

The fire opal

Robert Fraser



THE FIRE OPAL

THE FIRE OPAL

By

ROBERT FRASER

AUTHOR OF "THREE MEN AND A MAID"

"It is strange how deeply colors seem to permeate one, like
scent. I suppose that is the reason why gems are used as
spiritual emblems in the Revelations of St. John."

GEORGE ELIOT: *Middlemarch*, Vol. I., Chap. I.



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CHAPTER I

THE THREE SMALL TRIANGLES

LIEUTENANT FRANK ARMSTRONG halted for a moment in the colonnade on the north side of Piccadilly Circus to allow a knot of taxi-cabs, motor-omnibuses, and private carriages to disentangle its intricacies before he crossed to the Criterion.

The rush of traffic was unfamiliar, the scent of petrol pungent in his nostrils. When he left London, eight years ago, it was the biggest stable in the world; now it seemed to be one immense garage. Still, on this bright May morning, it was good in his eyes, and, where most things were of the new order, the traffic-directing policeman remained, so Armstrong soon reached the opposite pavement. Then he stopped again, lit the second cigar of the day from the glowing end of the first one, and took another long look at a scene whose stolid, old-time features were slowly beginning to emerge from all that was unfamiliar and bizarre in his eyes.

"Yes," he said to himself, crossing his hands on

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top of his Malacca cane as if it were a cavalry saber, "though altered a bit, it is still the same old London. And, by gad! isn't it good to be home again? A Russian steppe or Indian maidàn has its points, but neither of 'em is a patch on this."

He could really talk in much more lofty strain, having the gift of tongues. But when a man chats at ease with himself he may be allowed to indulge in a little expressive slang.

A one-armed commissionaire pacing to and fro in front of the Criterion Theater cocked an eye at him. This man saw tens of thousands of people daily, but he carried four shreds of ribbon on the left breast of his trim uniform, and he could pick out a soldier in mufti from the multitude, as the farmer can distinguish oats from barley when the green shoots are an inch above the ground.

"Um," he communed, noting the squared shoulders, the straight back, the well-cut clothes, and brown boots that seemed to be molded to the wearer, "a youngster home on leave. Staff Corps, I reckon; Bengal Lancer, by the cut of him."

He was not mistaken. And to this worn veteran the outer London of May, with its glitter of fashion and busy life, straightway became dull and colorless. His mind's eye roved along the white, gun-barrel roads of an Indian cantonment; he saw the brown foot-hills of the Himalayas; he tramped through the rugged Khaibar with a kafila of camels crawling up from Peshawur to Ali Musjid.

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Blithely unconscious that he had evoked day-dreams in a commissionaire, Armstrong gazed his fill at the passing show. He had reached England only that morning by the mail train from Berlin, Wirballen, and Moscow. It was a fine day in the height of the Season; he had a sufficiency of money in his pocket; he had a clear month before he need trouble the P. and O. for a ticket, and he could enjoy life to the fullest extent compatible with a well-balanced mind and sober tastes. No wonder that "Town" should have its appeal, that life should look pleasant, that to be alive, young, and in good health should be the greatest gifts of Providence. Of course, he thought none of these things. He was neither a philosopher nor a prig. In a word, he was a Staff Corps subaltern home on furlough.

He waited there for no reason. It was in his mind to lunch at the Junior United Service Club. He had no plans for the day. Blow plans! He would just drift, and let the eddy carry him whither it listed.

Yet, he had good cause, in after time, to remember that happy-go-lucky halt by the wayside. Never was man drawn into more perilous vortex than he who loitered that day on the bank of the life-river flowing swiftly past.

He was about to saunter on again, when a string of sandwich-men crept slowly, with downcast eyes, along the gutter from Coventry Street. These woe-begones did not bow their heads because of misery or

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shame. They were looking for cigar-stumps and the raveled end of cigarettes. Armstrong became aware of the fact, forcibly as it were. He narrowly escaped having his cigar knocked from between his teeth when the leader made a wild dive for the discarded "stub," which was still a-light, and canted his placarded framework as he bent double.

"Poor devil!" commented Armstrong, with ready smile, as the standard-bearer shuffled away, eking out the remains of the recovered treasure. Then the legend on the swaying posters caught his eye.

"Well, of all the queer things!" he said. "Old Demidoff here!"

In bold letters of red, on the front placard, were the words, "Souls on Fire!" It was a catching phrase which compelled people to gaze at the procession. On the back you learnt that at the Anarchists' Club in such-and-such a street, Tottenham Court Road, that evening Prince Demidoff, "the famous Russian Exile," would lecture on the condition of his "tortured fellow-countrymen."

Anarchists' Club! Tottenham Court Road! Was there ever such a mad association of ideas? And old Demidoff—a spectacled scientist, a white-haired visionary who would not hurt a fly! Armstrong knew his Russia well enough to appreciate the dumb tragedy which lay behind the printed words, but, just now, he could only grin at the humor of it. Anarchists! With staid London policemen piloting their out-at-heel heralds across the Circus! And the

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adroit use of the word "tortured"—with its visions of the knout, the scaffold, the dreary road to Siberia!

Suddenly an elegant automobile pulled up, and out sprang a tall, slightly-built young man, alert, bright-faced, and self-possessed in manner.

"You, Armstrong!" he cried. "When did *you* blow in?"

"You don't mean to say you are in town, Jimmie?" said the other, with that fine disregard for the meanings of words displayed by people when they are taken by surprise.

"Ra-ther! The whole gang is in Charles Street, Berkeley Square. We've taken a shanty there for the Season."

"And how is everybody?" demanded Armstrong, when their hands met.

"Valletort is all right, and momma is becoming a true British matron. Ermie is 'out,' presented last Court, and fearfully stuck on herself. Anyhow, come along to lunch."

"Well—er——"

"In with you. Right ahead, Phipps!"—this to the chauffeur.

Lord Carlingham's mother, in her youth, had been a belle of New York society, so his remark about "momma" was clearly irreverent. "Valletort" was his father, with the omitted formality of "The Right Honorable the Earl of," and "Ermie" was his sister, Lady Ermytrude Grandison, for in such wise do the names of the British aristocracy puzzle

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the benighted foreigner. Is it not recorded that a smart American girl complained of the absurdity of spelling a name C-h-o-l-o-m-o-n-d-e-l-e-y and pronouncing it Marchbanks!

Armstrong had met the family in St. Petersburg during the previous winter while he was studying the language, and chance threw him a good deal in their way—more, perhaps, than the Countess wholly approved of, since republican traditions are apt to weaken under the pressure of a five-spiked coronet.

Therefore, the maternal eye was critical, if polite, as it watched the meeting between her daughter and "Mr." Armstrong. But Ermyntitude's pretty head was in the clouds, for well-bred "eligibles" were plentiful in her sphere as August blackberries in a moorland lane, though perhaps somewhat green, as blackberries often are in August. She greeted the young subaltern with just sufficient dignity to remind him that if ever his arms had clasped her waist during a risky sleigh drive the incident was forgotten.

"I suppose you can talk Russian like a native now?" said Lord Valletort, genially, to Armstrong. He himself spoke very little English, people said.

"I passed my exam. all right, sir," was the modest answer.

"That—er—means promotion, and—er—that sort of thing, eh?"

"Not exactly. Of course it is good for an impetuous lieutenant to be classed as 'interpreter,'

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but at present my chief gain is the added grant, which makes my 'language leave' end in a burst of glory."

The Countess nodded her approval. Armstrong expressed very proper sentiments. "Impecunious" was the right word.

