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IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BY

O U I D A,

AUTHOR OF "STRATHMORE," "MOTHS," ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1883.

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"Doch—alles was dazu mich trieb,
Gott! war so gut! ach, war so lieb!"
Goethe.

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TO

"A PERFECT WOMAN, NOBLY PLANN'D"

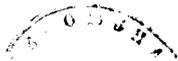
WALBURGA, LADY PAGET

NÉE

COUNTESS VON HOHENTHAL

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W A N D A.



PROEM.

Doch—alles was dazu mich trieb,
Gott! war so gut! ach, war so lieb!—GOETHE.

TOWARDS the close of a summer's day in Russia a travelling carriage was compelled to pause before a little village whilst a smith rudely mended its broken wheel. The hamlet was composed of a few very poor dwellings grouped around a large low horse-shoe shaped building, which was the manorial mansion of the absent proprietor. It was gloomy, and dropping to decay; its many windows were barred and shuttered; the grass grew in its courts, and flowering weeds had time to seed and root themselves on its whitewashed walls.

Around it the level ground was at this season covered with green wheat, spreading for leagues on leagues, and billowing and undulating under the wind that blew from the steppes, like the green sea which it resembled. Farther on were woods of larch and clumps of willow; and in the distance, across the great plain to the westward, rolled a vast shining



river, here golden with choking sand, here dun-coloured with turbid waves, here broken with islets and swamps of reeds, where the singing swan and the pelican made their nests.

It was in one of those far-off provinces through which the Volga rolls its sand-laden and yellow waves. The scene was bleak and mournful, though for many leagues the green corn spread and caught the timid sunshine and the shadow of the clouds. There were a few stunted willows near the house, and a few gashed pines; a dried-up lake was glittering with crystals of salt; the domes and minarets of a little city rose above the sky line far away to the south-east; and farther yet northward towered the peaks of the Ural Mountains; the wall of stone that divides Siberia from the living world. All was desolate, melancholy, isolated, even though the season was early summer; but the vastness of the view, the majesty of the river, the suggestion of the faint blue summits where the Urals rose against the sky, gave solemnity and a melancholy charm to a landscape that was otherwise monotonous and tedious.

Prince Paul Ivanovitch Zabaroff was in Russia because he was on the point of marriage with a great heiress of the southern provinces, and was travelling across from Orenburg to the Krimea, where his betrothed bride awaited him in the summer palace of her fathers. Russia, with the exception of Petersburg, was an unknown and detested place to him; his errand was distasteful, his journey tedious, his temper irritated; and when a wheel of his *telegue* came off in this miserable village of the Northern

Volga district, he was in no mood to brook with patience such an accident. He paced to and fro restlessly as he looked round on the few and miserable cabins of a district that had been continually harried and fired through many centuries by Kossack and Tartar.

"Whose house is that?" he said to his servant, pointing to the great white building.

The servant humbly answered, "Little father, it is thine."

"Mine!" echoed Paul Zabaroff. He was astonished; then he laughed, as he remembered that he had large properties around the city of Kazán.

The whole soil was his own as far as his eyes could reach, till the great river formed its boundary. He did not even know his steward here; the villagers did not know him. He had been here once only, a single night, in the late autumn time, long, long before. He was a man in whose life incidents followed each other too rapidly for remembrance to have any abiding-place or regret any home in his mind. He had immense estates, north, south, east, west; his agents forwarded him the revenues of each, or as much of the revenues as they chose him to enjoy, when they themselves were satisfied with their gains.

When he was not in Paris he was in Petersburg, and he was an impassioned and very daring gamester. These great silent houses, in the heart of fir woods, in the centre of grass plains, or on the banks of lonely rivers, were all absolutely unknown to and indifferent to him. He was too admired and popular at his Court ever to have had the sentence passed