Sophia's own hope was that the girl would prove wanton. "Dorothée is *canaille*," she wrote hopefully to her niece, when the infamous ducal wedding was mooted. "She will avenge us all--" betray her mean birth in some resounding way, kick over matrimonial traces, fail in dignity, run off with a groom; all these things Duchess Sophia hoped of the Frenchwoman's daughter, the Frenchwoman herself being so armed against scandal.

And yet six years later the girl was in her own house as a daughter, and the Duchess of Orleans could let her pen run in reprobation, heaving up tall capitals like lifted hands with something of that joy which the deserved misfortunes of a relative only can afford.

It was George-Louis, the eldest son of Hanover, who had forced his mother to this tribulation. He was a sulky, brutal, and courageous young man with a remote chance of the English throne, but nothing else to recommend him as a *parti*. Duchess Sophia beheld him without illusion. She had views, which could hardly be called hopes for him, in her cousin Charles's country, with her cousin James's daughter. The Duke of York had a leaning towards Popishness, the English would surely never abide him as King. His elder daughter had done well for herself in Holland, the younger, Anne, was free to receive advances. George-Louis knew no English, but on the whole silence became him better than the kind of speech he affected, and with a little pocket-money he might make a sufficient show. He was despatched, expensively, with letters for England which could very well have travelled by courier.

Unhappily for his less obvious mission, the Duke of York's daughter disliked him on sight. His pursuit of her, no doubt, was sluggish. He had been quite comfortable with a mistress, the sister of his father's Baroness, from the age of sixteen, and found himself not very patient of his mother's plans for an English marriage. She was always quoting England at him; it existed in her mind as an Isle of the Blessed, descent from whose kings gave strength and wisdom, having a mettlesome people better worth ruling than the mild Germans of her Hanover Duchy. But George-Louis liked Germans. They displayed right feelings where nobility was concerned; they were never casual. The English left his barge on the mud at Greenwich, and sent nobody to meet him; they lopped off the head of a nobleman while he

was there with no more ceremony, his wondering letter noted, than a cook might show to a pullet. They made him, however, after much Latin speechifying, a Doctor of Civil Law, and with this sole acknowledgment of interest in their future possible ruler sent him home.

Duchess Sophia received him with blended feelings of irritation and relief; after all, the Princess Anne's mother had been a commoner. But when she surveyed the marriageable young women of Europe, hardly a court was unblemished; France's bastards, for instance, were legitimised and gave themselves airs fit to send Madame the Duchess of Orléans into a swoon of rage. Those with the right quarterings had no money; and though Duchess Sophia would, if a choice were to be made, have let the money go--Bohemia was in her blood as well as England--her Duke was not of the same opinion. Her Duke's ambitions were not lofty; what was within his grasp, that he would put out his hand to. His brother's Duchy was near, was rich, would round off his own, and it went with his brother's only child.

The Duke gave his attention to the matter, urged by his mistress and her husband. The Platens knew their place. They aspired to no such coronet as had come the way of Eléonore d'Olbreuse, and cared exactly nothing for the externals of power. It delighted the Baroness to watch arms being presented and hats going off whenever the Duke of Hanover took the air, and to curtsy herself as low as anyone. She savoured with exquisite pleasure the difference between Ernest Augustus in his laced coat and Ernest Augustus in his nightshirt, and would dip to the one with all humility provided she might have her way the other. She

saw matters clearly, an excellent territory going begging, and her sister's young lover provided for. Ernest Augustus kept his sons short; he had five of them, and no very princely disposition to spend. The marriage would put money in George-Louis' pocket, unquestioned money, money of which, if the settlements were properly managed, he should have the sole disposal. His affections were not volatile, Baroness Platen's sister might count on retaining her hold for many years to come. In short, it was to everyone's advantage to bring off the match.