"What are you doing this evening?" asked Carlingham, whose eyes sparkled as he read the soul of mamma.

"I was at the crossroads of uncertainty until I saw some sandwich-men in Piccadilly Circus. As it is, I am half-resolved to go to an anarchists' meeting."

Valletort looked scandalized. Her ladyship lifted a pair of lorgnettes. Even the butler tilted his nose a trifle higher.

But Ermyntrude said,—

"How delightful!"

And her brother chimed in,—

"Bully for you! I'll come along, too."

"Did you say 'anarchists'?" inquired the Countess, in amaze. Her expression reminded Armstrong of a fox-terrier's when rats are mentioned.

"Yes; but please let me explain. They are of a harmless variety. Prince Demidoff is lecturing them. He is a real prince, too, a true descendant of Rurik, I believe."

"Oh, outrageous!"

"Russia is a queer country," said Armstrong, blissfully unaware of the corns he was treading on.

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"It has no real aristocracy, as we understand the word. Peter the Great worked as a shipbuilder, you know. Count Devrier, one of his Ministers, was a Portuguese cabin-boy; his Commander-in-Chief, a pure negro; his Finance Minister, a Jew peddler, and his Serene Highness Prince Menshikoff, a baker's apprentice."

"Me for the anarchist prince!" laughed Carlingham, who knew that his great-grandfather on one side ran an eating-house at the Battery.

"Please take me, too. I am intensely interested in Russia," said his sister.

"Ermytrude! We are going to Lady Ambleton's dance," cried her indignant mother.

The Earl of Valletort ate a peach, thinking it was cheese. Armstrong had muddled him hopelessly. The unwitting cause of this commotion was waylaid by Ermytrude afterwards. With the Countess out of range, her manner became less airy.

"Do you remain long in town?" she asked.

"Only a month. Then I go back to India."

"I am sorry. I suppose we shall not see you again for years."

"No," he said, somewhat stiffly. He thought he had stifled certain memories effectually, but they crowded on him hot-foot as he looked into the depths of her blue eyes.

She shot a quick glance at him.

"A month!" she said, tentatively. "That means you will be here for Ascot?"

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“Yes. Indeed, I leave town on the following Thursday.”

“We have a house-party for Ascot. Mother thought it would be nice.”

“It should be charming,” he said, forcing himself to look steadily at her. Had she forgotten, he wondered, that night on the Nevski Prospect, when their sleigh collided with a kibitka driven by a drunken man? It was not a great thing to remember—a crash, a startled scream, a moment when he held her close to his breast and sprang clear of the plunging horses. But it meant much to him, and the memory hurt, for it was so fantastically impossible to say now what his eyes had said then.

“Are you vexed with me?” she asked, with the quiet directness that was a heritage of her American ancestry.

So he smiled, on compulsion.

“I? Vexed! With Lady Ermyntrude Grandison?” he began, chaffingly. Then the hot blood rushed to his face and the words came unbidden.

“God forbid!” he murmured. “I take with me to India the recollection of too many happy hours to be vexed with you.”

Carlingham heard a premonitory rustle of the Countess’ skirts across the drawing-room. In his own phrase, he “cut in ahead of the mater.”

“By the way, Armstrong,” he said, strolling casually towards the couple, “what time is that anarchist affair? I suppose we can’t dine. What

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do you say if we go there first, rush home and dress, and sup at the Savoy?"

The lecture was of the usual terrifying type, but the audience did not seem to feel very strongly about atrocities committed in the Tsar's name. People sat in small parties on benches and chairs grouped around tables. The place was ill-lighted. Tea and coffee were to be had cheaply. Pipes, cigarettes, even cigars, were in the mouths of all the men. The women smoked cigarettes, loosely folded in the Spanish fashion. Oddly enough, the audience consisted of Italians, Germans, Frenchmen, Polish Jews. There was only a sprinkling of Russians—even more Britons. Not many genuine Russians live in London.

"How long, O Lord, how long? Our people suffer in bondage; they are melancholy with the dumb pain of animals; their silent plaint reaches to the foot of Thy throne. Shall they not hope? Are generations yet unborn to bear the yoke of the oppressor?"

The speaker's fiery orbs scintillated as he uplifted his thin hands, raised his face in ecstatic agony, and told how the Souls on Fire awaited their deliverance. His silvery locks and benignant aspect lent a thrill of conviction to his impassioned words. That was the worst of it, thought some among the few Englishmen present. Things could not really be so bad in any land. Human nature would not stand it. The princely professor had chosen isolated cases, brutal

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fragments of a nation's history—and what nation can reveal none? He made his case too blood-curdling. If men were ground into the dust, if women were flogged, if boys were converted into slaves and girls into courtesans—why, humanity would rise and rend its tyrants.

“Does that kind of thing actually go on in Russia?” whispered Carlingham, while the lecturer paused to search his notes for some statistics.

“I believe so. I heard queer tales at Saratoff, but the people are cowed, stolid—for the most part they endure in silence.”

“Queer crowd here,” said Carlingham, when a babel of voices at the conclusion of the harangue made it possible to speak aloud.

“Yes. Take a peep at our friend at the next table.”

The man to whom Armstrong drew attention was tall and grossly compacted. Replace his shoddy suit and bowler hat with the moujik's fur cap, sheepskin coat, and loose trousers tucked into big boots and he became a typical peasant of Little Russia. His face was heavy, his forehead low and deeply lined, his eyebrows bushy and overhanging, and a drooping nether lip lent no redeeming strength to his wide, coarse mouth. His shaggy hair and bristling beard were unkempt and brutish, and his colossal frame betokened a bull-like strength.

“By Jove! isn't he a picture—the true article, anyhow,” commented his lordship.

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"Yes. One wonders how he has managed to wander here."

"Can't you talk to him? We're in no hurry. I would sooner listen than eat."

Thus prompted, Armstrong sought a pretext to address the uncouth being in whom they were interested. The man took from his pocket a square of hard tobacco, plucked at his waistband, and drew forth an ugly-looking sheath knife. Here was the opportunity. Frank leaned forward.

"Let me offer you a cigar," he said.

The man lifted his head, and their surprise was mutual. It was astonishing to the Russian to be addressed in the true patois of his race by a young, gentlemanly Englishman. But it was even more amazing to Frank to find how the deep-set eyes illumined the boorish lineaments, and gave them character, courage, purpose.

"Thank you," said the stranger, civilly, and the talk commenced.

Carlingham knew enough of Russian to follow vaguely what they said.

"You ask if Demidoff"—no "Prince" on this man's lips—"has told the truth," he growled, in a voice with the rasp of fetters in it. "No. No man can do that. He may feel it—here," and he pointed to his breast, "but there are no words that can express it."

"But, surely——" urged Armstrong.

The other, though puffing the cigar, seemed to

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find pleasure in carving the stubborn tobacco. He sliced it on the rough deal table, and they saw that the knife was fashioned either to cut or stab. It was of good steel, and the haft was of crinkled horn. On the side of the handle were cut three small triangular spaces. They showed white against the brown.

“How can you English believe?” asked the Russian, calmly. “You have forgotten, for long ages. Danes came here, they say, and Normans, but that was a thousand years ago. A thousand years ago we Russians were happy. We were free tribes, and we fought and killed. Now we are not free, and we cannot fight—but——”

He smiled pleasantly. His eyes, great, glowing, melting eyes, and his smile, so kindly and courteous, redeemed his hang-dog looks. A fanatic, this man, perhaps, and a dangerous one, for he had restraint and grim humor in him. Certainly he was an enigma. He would not be drawn. He uttered platitudes, and they knew it. Soon they bade him “Good-night.” In Tottenham Court Road they hailed a taxi-cab. Armstrong’s rooms were in Jermyn Street, and there they dressed for the Savoy.

