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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

# M O T H S

A NOVEL

BY

O U I D A

“Like unto moths fretting a garment” (PSALM)

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LEIPZIG  
BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

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## M O T H S.



## CHAPTER I.

A FEW weeks later they were at Svir.

Svir was one of the grandest summer palaces of the many palaces of the Princes Zouroff. It had been built by a French architect in the time of the great Catherine's love of French art, and its appanages were less an estate than a province or principality that stretched far away to the horizon on every side save one, where the Baltic spread its ice-plains in the winter, and its blue waters to the brief summer sunshine. It was a very grand place; it had acres of palm-houses and glass-houses; it had vast stables full of horses; it had a theatre, with a stage as large as the Folies-Marigny's; it had vast forests in which the bear and the boar and the wolf were hunted with the splendour and the barbarity of the royal hunts that Snyders painted; it was a Muscovite Versailles, with hundreds of halls and chambers, and a staircase, up which fifty men might have walked abreast; it had many treasures, too, of the arts, and precious marbles, Greek and Roman; yet there was no place on earth which Vere hated as she hated Svir.

To her it was the symbol of despotism, of brutal power, of soulless magnificence; and the cruelties of the sport that filled all the days, and the oppression of the peasantry by the police-agents which she was impotent to redress, weighed on her with continual pain. She had been taught in her girlhood to think; she knew too much to accept the surface gloss of things as their truth; she could not be content with a life which was a perpetual pageantry, without any other aim than that of killing time.

So much did the life at Svir displease her, and so indifferent was she to her own position in it, that she never observed that she was less mistress of it than was the Duchesse de Sonnaz, who was there with the Duc Paul, a placid sweet-tempered man, who was devoted to entomology and other harmless sciences. It was not Vere, but Madame Jeanne who directed the amusements of each day and night. It was Madame Jeanne who scolded the manager of the operetta troupe, who selected the pieces to be performed in the theatre, who organised the hunting parties and the cotillons, and the sailing, and the riding. It was Madame Jeanne who, with her pistols in her belt, and her gold-tipped ivory hunting-horn, and her green tunic and trowsers, and her general *franc-tireur* aspect, went out with Sergius Zouroff to see the bear's death-struggle, and give the last stroke in the wolf's throat.

Vere—to whom the moonlit *curée* in the great court was a horrible sight, and who, though she had never blenched when the wolves had bayed after the

sledge, would have turned sick and blind at sight of the dying beasts with the hunters' knives in their necks—was only glad that there was anyone who should take the task off her hands of amusing the large house-party and the morose humours of her husband. The words of Corrèze had failed to awaken any suspicion in her mind.

That the presence of Madame de Sonnaz at Svir was as great an insult to her as that of Noisette in the Kermesse pavilion never entered her thoughts. She only as yet knew very imperfectly her world.

"It is well she is beautiful, for she is only a bit of still life," said Prince Zouroff very contemptuously to some one who complimented him upon his wife's loveliness.

When she received their Imperial guests at the foot of her staircase, with a great bouquet of lilies of the valley and orchids in her hand, she was a perfect picture against the ebony and malachite of the balustrade—that he granted; but she might as well have been made of marble for aught of interest or animation that she showed.

It angered him bitterly that the luxury and extravagance with which she was surrounded did not impress her more. It was so very difficult to hurt a woman who cared for so little; her indifference seemed to remove her thousands of leagues away from him.

"You see it is of no use to be angry with her," he said to his confidant, Madame Jeanne. "You do not move her. She remains tranquil. She does not op-