(II)

Matters being so, a courier arrived early one morning bearing a very secret packet from some person about the Court of Zelle. (The agreeable brothers maintained spies in each other's houses.) This letter was written in the simple cipher of the time, wherein news ran its course and only the names of those concerned in it were disguised. It came first to Platen's hands, who had no need to get out his key-code from the locked portfolio that so carefully accompanied him everywhere. He poised his spectacles and read:

"Frau Sudel is making preparations for the little Federleicht's feast, two days hence. Unless steps are taken, there may be some crockery broken, for invitations have gone out to Herr Wolf and his son, and you know that these, being in a sense relations, are likely to make the most of a chance to show off. Herr Nimrod would prefer other guests; he takes *family ties* seriously. But Frau Sudel is in command, and as for Federleicht, she is so well disposed to the guests that she has not wept or beaten her servants for weeks. If it is intended to pay a visit, it had best be soon."

By which Baron Platen understood that Duke Antony Ulrich of Wolfenbüttel, encouraged by the Duchess, was about to come forward with an acceptable son, and that there was every likelihood of the betrothal being announced at Zelle on September 15th, the birthday of Featherweight, the Princess Sophia-Dorothea, two days hence. The Baron sent a messenger running to his wife's quarters. She lay in rooms better lighted and more convenient in every way than the conjugal apartments, and the messenger, arriving, was told by her angular maid that she was still asleep. This euphemism meant that Ernest Augustus was with the Baroness, and as a rule the messenger had orders to withdraw respectfully on hearing it; but the envelope he bore had three red strokes of the quill clean across it, which meant that the business was urgent. With no wink, no grimace, civilly the messenger insisted.

"Be good enough to wake the esteemed lady, and tell her that I come on behalf of his Serene Highness."

Snores could be faintly heard through a double door to the left of the corridor. The maid looked incredulous, and repeated:

"His Serene Highness?"

The messenger inclined at the title, and with no change of expression in face or voice, said deferentially:

"Leave the old feather-bolster be, but wake her up if you have to spit in her ear. This letter's for her own hand."

The maid received these instructions without any perceptible disquiet, and withdrew to the inner door, which she opened. The snores increased in violence, but did not halt. Low voices answered each other to this

accompaniment, there was the indefinable sound of rapid physical movement, and a figure in a puce silk robe flowered with damask pomegranates stood an instant in the door, then came forward. She showed no care for her appearance before the manservant; her robe fell apart, her head was swathed in a ridiculous bed-turban of muslin with a twinkle of gold here and there. Stale paint lay patched on her cheeks and mouth; her eyes were crusted with sleep, lidded like a snake's, but bright; the face drowsily lovely. She held out one hand for the paper, keeping the bed-gown together with the other, and in a deep voice, with a kind of angry geniality like that of a toper disturbed at his cups, questioned the messenger.

"What's this? Can't your master settle his own business without this wet-nursing? Give me your letter."

She took it and turned on the same movement. Over her shoulder came the one word:

"Wait."

The messenger bowed to her back and obeyed her, standing at attention. The maid waited with him, her face as blank as his own. Those hidden snores that had continued with pleasant regularity, a trustful homely sound, suddenly ceased in a snort. There were voices, one deep and grumbling, the other loud. In a moment the puce gown was at the door again.

"Hulda!"

"Gracious one?"

"Tell the man to be gone, there's no answer."

The messenger bowed once more to the half-shut door, the sound of the deep and grumbling voice inside it, and

made his way down the corridor without looking back. There was no sense in looking back, nothing to be seen; but meeting a servant in the Duke's livery he jerked a thumb. The other wagged a hand and lifted his chin in a certain way, and it was fully understood between them where their master the Duke had spent the night. Neither smiled. Neither perceived in the Duke's behaviour anything to be reprobated. Both were excellent husbands and fathers, who watched the strangest goings-on above their heads which they made no attempt either to criticise or to take for example, recognising that any departure from conventional morality cost money and was not for them. They understood that these wigged Olympians must somehow beguile the tedium of enough money and too much time, but no more than the Greeks did they set out either to emulate or to deplore the exploits of their deities.

Inside the bedroom, under the crimson tent of a vast bed, the Bishop-Duke was sitting up, nightcap awry, and mouth twisted in a yawn to match.

"Just look at this," Clara Platen ordered, holding her paper under his nose. He took it, scowled, stretched, and after an instant's glance asked her how the devil did she expect him to remember the cipher. She answered with another question.

"What day of the month are we come to?"

He considered, reckoning by the Church calendar. "We're about a week off St. Matthew; the fourteenth, is it?"