“A funny bunch, those Russians,” said Carlingham, having arranged his tie satisfactorily. “Difficult to reckon up, eh?”

“It is the Asiatic strain that perplexes. Difference between a fox-terrier and a jungle dog, you know. Both are dogs, but one is of the tame

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land, the other of the wild, and the cross is perplexing.”

“Um! Did you spot how that big fellow used his knife? Seemed to be cutting a throat with each slash! Now, get a move on, there’s a good chap. I’m ravenous.”

CHAPTER II

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SOMEHOW, Frank Armstrong found himself attached to the Valletort ménage. Her ladyship forgot the anarchist lecture and ceased to suspect him. The Earl liked him, Carlingham was his avowed friend, and Ermyntrude was quite sure that a girl need not be bound in London by a flirtation in Russia.

Nevertheless, he became increasingly conscious that the pleasant holiday to which he had so looked forward was a desperate failure. He told himself so often that to see so much of Lady Ermyntrude was a dangerous pastime that the admonition ceased to have any effect.

Under ordinary conditions a young Staff Corps officer could neither belong to the Valletort set nor afford to mix in it. Lord Carlingham decided the first problem, and a year's economy in Russia, joined to the bonus earned by passing the highest possible language test, made the second easy. Yet, if his heart was a-flame, no one knew of it. By neither word nor look did he seek to win his way with the girl. She, heedless of consequences, feeling only that his company was agreeable, encouraged his

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presence on every possible occasion, and caused him to be hated by several people who did not even know his name.

The brother and sister were curiously alike. Their high-lineaged father was a nonentity. It had done the Valletort strain a vast amount of good to be enlivened by the new blood of the States, and the Valletort fortunes were equally benefited by an inexhaustible supply of American dollars. Hence, these two young aristocrats were free to think, and, practically, to act as they chose. The girl especially, being only nineteen, lived in a dreamland of her own. Secure in rank and wealth, beautiful, accomplished in the arts as taught by governesses and masters, she was now vaguely comprehending the vastness of the world and the scope of the position to which she was born.

Ideas of love, of matrimony, had not yet entered her pretty head. Perhaps she did not stop to analyze her feelings towards Armstrong, who, with his subaltern's pay and his hundred a year of private means, was obviously "impossible." The pity of it, from a common-sense point of view, was that they came together again so early in that eventful month of furlough.

The days passed. Armstrong, musing on the unhappiness of life because he saw no possible chance of meeting Ermystrude during the next week—he absolutely refused to go to Ascot on the off chance of an encounter on the lawn—was electrified one

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morning by receiving a nicely worded invitation from the Countess of Valletort to join her party at The Cedars. Not go to Ascot, indeed!—so much for good resolutions—he was there by the earliest train. Between Carlingham and his sister the affair had been managed adroitly.

There were thirty guests, and among them a Russian prince, but, this time, the prince was not a Socialist lecturer. Frank, who met him for the first time at dinner, knew in an instant that Lady Ermytrude was greatly taken by the big, blond man who sat beside her. He chanced to be at the same table as the two, for the diners were scattered in fives and sixes about a spacious room.

Lord Valletort was there, and two women well known in society, both of them secretly speculating on the identity of the bronzed young officer. They knew his name, of course, but that was all, and the lack of other label, at an Ascot house-party, raises questions. The host, never saying much, cast off the onus of conversation with the appearance of the soup.

“Prince Melnikoff,” he said, “my—er—young friend, Armstrong, knows your—er—country very well.”

“Oh, indeed!” said his highness, smiling so cheerfully that his strong, white teeth glistened; “then he has the advantage of me.”

“Eh, what’s that?” asked Valletort, thinking his hearing had betrayed him, for Prince Boris Melnikoff

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was a name, a personage, a brilliant star of society.

"I mean it, I assure you," said the other. "Of course everybody visits Petersburg, and I can find my way about my estates. Beyond that, I am a stranger in my own land. I spend the winter—and that not always—between the capital and Bannofka, my place on the Volga, you know. For the rest, I live in Paris, Vienna, London, Trouville, Homburg—quite a fashionable gad-about, I assure you."

"The Volga. That is the river, isn't it?" said Ermyntrode.

"Yes; one of our great water-ways."

"It sounds romantic."

"It would be a place of romance if you came to see it."

He smiled again, giving his light compliment an air of good-natured joviality. He was young, not more than thirty, a giant in stature, a splendid creature, with tawny hair and mustache, and a closely trimmed beard ending in a Vandyke point. Undeniably handsome, of the leonine type, he looked a king. Armstrong knew that he was a Don Cossack by descent, glorified and made massive by some generations of selection and good living. The name was familiar in his ears. He strove hard to recall the circumstances under which he had heard it.

But Ermyntrode was speaking again.

"Estates in Russia mean provinces elsewhere, don't they?"

"They are extensive, you see." He waved a hand

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to signify immensity. "We count by square miles, not by acres. There are forests and great plains. But the people are poor. It is a hard land to till. Fortunately for me, one of my ancestors was a distinguished robber."

"A robber!"

A deprecating titter ran round the table. Of course, his highness was pleased to joke. He joined in the laugh with the utmost content.

"Please don't think I'm not serious!" he cried. "The gentleman is historical. His name was Stenka Razin. He used to sit on a high cliff overlooking the river, in an armchair inlaid with ivory, and watch his men plundering passing vessels. Oh, he was a genuine pirate, beyond dispute!"

Such stories, discreetly thrown back in date, are amusing. Armstrong, already jealous of this princely interloper, fired a question at him.

"I have heard of Stenka," he said. "Is it true that he served an earlier robber as cook for fifteen years before he could find an opportunity to murder him?"

Prince Melnikoff did not smile this time. He looked fixedly at Frank.

"How did you come to hear that?" he returned.

"Because I have been living in Saratoff."

"Recently?"

"Until the end of May."

"How long were you there?"

"Only four months."

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"Ah!" The prince was pleased to treat the brusque interruption with good-humor.

"The cook story may be true," he said. "Stenka was a dreadful scoundrel."

His candid tact redeemed an awkward incident. Armstrong felt that he had not chosen the smooth path, and Lady Ermytrude glanced at him with a slight air of surprise.

"Personally," she said, "I find Stenka interesting. He had an individuality. Look at my father. The first Valletort was a Norman pirate, and stole several townships. Ships! There you have it. The same thing, precisely."

"Thank you," said the Russian, with a gleam of his fine eyes. Was it fancy, or did the fleeting glance bring to Armstrong's mind the brawny moujik of the Anarchists' Club? After that he said very little. His heart was heavy. He was sorry now he had come to Ascot. Yet he lingered. He liked the racing, but the remaining hours of the four days were far from enjoyable, and he was on the very lip of departure when all England was startled by the news that Prince Boris Melnikoff had been the victim of an extraordinary bomb outrage.

In the early hours of the morning his highness was riding alone through a secluded lane when a bomb was thrown at him from a wood which bordered the road. The projectile exploded under his horse, a magnificent Arab which had often attracted the attention of connoisseurs in the Row. The animal

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was killed, being shockingly mangled, but Prince Melnikoff escaped unhurt. The incident was actually witnessed by the occupants of a motor car, which rounded a corner of the road at the instant the bomb fell. The men in the car rushed to his assistance, but he was on his feet before they reached him. He coolly dissuaded them from searching the wood on the score that they were unarmed, asked them to drive him back to The Cedars, and was in the act of bidding them farewell when he discovered that a talisman, which he carried slung round his neck by a gold chain, was missing. He described it as a fire opal, a splendid stone, two inches long, three-quarters of an inch wide, and about a quarter of an inch thick. He appeared to be enraged beyond measure by its loss, and returned instantly to the scene of the outrage in the same friendly car.