"The fourteenth. And the fifteenth is this little bitch your Serene Highness' niece's birthday, and the fifteenth is tomorrow, and on the fifteenth the contract with the

Wolfenbüttel will be signed. And when it is signed you will have something mighty like an enemy on your frontier."

"Twenty-four hours! There's nothing to be done."

"Do you want the Zelle property?"

"It will come to me after my brother's death. I saw to that when I gave my consent to him marrying. He can't wriggle out of it."

"And what about the money? All he's saved, all he's given to that woman? Wilhelmsburg, Stillhorn, half a dozen other estates? She's the richest woman in Germany in her own right. She's no fool. She's feathered her nest. These Frenchwomen are all practical. It's only the silly sentimental Germans like me that don't look past the pillow to the purse."

"Aren't you satisfied, Clara? All this fighting--and then the boys, they take all my ready money."

"And yet you won't look at a plan to get one of them off your hands."

The Duke pulled off his nightcap irritably; and as though reminded by it of conjugal duties, said gruffly:

"You'll never get the Duchess round." He fingered the letter, pointed to a phrase. "Frau Sudel;* that's her name for the Frenchwoman."

[* "Sudel" = puddle, dirt.]

"I pay you the compliment of supposing that your Serene Highness--" the pomegranates crumpled as she sank in a state curtsy--"can give your wife an order."

"That I can, till I'm black in the face; getting it attended to is another matter." He considered, shaking his head, with

the natural distaste of an overfed ageing man for action. "It's too late to do anything."

"Zelle is twenty miles away. Ten hours' travelling. I'll do it; I'll go there and make the demand. That is, my husband shall."

The Duke-Bishop had not lived half a century in the world without acquiring a certain natural shrewdness which served him sometimes in lieu of statecraft; he was perfectly well aware that his brother, who retained a sense of punctilio oddly at variance with his abandon in marrying a commoner, would regard such an embassy as an insult. Platen, whose complaisance was known and mocked in the streets, cut no very dignified figure for all his dignities--Baron of this and that, Prime Minister and Councillor of State. The Duke, with sufficient brutality, voiced his opinion.

"They don't like your sort of husband over there. And my brother doesn't take much account of any whore except his own."

The Baroness took no notice of this bluntness, concerned as she was for her Duke-Bishop's pocket.

"In a matter of such urgency, it would do no harm for you to go in person."

"I? Out of the question. Why, good God, it's half a dozen years since I've spoken to George William. I'm not going to be the first to make advances. And to start off by asking a favour--no, put it out of your head."

"Are you prepared to support your sot of a son all his life?"

The Duke muttered that George was not so bad, a fighter--

"And a spender, too. I've done what I could, put my own sister into his bed so that he shouldn't get into the hands of some rapacious foreigner. And this is all the thanks I get. She'll end by having to provide for him, I see that; already she's lent him more than she can spare. Princely! And as for me, I go about in the same old dresses, driving the same old pair of bays. I don't care for show, but it looks badly, the Duke's lady down at heel like a butcher's housekeeper. I may have to consider going away from here."

"Clara! Well, but what the devil do you want me to do?"

The silk rustled, the ruddy pomegranates turned silver as their damask faced another light. Clara von Platen's tone, which had been that of truculent good-humour, changed all at once to smoothness.

"Serene Highness, I think the matter could be so put to the Duchess that she would undertake this mission."

The Duke ceased to twirl his nightcap, and stared, heavy lids lifted, heavy lips parted. Then he laughed.

"If she does, I'll give you a commission on the marriage settlement. Sophy! She'd as soon burn her family tree."

The Baroness disregarded this, and pounced on his offer.

"How much? The commission?"

"Five per cent," the Duke answered cheerfully, sure of not having to pay.

"Done! Clasp hands on it."

The Duke-Bishop gave his mistress's cheek an affectionate buffet, such an episcopal blow as is bestowed according to ritual upon candidates for confirmation.

"I'll clasp anything you like when you come and tell me it's settled."

"Will you stand by the promises I make?"

"In reason."

"Pull that bell for me, then."