A dog-cart brought Lord Carlingham and Frank hot on his heels. Indeed, Armstrong's portmanteaux were in the cart in readiness to proceed to the station when the prince appeared in the motor. The two soon reached the wood, where a small crowd, judiciously restrained by a policeman, indicated the exact locality; a little farther on, Prince Boris, with several willing helpers, was searching every tussock of grass and thorn-root to find the lost trinket. He did not seem to be wholly pleased by Armstrong's presence, but politely waved aside a theory that the opal might be in his clothes.

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"It passes through a slit cut in my waistcoat for the purpose," he explained. "I carry it in my left pocket invariably. It must have been jerked out as the Arab sprang in the air, and may have fallen anywhere."

"Perhaps it was found by some passerby," suggested Armstrong.

"Then I will offer a reward—five hundred pounds or a thousand—for its recovery."

Certainly His Serene Highness had lost his serenity. There never was man more perturbed by such a comparatively trivial cause.

Armstrong wondered if anyone had searched the meadow on the other side of the road. It was quite conceivable that a smooth object like the opal, shot forth from its resting-place with a force sufficient to break a strong gold chain, might have flown a considerable distance.

He climbed a gate and walked up behind the hedge until he was abreast of the dark stain on the road, hastily smothered in dust, which showed where the unfortunate horse had been killed. Hardly knowing why he took such trouble on behalf of a man whom he detested—feeling, perhaps, that it was unreasonable to dislike Prince Boris simply because Lady Ermytrude might become a Russian Princess—he began a close scrutiny of the luxuriant crop of grass.

He had not gone five yards before he saw the opal shining in the sun. His first impulse was to cry

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aloud to the searchers in the roadway, but, for some occult reason, he checked the words on his lips. He stooped and lifted the glorious gem from its resting-place. At that instant he was screened from observation by a hazel tree, and he was able to examine the stone unobserved.

Never in his life had he seen such a wondrous object. In it shimmered all the colors of the rainbow, and its prismatic hues flashed at him in the sunlight with overpowering brilliancy. Red, blue, green, yellow, the flame of gold and of hell-hearted ruby, the tender pink of the sky at dawn and the ultramarine tints of the heavens on a starry night, all these seemed to sparkle at him from the strip of iridescent silica glowing in his hand.

The owner's description of its size was quite accurate. Near to one end a hole was bored, through which the gold chain had probably passed. The side that Armstrong first held towards his dazzled eyes was smooth and glassy to the touch. He turned the opal quite mechanically, and again he experienced a shock of incoherent surprise. On this side were inlaid three small golden triangles, or pyramids, of equal size. With the very glimpse of them he remembered the horn-hafted knife of the big Russian encountered at the Anarchist Club.

The same token, but in such different degrees! What could it mean? Was it the insignia of some secret society? Surely Prince Boris Melnikoff, the friend of royalty, the pampered favorite of many

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courts, could have naught in common with a man who said that only the heart could conceive the tragedy of his country!

“Now we are not free, and we cannot fight,” he had muttered, “but——” Was the significance of the pause explained by the stain on the white Ascot road?

The dull gold of the little pyramids in no wise interfered with the beauty of the remainder of the gem on its engraved side. Armstrong fancied that the metal bore some faint marks, letters or heraldic devices, but he feared that someone might see him from the road if he remained too long absorbed in its scrutiny. Oddly enough, there darted through his brain, not merely the temptation, but the active suggestion that he would do well to place the opal in his pocket and say nothing whatever about it to anybody. To a man of the highest honor such a prompting was grotesque, preposterous. The mere thought of it restored his scattered wits and made him laugh aloud.

At once he leaned over the hedge, and, holding out the gem, said,—

“I think I have found your Highness’ lost fetish,” hardly realizing that he had used any expression out of the common.

An almost frantic joy leaped into the eyes of Prince Boris when he saw the opal glittering in Armstrong’s hand. He actually clutched at it with a ludicrous haste.

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"I can never thank you sufficiently!" he cried hoarsely. "Name your own recompense."

Armstrong flushed. The moment the opal quitted his hand he felt calmer.

"I am only too glad to have rendered you a slight service," he said.

"But you do not know what this means to me," said the other, with feverish earnestness. "It is"—he checked himself—"it is a family heirloom beyond value. Ask anything I can give, and——"

"Again I repeat that my reward lies in having restored it to you," said Frank, and the Russian seemed to understand that his excitement was passing the bounds of discretion, for all those who had aided in the search were drawing near.

"Won't you even let us see it?" asked Lord Carlingham, pleasantly.

Prince Boris inflated his huge chest with a deep breath, and partially recovered his self-control.

"It is forbidden," he said, with a nervous laugh, "but the occasion is unique. Nevertheless, it must not leave my possession a second time."

He opened his hand, which was curiously slim and shapely for such a giant of a man. The opal lay lengthwise across the palm. Armstrong noted that, whether by chance or design, the engraved side of the stone was hidden.

Everyone crowded round to look at the ornament which the Russian magnate prized so exceedingly. Perhaps its delicate colors depended on the stone's

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semi-transparency when held so that it was surrounded by light, for it certainly seemed to Armstrong that it did not shine so resplendently against the white, well-manicured hand of its owner as when he had held it himself.

Carlingham, who alone of the other bystanders knew Melnikoff personally, voiced what appeared to be the general opinion when he said,—

“Well, it is a very pretty thing, but I don’t see why you should make such a fuss about it. Is it valuable?”

The prince smiled. He was rapidly regaining his careless and easy-going manner; there was something of the normal nonchalance in his voice.

“Some people credit the opal with magical properties,” he said. “Others, who are superstitious, call it unlucky. For me, the value of this one is wholly sentimental.”

With that he put it in his pocket, and the throng gradually dispersed. Melnikoff wanted to find the police who were engaged in searching the undergrowth of the wood. He was still wishful to stop any further investigations by the authorities. Carlingham assured him that English law demanded the closest inquiry into such an outrage as the throwing of a bomb. Then the prince yielded the point.

“We are happier in Russia,” he said off-handedly. “The police obey the nobles. Here, a member of the House of Lords is merely one of the general public.”

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"You tell that to my mother, and you will hear a different view," grinned the youngster. "Come on, Armstrong. Why are you standing behind that hedge? I'll find some lunch for you."

"I am going straight to town," said Frank, suddenly.

"The deuce you are! I have no end of things I want to talk to you about."

"Sorry, but I cannot remain."

Not all Carlingham's protests could shake his resolution. Meet Ermytrude again he would not: Moreover, he wished to be alone. By an odd trick of memory, when Prince Boris was speaking of the limitless privileges of the Russian grandees, a story he had heard in Saratoff of the great man who lived at Bannofka came back to him.

A girl, reputedly beautiful, had been flogged by order of a Prince Melnikoff because she dared to dispatch a complaint by post to St. Petersburg. Some bureaucrat there had sent back the letter to the local ruler, and the young woman was publicly knouted. It might be this same Prince Boris Melnikoff who had perpetrated the inhuman deed, or, perhaps, his father. Armstrong could not tell. But the thought choked him. To see the Russian again in the company of the woman he loved was too intolerable to be borne.