The Duke put up a hand and tugged the embroidered bell-rope; a knock suspiciously instantaneous answered it, but the waiting maid made no attempt to enter. Baroness von Platen spoke loudly, to be heard through the panels.

"Send Hans to Her Serene Highness at once; he is to ask if the Prime Minister's wife may hope for the honour of an audience this morning to pay her respectful duty."

A voice repeated the message; it was confirmed with a brief word; the Baroness turned back into the room, and stood akimbo in front of her lover. She laughed, showing excellent teeth, the eye-teeth longer than the others, and sharp. The whole face had this fault, a sharpness edging beauty just out of line.

"Five per cent, and a prince's gratitude! I'll earn it, if I have to listen to theology for an hour."

"Dress, then. My wife's liberal, but she won't stand a bed-gown. By God, I believe you may have a chance. She's a fool where the boys are concerned."

"That's a true word."

The half-clad figure stiffened, the shaved head went up; with his nightcap swinging on a finger the Duke rebuked his woman from the bed he had shared with her.

"I would remind you that you are speaking of a royal personage."

The pomegranates crumpled, this time not in mockery.

"Serence Highness! No apology can be too humble."

"It is forgotten. You have my best hopes for your success."

Duchess Sophia when the message arrived was up and at her books, reading Helvetius on the transmutation of gold, a work much studied by her brother Rupert, and by him sent from England.

"Moreover," wrote the learned doctor, "I may properly query which of the wisest Philosophers is so Sage, as to be able to comprehend with the acuteness of his own most dextrous ingeny, with what Obumbracle the Imaginative, Tinging, Venemous, or Monstrous Faculty of any pregnant woman, compleat its work in one Moment, if it be deduced with art by some External Object?"

Duchess Sophia paused, frowned, smiled a little sideways, and pencilled in the margin of her book a reference to Ecclesiastes, that text which asks how any man shall understand the growth of bones in the womb. She looked up from her page to discover a lady-in-waiting at the ready to curtsy.

"What is it?"

"Serene Highness, a request from the Baroness Platen to be permitted to come and pay her duty."

"What does she want?"

"That was all the message, Serene Highness."

"I will receive her," said Duchess Sophia after a moment, and returned to her book. She had got to page 41, where Helvetius speaks of an experiment done at The Hague.

"The space of two weeks being elapsed, supernatant on the Spirit of Salt, appeared a most splendid Silver-Starre, so exceeding curious, as if it had been made with an

Instrument by a most ingenious Artist. At the sight of which, the said Grill, filled with exceeding Joy, signified to us, that he had seen the Signate Star of Philosophers, touching which he had read in Basilius, as he thought. I, and many other honest men, did behold this Star--"

There was an irruption of ladies, rustling, tapping their heels on the bare polished floor, and the Duchess Sophia, sighing, put away speculation. She did not rise to greet the Baroness nor put out her hand, but sat back in her chair, a thin fine-nosed elderly woman, ready to listen. She was, like the footmen in the Palace, like the little boys spitting from the town bridge, entirely aware of the relationship in which this person stood to her husband, but by no sign or word did she recognise it. Clara Platen for her part felt something of awe for the woman who disputed with theologians, and put aside Court whisperings as a man may walk past a stinking ditch with his handkerchief to his nose. She spoke of Duchess Sophia lightly because she was afraid of her, and she was afraid because Duchess Sophia was incalculable, not to be angered, not to be wounded, proof as though her soul walked armoured in a corslet of steel.

The Duchess spoke the necessary first words, using royalty's most excellent privilege, that of beginning and ending conversation at pleasure.

"And your health, Frau Baronin? You should take care of it, you are a necessary personage."

"Thank your Serene Highness, well. And the Prince of Hanover, if I may dare to enquire? Recovered?"

The Duchess was not aware that her eldest son had been ill of an unromantic surfeit of wine; the news had in fact

reached Clara Platen in a note ten minutes before she set out from her own rooms. But she betrayed nothing of this, and no anxiety.

"These indispositions are seasonable. If he would be guided by me and take his pinch of antimony now and then, as I do, the Prince would not be troubled."

"The whole Court, the whole State, will be relieved to learn that it is not a putrid infection. Madam, you are known through the world for a Princess with whom her servants may speak honestly, without fear of displeasing."