Finding him inflexible, Carlingham drove him to the station. There was no train to London for nearly an hour, and it was a slow one at that, so

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he consented to be driven to Windsor, where he could catch an express. They arrived at the Great Western Station in good time. Walking up and down the platform with his young companion, Armstrong, strangely restless, caught sight of a man seated in a third-class carriage. At first the stranger puzzled him. He was irritable with himself for giving the incident a moment's consideration. In a crowded station, why should he pick out a solitary individual, ensconced behind a newspaper, and seek to recollect where he had seen him before? He laughed, harshly, and surprised his friend by saying,—

“I shall be heartily glad when my steamer sails.”

No explanation of his words was asked for or given—probably Lady Ermytrude's brother thought that some things are better left unsaid. At last the two shook hands, and the train glided out of the station. Armstrong lit a cigar, and resolved to banish from his mind the gloom which so steadily enveloped him during these last days of his residence in England. When a man makes an effort of that sort he generally thinks harder than ever of the distracting circumstances.

Halfway to London he awoke with a start to the conviction that the man he saw in Windsor Station was the Russian whom he met at the Anarchists' Club, but clean-shaven, barbered, trimmed out of all resemblance to the hirsute moujik whom Carlingham had called a “picture.” At Paddington he determined to verify this belief. Before the train came

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to a standstill he alighted and ran forward to the third-class carriages in front, in one of which he had seen the heavy, broad-shouldered, bullet-headed man who now looked like an ex-prizefighter.

Yes; he was almost sure he was right. The big fellow who lumbered out of the train certainly had the figure of a Russian. Armstrong knew if he could see the stranger's eyes he would be positive. He hastily told a porter to rescue his portmanteaux from the van, and quickened his pace. The other man was about to dive into the underground passage to Praed Street when Frank tapped him on the shoulder.

"Stoi!" (Stop) he cried.

The man turned and faced him, with a queer jerk like an automaton. Armstrong was certain now.

"I want to speak to you," he said, sternly. "The matter is important. It concerns Prince Boris Melnikoff."

CHAPTER III

A PROPOSAL

THE attack on Prince Melnikoff's life lifted him to the heroic in the eyes of Ermyntrude. There was nothing strange in that. Any woman likes to see a man courageous, undaunted in the face of death, especially when he escapes.

Had the Russian shared the fate of his horse the girl would have been shocked inexpressibly. The memory of his fine appearance and polished manners must have become merged in the horror of a tragedy. As it was, she involuntarily surrounded him with the aura of romance; he presented a striking and imposing figure amidst the extraordinary sensation of a murderous outrage in a quiet place like Ascot. By chance, she was not present when he discovered the loss of the opal amulet, nor did she hear of the paroxysm of rage which then possessed him, or she must have been perplexed by finding that such a cool, self-possessed personage should indulge in frantic vituperations.

The prince reached The Cedars long before the return of Lord Carlingham from Windsor station. Ermyntrude—who heard from her mother that his

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highness had lost a valuable jewel—all agog, too, with a woman's interest in aught concerning gems—ran out to the porch to meet him as he descended from the motor still placed at his disposal by its courteous owner.

“Have you found it?” she asked, enthusiastically.

“Yes. My lucky star happens to be in the ascendant.”

“Let me see it,” she said, eager to examine an article to which he attached such value.

He made a gesture of laughing protest.

“Are you devoured by curiosity?” he cried.

“Indeed, I am. My mother said you prized it exceedingly. I want to see what it is a man can treasure so highly.”

She offered a fine picture, standing there amidst the wealth of flowers and plants that adorned the veranda. The summer sun had browned her fresh young face, and the bright sky was reflected in her blue eyes. Prince Boris thought there was none so beautiful, so candid, so delightfully unconscious of her own charms, among the countless pretty women he met in society.

He sent away the Panhard car with a polite message to be conveyed by the chauffeur. Then he turned to Ermytrude.

“Come into the garden,” he said, “and I will not only show you my opal, but tell you its story.”

She needed no second invitation. Soon they were walking among the flowers and wending their way to

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a summer-house. The Countess of Valletort, seeing them, smiled pleasantly. She wondered what Newport and Philadelphia would say if Lady Ermyntrude Grandison became a princess! Yet, the two people mostly concerned in any such gossip had no words of love for each other at the moment. Prince Boris would have laughed, Ermyntrude would have arched scornful eyebrows, had anyone suggested the possibilities of that garden stroll on a summer's day.

The opal was already attached to its gold chain, which the Russian had bound together temporarily until a skilled craftsman welded its broken links. When Ermyntrude saw it she was loud in her admiration of the ever-changing beauty of the stone, though, like her brother and the rest, she did not really perceive why the prince should set such store on its recovery.

"Where did you find it?" she asked.

"I did not find it myself," he said, lightly, though not without a quick glance at her. "Your young friend, the Indian lancer, discovered it in a neighboring field."

"Mr. Armstrong!" Her surprise was genuine. "I thought he had gone to town early this morning."

"It seems that your brother brought him to my assistance."

"How fortunate!" she cried, and, apparently, Melnikoff was pleased by her careless comment.

"The luck of my house is bound up with this

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opal," he went on. "It is a tradition, founded on I know not what, that when, if ever, it is broken our line shall cease to exist. I am the last of my race. Naturally, I wished to see if my talisman were intact or not."

"Do you believe these old-world tales?" she said.

"No; I do not. But so oddly at variance are the heart and the intellect that I admit a feeling of great relief now that the stone is restored to me undamaged."

They had reached the creeper-covered arbor, and the sun was hot.

"Sit down there," said Ermyntrode, pointing to a chair, "and tell me all about this horrible affair. Are you the object of nihilist hatred? Why should anyone seek to take *your* life? You don't interfere with politics, do you, and surely you cannot be a cruel ruler of your people?"

Her ingenuous candor delighted him.

"We Russians are a strange nation, or collection of nations," he said, with a gravity that was pleasing to his hearer. "We dwell in a country of vast distances, of solitude, of extremes. Sometimes the extremes meet, as this morning, for instance, and there is an explosion. I know no more than you what inspired some fanatic to try to take my life. I am the nominal head of a province as large as England. It contains towns, forests, lonely hills and steppes, and two great rivers, the Volga and the Don, run through it. Perhaps there has been a

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collision between my authority and some individual or community, and I am held responsible. How can I read the riddle?"

"The nominal head!" she repeated. "If I were a man I would not tolerate that word 'nominal.' I am half an American, you know, and the transatlantic strain in me revolts against the idea."

"What would you have me do?"

Her eyes looked dreamily out over the sunlit vista. It is easy for nineteen to theorize in an Ascot garden.

"If I were you," she said, "I would abandon this life of idle fashion—what poor creatures we are to become slaves to it! Are there still serfs in Russia? Anyhow, you have the term, and what is the round of what we call society but a serfdom of fine clothing, expensive food, and smiling make-believe? Nominal! What is more nominal than a career which says you must live one-third of the year in town, mostly talking scandal; one-third in the country, mostly slaying poor creatures bred to be shot; and one-third at Monte Carlo, fluttering between the Casino, one or two cookshops, and the gun club?"

She did not realize how intent Prince Boris was on her words.

"You destroy, but you do not build," he said. "Again I ask—what is the alternative for me?"

"You have told me in your own words. You have a province as large as England. Rule it."

He bent nearer, and, had she been watching his

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face, she would have seen something of the sudden fire in his eyes. But he could control his voice.

“I am thirty years of age,” he said, “and have had my surfeit of pleasures. It is odd, but you have divined something of my own inner thought. Only yesterday I saw in one of your English papers a clever article which, by curious accident, laid bare a great truth about Russia. I have the cutting here.”

He took some letters from his coat pocket. One of them fell to the ground. He picked it up with a frown. Searching among the others, he found a scrap of paper.

“It is a paragraph dealing with the real and imaginary position of our Emperor. You regard the Tsar as an autocrat in a country which stretches across half the map of the world. So he is; but, says the paper: ‘The effect of this state of things is to reduce the Tsar to a nullity, and to confer upon all the chief officials practical omnipotence within their own sphere of administration!’”

He paused. Then he added, with an indifferent sigh,—

“I am more than a chief official. I am a provincial satrap, a sort of minor tsar, with more than a tsar’s power, because my dominion is within practicable bounds.”

“Then, why are you here?” she demanded, tapping an impatient foot on the boards of the summer-house.

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"I shall tell you," he answered, rising suddenly and bending over her. "I am looking for a tsarina."

There could be no mistaking his intent. For one instant the girl lifted her startled eyes to his. She dropped them again, and her face and neck became suffused with rich color. Yet she strove to shirk the ordeal so unexpectedly thrust upon her.

"Before you seek a queen you should first be king," she murmured.

"I *am* a king. I have only to occupy my throne. Will you share it?"

She bent her head still lower. Her heart throbbed tumultuously. This was not the love she had read of in books. It was not the love of which she had vague imaginings, as a young bird poised on the edge of the nest may fearfully contemplate flight through the boundless and unsustaining air.

"You must not ask me now," she said, timidly, shrinking from the hand which had caught her shoulder.

"Nay, but I will," he answered. "Bid me take you to my kingdom and I will obey. It rests with you. I shall be your—your serf—in all save this. My future is in your hands. I will make you a princess worthy of the title. There can be no limit to our ambition. In Russia, at any hour, there is the possibility——"

A rapid step advancing over the gravel path restored their bewildered senses. Deeply annoyed by

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the interruption, Prince Boris lifted his head with the leonine action that seemed so typical of him. Who was it, demanded his blazing eyes, who dared intrude at such a moment? Lord Carlingham, careless whether he was scowled at or not, saw that the Russian was aware of his approach.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, blithely. "There is a bally policeman here. Says he must see you instantly."

Melnikoff knew that the spell was broken. He whispered gently,—

"I am hoping for a favorable answer. Think of what I have said, and all that it means to you—and to me."

He turned to Carlingham.

"A policeman; where is he?" he asked. "Were we in Bannofka, I would"—he paused; really he must check these outspoken comments—"I would leave others to deal with such disagreeable things."

He approached and linked an arm through Carlingham's.

"I do think," he muttered, "that if *I* am content to let this business drop, the authorities might oblige me. I must appeal to London."

"But this chap is an inspector. He says that an important discovery has been made."

"A discovery! Of what?"

"I don't know. I found him talking to the butler, so came to unearthing you; one of the servants said you were in the garden with Ermie."

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The Russian smiled. One of *his* servants would not have made that mistake. The police inspector awaited them on the drive. He saluted, and stood in soldierly attitude whilst he addressed the prince.

"An extraordinary thing has happened," he said. "One of my men, engaged in searching the wood, noticed that the long grass and weeds surrounding a small fenced-in lake had been trampled on recently. He followed up the track, your Highness, and found a woman——"

"A woman! Was she dead?" interrupted Prince Melnikoff, and Carlingham fancied there was a note of anxiety in his friend's voice.

"Yes, quite dead. She had been in the water some hours. Her hands and feet were tied together."

The prince drew himself up haughtily.

"What has this to do with me?" he cried, impatiently, throwing out his hands as if some impediment had been removed from his path.

"I beg your Highness's pardon, but, taking into account the fact that some person unknown threw a bomb at you this morning, and that this woman found dead looks like a Russian, I thought——"

"Looks like a Russian! What does that mean? Are Russians branded with their nationality?"

The inspector, though surprised at the reception given to him, was not to be browbeaten.

"No, your Highness," he said, "they are human beings like the rest of us. But this woman had a letter in her pocket with the Saratoff postmark. I

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could not read the writing, but I made out from an atlas that Saratoff is in Russia."

"Have you the letter? Show it to me!" cried Prince Boris, very excitedly.

"I am sorry I cannot show it to you. It is being carefully dried at the police-station. I came here to ask your Highness if you could identify the woman."

"Then I say at once I cannot. I saw no woman. All I know is that my horse plunged violently after a loud explosion, and I was thrown headlong."

The inspector saluted again and went off.

"Now, why the deuce," thought Carlingham, "did Armstrong hurry off to town? Just at present he might be useful, and surely my tall friend must know whether it was a man or a woman who heaved the shell at him? Glad I'm not a Russian, and I jolly well hope Ernie isn't going to be one, either!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY OF THE WOOD

THE man whom Armstrong accosted so abruptly on the platform of Paddington Station looked at him with an effrontery that was amazing, if, indeed, he had been concerned in the affair at Ascot.

“Prince Boris Melnikoff!” he said, coolly. “Why do you name him to me?”

It was a remarkable fact that he did not attempt to deny his knowledge of the Russian language. Possibly he spoke little, if any, English, so he thought it best to face his questioner boldly.

The Englishman, of course, knew nothing of the grewsome discovery made by the police. He imagined that, by sheer chance, he had come in contact with one of the principals in a nihilist plot which had miscarried, and he decided to investigate matters on his own account before he gave information to the authorities. The whole course of events might have been altered materially had he caused the man to be arrested, and assuredly he would not have hesitated a moment if he was aware that the corpse of a murdered woman, recovered from the pond at Ascot, was even then resting in the local mortuary

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awaiting an inquest. Still, even within his limited knowledge, the affair looked serious enough, and he decided that a crowded railway station was no fit place in which to discuss it.

"I think," he said, in the most non-committal words he could find, "that your presence at Windsor Station on the day chosen for an attempt on the prince's life requires some explanation. You can give it to me if you like. Otherwise, I must call the police."

The stranger, so oddly out of his environment in London, seemed to hesitate. He looked at Armstrong with those wonderfully luminous eyes which redeemed his hang-dog face from absolute ferocity.

"I will answer your questions," he muttered, at last.

"We cannot talk here. Come with me to my rooms in Jermyn Street."

"Where you will," was the unemotional reply.

They walked together to the hansom summoned by the porter in charge of Armstrong's baggage. The Russian entered, Frank climbed in after him, and they were off. Armstrong sidled round on the seat, so as to command his companion's face.

"Now," he said, "tell me who is responsible for the outrage at Ascot, and what was its motive."

"Nitchevo!" said the other. The phrase means "I don't know," but a Russian can throw a blank negative into it that requires more emphatic words in English.

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"If you do not know," persisted Armstrong, "why do you carry in your pocket a knife with three triangles, or pyramids, engraved on the handle, while Prince Boris Melnikoff treasures an opal bearing the same token?"

"Because we are of the same race. The three tents are the sign of our house."

A new significance dawned on his hearer. So the triangles were meant to represent tents, a sort of heraldic device that would commend itself to nomad Cossacks.

"Do you want me to believe that you, a Russian, an absolute stranger in England, visited the neighborhood of Ascot to-day by chance, and disguised yourself for the excursion?" asked Armstrong, impatiently.

"No. You offered me the alternative of being questioned by you or the police. I prefer you. You understand my language."

"Then, tell me why you went to such an out-of-the-way place. Was it to meet Prince Melnikoff?"

"Yes."

"Did you meet him?"

"Yes."

"What was your object?"

The heavy, sullen countenance was suddenly lifted, and the man said,—

"What right have you to ask?"