"I hope I have philosophy enough to endure plain speaking. What's your intention, Baroness?"

Clara Platen hesitated. Duchess Sophia, shrugging, gave a look which sent the knot of waiting-ladies out of earshot to the other side of the room. Then the Duke's mistress said, steadily looking into the eyes of the Duke's wife:

"The Prince is in danger."

Duchess Sophia's expression did not change, the mask of civil interest did not lift, but for an instant her lids quivered. She answered with perfect steadiness:

"What threatens him?"

"Sickness. Debts. The chances of war."

Duchess Sophia answered, after a moment, coldly: "These last are men's matters. He should go to his father."

Clara Platen's blunt good-fellow tone sank a little; she looked down in awkward embarrassment such as a man might show, and at last with what seemed an effort spoke again.

"I have reason to know--your Serene Highness will understand that this is painful for me, considering the

channel through which the information comes--that the sickness is of a nature to affect the posterity of this noble house."

Duchess Sophia knew the channel; it was Clara Platen's own sister, Frau Busche, then, from whom George-Louis had his pox. But what could be Platen's motive for informing her of it, she could not conceive. She waited, a finger beginning to tap.

"The Prince has said to this person by whom I am informed, that he is overwhelmed with debt, and can see no way out of it but one that is dreadful even to consider."

Duchess Sophia laughed, and matched false bluntness with real.

"You are not telling me that my son George-Louis will ever put a pistol to his head because of money owing, or even because he has caught the pox off some whore."

"The Prince has said that he will take service abroad."

Again that twitch of the eyelid, so slight, so revealing, that showed the barb had struck home. George-Louis' liking for the camp, his unimaginative valour, were traits in him of which his mother was aware, and which now and then gave her wakeful nights.

"Service with the Emperor. Your Serene Highness knows that in the Empire there is always war of some kind going on; and the Prince has said--pardon, Serene Highness, I quote his words--he has said that since he must rot, it shall be under, and not above ground."

She stopped on that phrase, and the Duchess Sophia's fingers caught it from her and repeated it upon the table top, tapping, galloping. "Since he must rot, it shall be

underground. Underground. Underground." The phrase had her son's stamp on it, the decision too was like him; there truth spoke. Only the woman's motive still puzzled her; and having that strange unworldliness, that bewilderment in face of everyday humanity which much philosophical reading imposes, she did not reject the thought that Platen was moved by honest concern, remorse perhaps. They knew little of each other beyond compliments face to face, and a woman who sells her body, conjectured the Duchess, that liberal woman, need not harbour all the other vices to match.

She said, therefore, less coldly:

"I am obliged to you. The Prince cannot take service without his father's consent--"

"Which the Duke will give."

Duchess Sophia had her answer and did not for an instant think to disbelieve or dispute it. That George-Louis and his father disagreed even to blows she was aware. That the Duke, confronted with the alternative of paying his son's debts or letting him go to the Emperor's army, would choose the latter, she had no doubt at all. And her mind ran quickly over such means of getting money as were open to her, the only means she, as a queen's daughter, had ever known; selling jewels or pawning them, borrowing from rich commoners in exchange for a place at court, yielding up treasures of precious stones or privileges. She and her kind had no way to make riches; they could only exchange what they had, and do without when they had no more. She would not ask the amount of her son's debt; but as if her

thought had made entry into Platen's mind the woman answered it.

"My informant lent the Prince such money as she could; she says that the Jews have got hold of him for a sum--but this may be not wholly true; however, she has it from the Prince himself; two hundred thousand thalers was the figure. But this may not be true."

Duchess Sophia put out of her head at once the notion that a bracelet and a brooch or two might dispose of her son's indebtedness. She forgot her calm for an instant,' confronted with this unbelievable sum, to exclaim aloud:

"Hopeless! The folly of it--"

Then checked; and Baroness Platen began, reasonably and without emphasis, to speak, making a case for the marriage with Zelle. It would keep George-Louis at home; it would pay his debts; it would gain territory and money for Hanover; it would affront Duke Antony Ulrich of Wolfenbüttel. She had time only to state these desiderata before there was a fluttering among the distant inquisitive ladies, a voice announcing, and Duchess Sophia was on her feet to greet her husband Ernest Augustus, who came at once into the discussion, pat upon his cue. The Baroness effaced herself; she had given the cue, had taught him his part, and now, confident, was prepared to wait in the wings among the other *figurantes* while he stormed through it. And storm he did, for the debts were real, and anger against his son rose easily to the necessary heat.