For an instant Frank was disconcerted. Certainly it might be thought, by a man innocent of

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any crime, that he was unwarrantably prying into the affairs of another.

"I am only seeking to assure myself that I am not acting wrongfully in failing to hand you over to the authorities."

"On what charge?"

"The charge of trying to kill Prince Boris by throwing a bomb at him."

"I threw no bomb—it was a woman. I would have given my life to save him."

"You—an anarchist?"

"Yes, I, whatever I may be. Some day I may be forced to call Boris Melnikoff to account. Rest assured I shall do so if he fails in the trust reposed in him. Until that day comes I must defend him with my life's blood. I thought he was in danger, and I went to Ascot to warn him. I was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, he escaped; and his enemies will not attack him again—not there, at any rate."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because they have failed so completely on this occasion that England cannot contain them. *They* know now that *I* know. It is enough."

The hansom was scampering down Park Lane before it turned into Mount Street. On every hand were signs of the London season—smart equipages, omnibuses laden with sightseers, a Cook's man bellowing through a megaphone the chief points of interest around the Marble Arch, nurse-maids play-

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ing with children on the grass beneath the trees—in the immediate foreground a diminutive coster treating with contumely a gigantic brewer's dray.

It was absurdly at variance with the locality and the scene that two men in a hansom—one a Russian conspirator—should be calmly discussing a bomb outrage, and dissecting a mystery that looked like a family vendetta. Armstrong, too, was conscious that his companion was far the more collected of the pair. His replies were candid and to the point. He evidently awaited the Englishman's further inquiries with the utmost complacency.

Armstrong found it difficult to make up his mind as to a definite course of action. "Give me your address," he said after a pause, "and I will let this matter rest unless there are unforeseen developments. I am leaving England in a few days, and I do not wish to be mixed up in any official investigation. When all is said and done, the prince is uninjured, and his affairs hardly concern me."

The Russian produced an envelope. It bore a name, and the number of a house in Charlotte Street.

"Ask there for Ivan Stephanovitch and you will find me," he said.

John, the son of Stephen, certainly acted like one who did not shirk scrutiny. Armstrong was more than ever puzzled by his behavior.

"You have met me in a straightforward way," he admitted, "but you must acknowledge that my

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suspensions were natural, especially when I saw the opal carried by Prince Melnikoff."

"How came you to see it?"

"Because he had lost it."

This time his words penetrated the husk of indifference, either felt or assumed, by the gigantic Ivan. The man clutched his arm in an iron grasp, and his big eyes blazed, as he cried,—

"Lost it! Has it gone?"

"No, no," was the assurance; "it fell in a neighboring field. It was I who found it."

"And you restored it to him?"

"Yes."

"How is it that you, an Englishman, take such an interest in a foreigner?"

Their rôles were suddenly reversed. The Russian was thoroughly excited by the mere suggestion that the opal had left its rightful owner's possession, and Armstrong found himself not only perplexed now, but embarrassed.

"Well," he said, "I met Prince Melnikoff at the house of Lord Valletort. I happen to be a friend of Lord Valletort's son, and, as his highness seems to be paying some attention to my friend's sister, I naturally——"

"Do you mean that Melnikoff would dare to think of marrying some girl here in England?"

"Assuredly; it looks like it."

Were it not for his own bitterness of spirit, evoked by the unexpected turn taken by the conversation,

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Armstrong must have been startled by the rage which convulsed Stephanovitch's face. He saw nothing of this, however, and was staring gloomily into space when his eyes chanced to catch the wondering look of a policeman standing at the corner of Carlos Place. Then he glanced at his companion again, and was amazed by the Russian's vindictive expression. Before he could speak again, the other, apparently yielding to impulse, brought forth the envelope once more.

"Tell the driver to take us there," he growled, indicating the address.

"Why? I am satisfied with your explanation."

"Tell him," persisted the other.

"But there is no reason. I quite believe you live there."

The Russian flung his hand outwards in anger.

"What do I care what you believe!" he cried.

"If you are a friend of these English people, you must warn them that Boris Melnikoff can never marry one of their kin. Come with me. I will show you his wife."

"His wife!" gasped Armstrong, horrified by the mere hint of a vulgar intrigue into which the name of Ermytrude might be drawn.

"The woman destined to be his wife!" roared the other, thoroughly excited, and careless of the attention he attracted from those who caught sight of his huge form and frenzied gestures. "Boris Melnikoff can marry but one woman in the world.

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He knows that. Let him beware lest I carve the recollection on his heart."

It was essential that Frank should calm the man. A giant, bellowing threats in Russian, and sawing the air with clenched fists over the doors of a hansom, is not a customary object in Berkeley Square. Passing chauffeurs and cabmen were grinning sarcastically, and pedestrians were standing on the pavement to look after the vehicle, while Armstrong became aware that their own driver was squinting at them through the little trap-door in the roof.

To pacify the Russian, he assured him that, after depositing his belongings at his Jermyn Street lodgings, he would accompany him. Thenceforth, not a word would Ivan utter until they reached the neighborhood of Charlotte Street. At some little distance, seeming to recognize his whereabouts, he told Armstrong to stop the vehicle. They proceeded on foot to one of the soiled houses of a bygone elegance which are to be found in that part of London. Letting himself in with a latch-key, the Russian, followed by his strangely-made acquaintance, went rapidly upstairs to the first floor.

It was dark there, and the solitary door communicating with the inner suite of apartments was veiled by a heavy curtain. The big man, energetic in his movements notwithstanding his great stature, turned the handle as he swept aside the *portière*, and Armstrong heard a woman's voice cry, gladly,—

"Is that you, Vonia?"

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Vonia stands for Ivan in Russian much as "Jack" for "John" in English, and its use now showed that the man hailed in that manner must be an intimate friend or relative of the speaker.

"Hush, Natushka," he replied. "I bring one to meet thee."

Armstrong caught a startled ejaculation; but it was he, and not the woman suddenly encountered in the strong light of the sitting-room, who was taken at a disadvantage. At first he was spellbound. He entered a dingy London dwelling and found therein an Eastern odalisque, attired in robes of barbaric splendor, and beautiful as the dark-haired Gulbeyaz, of whose charms Byron wrote,—

"Her presence was as lofty as her state,
Her beauty of that overpowering kind
Whose force description only would abate:
I'd rather leave it much to your own mind."

The woman, or girl, for she was not twenty years of age, might have been the youthful queen of some old-time Trans-Caspian realm. She was tall and finely modeled, with the full lips, the creamy skin which Persian poets give to their "moon-faced" heroines; the dark, deer-like eyes of the rarest type of Georgian loveliness. Her shining black hair was caught back from a smooth forehead by a gold circlet. Around her graceful neck was another golden ornament, its fine mesh lying flat, and glinting dully as it followed the curves of her throat.

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A bodice of light-blue silk was half revealed by a flowing robe of white muslin, fastened at her slim waist by a golden belt. But it was not her costume, nor the wondrous effect of her Eastern beauty, which finally held Armstrong's gaze. Circlet, necklet, and belt each bore the device of three tents in large triangle-shaped rubies, picked out in lines of tiny opals.

Even while the two were gazing in wonder at each other—for the girl seemed to be almost as surprised as the man—the big Russian cried,—

“What is your name, Englishman?”

Armstrong told him.

“It conveys little to my ears,” said the other. “You must write it in Russian characters, so that my sister may know how to find you if she needs your help.”

Armstrong was too bewildered to say then that in a few days he would be far from England, even if he had the power to serve either of them in any way. He wrote his name, his present lodgings, and the address of his agents, and handed the paper to Ivan.