Clara von Platen, standing jovial yet subdued among the Duchess Sophia's ladies-in-waiting, all of whom searched her with a questing eye, wondering where the gift lay that

had raised her to power, scorning and envying at once, heard, as the Duke's voice grew gustier, snatches of the talk. Each maintained a position, disdaining to answer statement with argument.

"I tell you this, that we have between us four sons, and can well afford to let one go. The people will thank us, and your own stiff-necked country, if ever we come to it." Thus the Duke.

"I will not have that brat of Zelle in my house, nor call her mother sister. I have kept them out of my acquaintance these sixteen years, and I have no mind to take them into my bosom now." Thus the Duchess.

"I will not pay the boy's debts. I have spent enough on him, first and last. That English journey cost a fortune, and what came of it? You were ready enough to take a commoner into your bosom there, and a d'Olbreuse is as good as Anne Hyde any day of the week."

"My uncle lost his head rather than bate a jot of his kingship. Such conduct is proper, and I am astonished to know you rate your own blood so low as to pollute it with such stuff as Zelle offers.

"Come now, Sophy--"

The voices sank. Clara von Platen, indifferent to the pretence of discretion all about her, stared eagerly at the disputants, reading their looks. The Duke talked earnestly, with something of episcopal unction; the Duchess listened, inscrutable; she was too far off for a watching eye to see the movements of her lids. Threats, threats, thought Clara Platen, a woman with a nose like that won't yield to a threat.

She won't even snap at the money. But there's a line of approach through her pride. Will he remember it?

His back was to her, he was speaking, but the Duchess's face in profile was unyielding, and her fingers rested quietly on Helvetius' small brown book. Clara Platen moved a little, manœuvred until in the round mirror at the end of the room she could see the Duke dwindled to a mannikin, making tiny pleadings to the porcelain figure of his Duchess. A late wasp sallied in through the long window, darting in aimless angles hither, thither; Clara Platen made a great sweep of her hand at it, minimised by the mirror to an insect gesture, but which caught the Duke's eye. He turned. She innocently put up her fingers to the brooch holding her laces, a great coronet in diamonds, and let them rest there. He nodded, and within a few seconds the duel of the voices was resumed.

"There is another matter, our chance of the Electorate. With Zelle in my pocket, the Emperor would not refuse me."

"Do you deceive yourself. The Emperor has no more liking for bastards than I have."

"I will tell you what the Emperor has a liking for; a good compact state, not big enough to threaten, but big enough to help him. A state like that is dependable. He does not have to be running here and there to half a dozen princes to get an army together when he wants one. With Zelle, and the territories George William has bought, we should be in the running for an Electorate."

"An Electorate! If it were a kingdom, that would be something, perhaps."

"An Elector makes an Emperor out of a man, as the Roman priests make God out of a wafer. D'you call that

nothing? Listen, Sophy--"

Yes, yes, thought Clara Platen, watching, fingers worrying the diamond crown at her breast, now she's yielding, now she's tempted. The right to wear a bonnet for her husband, a few extra cannon-shots when she goes on a visit abroad; how is it that a princess, always used to these things, should still find them worth gambling for? Thank God that it is so, or we should never swing her round to this marriage. Strange, though! She will read her books just the same, and tease her chaplains as Electress just the same, there will be no change in her way of existence. She will spend pride to get pride, and go about afterwards in an old dress like a servant. There goes her hand; he's touched her.

And in fact the Duchess's thin fingers were beginning to drum on her book. The Duke appeared to halt in his talk, the mirror showed the watcher his face in miniature; those minuscule features revealed nothing, success was betrayed only in the cock of his heavy chin. He stooped to the tapping hand, kissed it as though in thanksgiving, then departed through a surge of curtsying women.

The Duchess did not immediately summon them about her. She sat still, faintly frowning for some moments, and at last got to her feet with decision.

"Ladies, you are excused. I am going to my garden for a while, and shall need no company. Baroness von Platen, our interview is at an end. I am obliged to you."

The women sank once again as she passed, and afterwards, craning at a window, perceived their august mistress and highness wandering about the walks in an old hat, snipping off flower-heads here and there with a pair of

damascened scissors. Her gardeners knew this perambulating mood, and kept close to their labours, neither standing to attention as she went by, nor attempting with baskets to follow after her and reverently retrieve the snippets. She marched in elderly garments, with long strides, soiling her hands like a market woman, while her mind concerned itself solely with crowns, quarterings--all the symbols and attributes of earthly pride.

Duchess Sophia wrestled thus all day. The dinner hour passed; a vast meal was served and eaten at which neither she nor George-Louis was present. The Duke's demeanour revealed nothing. Footmen in white gloves set the dishes to partners, four times covering the long table, poured wines, obeyed nods; all was tranquillity. In the late afternoon it was the Duchess's custom to summon her philosophers or clergymen with any visiting disputants to her chamber to talk, and in fact one such visitor was waiting to be summoned, an Irish Canon of Down with the reputation of a tongue that could split hairs. He had his clean bands on, and was ready with a civil speech in English for the Duchess, and a number of less polite Latin gambits for her chaplains, when a footman came to offer apologies, and to defer--"until a more profitable time,"--the joys of dispute. A similar message had been sent to the Hanoverian wranglers, and her ladies had received permission to absent themselves until evening.

Darkness fell soon, and cloudily. A small erratic wind sprang up that blew about the rose-trimmings, and hurried leaves here and there confusedly in front of the Duchess as she walked her paths. Nobody spied upon her; the windows

of the palace, as yet unlit, showed no peering faces, the gardeners had gathered their tools and, bowing to her upright back, had gone. The Duke was in his cabinet working with Platen; from time to time each looked, and caught the other looking, at the sun-shaped clock in the wall. Baroness Platen too, playing cards with a couple of young officers, careerists, looking admiringly over her shoulder, was preoccupied with the time, and constantly asked it, on pretence of admiring the watch, gold and shagreen, that the more penniless of her cavaliers readily brought out from his pocket.

Six o'clock, ran the Baroness's thoughts above the march of the cards, and the old woman's still fighting her pride. What, all this trouble about being civil to a sister-in-law, a gesture that means no more than if I set this diamond queen against this heart! Ten minutes and a couple of courtesies exchanged, against all that money and the bonnet. The girl's her niece already whether she likes it or not. Six o'clock!

But for all her preoccupation she neglected no chance, played her diamond knave, her hearts queen at the right moment, and took tricks with both.

"Infallible Baroness! Will you come one evening and show our mess how to play?"

"I'm no match for great blustering soldiers. You have only to go to war when you want more money, and take it out of other folk's pockets. I, if I lose, I lose."

"Baroness, we are all your bankers."

"Scandal, scandal." she answered laughing, while her pencil, busy with the score, worked out on her tablet a little

sum that had nothing to do with it. How much would the dowry be? Three hundred thousand thalers--annually? Pray heaven. Five per cent on that, every year--

"Lord, Baroness, have you won all that? You're a better player even than I thought. Fifteen thousand!"

"No, no, Captain. That's to come. And now, I suppose it's no part of any soldier's duty to procure a mere woman a glass of wine?"

At seven, as the Duke was turning to and fro in his cabinet, and Platen stood as etiquette ordered, his Serene Highness being on his feet, the Duchess was announced. She came in wearing a great cloak with a hood, buff-coloured, unassailable by mud; dressed for travelling. The Duke stared. Her face was very white, her eyes bright like those of a woman in fever. She spoke without waiting for his greeting or question.

"The horses are ready. Have you no message for Zelle?"

"You're going? Twenty miles of bad road, there's no post-house fit for you--"

"I shall travel all night, and sleep when I can."

"We have talked nothing over. We have not discussed any approach to the matter."

She answered that grimly.

"Since I go, you may rest assured that I shall find arguments. I do not intend to fail. No!"

And she snapped her fingers angrily, the thought having come that perhaps after all the French bitch might prevail upon her husband to refuse Hanover's son. The Duke worried still.