“You will know Natushka again if you see her?” asked the latter, his face lighting with a smile as he regarded the girl, who, for her part, was obviously not so timid now that she had covertly eyed the handsome, stalwart young Englishman.

“I do not think I will ever forget her,” said Frank, with a look of involuntary admiration.

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"Then you have met the lady who alone may become the wife of him who styles himself Prince Boris Melnikoff. Should there be any who doubt, tell them I said it—I—Ivan Stephanovitch!"

Armstrong fancied that Natushka—who no more resembled the man who called her sister than Venus Aphrodite resembles the god Pan, half-goat, half-satyr—did not attach to this announcement a tinge of the eager confidence that Ivan displayed. But he was given little time to form any theory on this point. The Russian signified that their talk had ended.

"You will pardon me now if I bid you farewell," he said, with gruff courtesy. "I have many matters to occupy me, and I would be alone with my sister, as she knows naught of events which have taken place this morning."

"Is there anything wrong, Vonja?" asked the girl.

"I will tell thee all, Natushka. But we must be alone."

Armstrong had no option now but to take leave of them. When he reached the street he could hardly believe that the extraordinary pair he had just quitted had a real existence, so utterly were they at variance with the outward and visible aspect of the disheveled hinterland of Tottenham Court Road.

He debated seriously with himself the pros and cons of the adventure. Was he justified in withholding his knowledge from the police? It was a

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difficult matter for a man who held the King's commission to adhere to a pledge hastily given to one who might be a dangerous desperado. At last he resolved to telegraph to Lord Carlingham, asking him to come to town.

It was, perhaps, as well not to determine upon a course of action too quickly; yet, in the very act of writing the message, he stopped and tore up the paper. Was he to inform his friend of the arrogant statement made by Ivan with regard to the Prince's matrimonial prospects? Would not Ermyntrude, if the story reached her, believe that he was inspired by other motives than a disinterested desire to serve her? Would not even the loyal-hearted Carlingham himself suspect him?

The sting of the thought brought its own remedy. He determined to wash his hands clean of the whole business, visit his agents, make some purchases, and pass the few remaining days of his leave in Paris. This grasping of the nettle relieved the tension of his soul. Ermyntrude was not for him, and he was far too resolute and high-minded a man to go about the world brooding over the unattainable.

He passed the afternoon busily and pleasantly. About five o'clock he drove to his chambers, to see his kit being packed in readiness for a start next morning. Turning out of Lower Regent Street, he overtook a newsboy running along Jermyn Street with a contents bill: "The Ascot Outrage: Sensational Discovery."

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When his cab pulled up, he waited for the boy and bought a paper.

"If I were a journalist I could make a readable article out of my own connection with the affair," he thought as he unfolded the sheet. "I wonder what the new development is?"

He soon learnt. His horrified eyes devoured the statement that the corpse of a woman, believed, from documents found in her possession, to be a Russian, had been found in a pond in the wood which sheltered Prince Melnikoff's assailant.

"We understand," the paragraph continued, "that the police have no doubt the poor creature was foully murdered. She was dead, strangled, before her body was thrust into the water, but, to make assurance doubly sure, her brutal assailant had bound her hands and feet with cords. The medical evidence will show that she had been dead about four hours when found, so it is no far-fetched theory which links this grewsome tragedy with the attack made on Prince Boris Melnikoff early this morning in the same locality."

The blood rushed from Armstrong's face and left him pallid. His heart throbbed with the terrible thought that possessed him.

"Great Heavens!" he muttered. "I am screening a murderer! That man, Ivan Stephanovitch, must have been responsible for this unfortunate woman's death!"

CHAPTER V

PRINCE MELNIKOFF'S DISDAIN

AT first Armstrong told himself that there was now only one course open to him. He must go straight to Scotland Yard and disclose the whole of the facts to the police. Yet he was so disturbed by the possible bearing of the crime on the life of a girl for whom he entertained a hopeless love that he checked the impulse to proceed without delay to the police headquarters.

The young officer was no milk-sop, fresh from country vicarage or crammer's, nor yet was he a feather-brained boy, more pleased than otherwise at being in active touch with a tragedy at once mysterious and thrilling. He had discovered, early in life, that hard work advances a man in the Army as in any other profession, and he was credited, by his friends and superiors, with the characteristics of clear judgment and sound common-sense.

Seated quietly in his own room, he calmly reviewed the evidence which he alone could adduce against Ivan Stephanovitch. He was not devoid of some legal experience attained by service on regimental courts-martial, and he soon perceived that, as far

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as "evidence" was concerned, there was none. Suspicion undoubtedly attached to the man. Probably, when the police were made acquainted with his movements, they would arrest him. But, unless some vital circumstances came to light, there was no chance of the Russian being convicted.

And certain aspects of the affair tended to exonerate him altogether. A murderer, flying from the scene of his crime, was a most unlikely person to reveal his abode to a man who recognized him by accident. Although the big Russian was undoubtedly disguised, and had admitted meeting Prince Boris that morning, he was quite candid in his statements. Moreover, when given an excellent chance of misleading his questioner as to his identity, not only did he refuse to avail himself of it, but he absolutely insisted that Armstrong should accompany him to the house wherein dwelt that marvelously beautiful enigma, Natushka.

Certainly, Stephanovitch's words seemed to hint at knowledge of the terrible deed brought to light by the Ascot police. But was it conceivable that a man racing hot-foot from the place where his victim was hidden could so utterly forget or ignore his own danger as to take a stranger into his confidence, when he must unquestionably be suspected of complicity in a crime that was sure to be discovered sooner or later?

The more Frank wrestled with the problem, the more bewildering it became. And there was another

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disturbing thought. The person most anxious that the local police should cease their painstaking investigations was Prince Melnikoff himself. True, if the dead woman were the bomb-thrower, the prince could not have caused her death. A party of motorists came to his rescue at the very instant of the attack, and Armstrong had left him still in their company.

The thing bristled with difficulties. A visit to Scotland Yard did not seem to be such a simple matter of duty after half-an-hour's quiet reflection as it had appeared when first he read the paragraph in the newspaper.

Ultimately, he decided that, whatever the personal inconvenience caused, his contemplated visit to Paris must be postponed, and Lord Carlingham taken into his confidence. Again, it was not compatible with the friendship existing between himself and the members of the Valletort household that he should rush off to Scotland Yard and drag them into notoriety on mere suspicion. No; he must conquer his own feelings, return to Ascot, and explain things fully to Carlingham—also, perhaps, to Prince Boris.

If the latter chose, he might explain things in such wise as to exonerate Stephanovitch. Obviously, the discreet course to adopt was for Frank to present himself at The Cedars by the next train.

June days, in fine weather, spin themselves out to very late hours by the clock. Though dinner was long ended, and Lord Valletort, a sleep-loving

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person, had already returned to his suite, it was still daylight when Frank halted a station hack at the lodge gates, and walked quietly up the tree-lined avenue. He did not wish to attract attention. People would wonder who was arriving if a vehicle rattled up to the entrance at a late hour.

The mansion was one of the many commodious country seats which can be rented about race-time in the neighborhood of Ascot. Its lawns, gardens, and ornamental grounds were laid out with exquisite taste. From the point of view of young people with a taste for flirtation, it was an earthly paradise of shaded walks and rustic seats.

Though the majority of guests were faithful to bridge, there were others who preferred a solitude *à deux*, and Armstrong, who recognized most of the men and some of the women, wished more than once he had put off his visit until the morning. He, of course, was not in evening dress, and a man feels like a fish out of water under such conditions. The contrast offered by these peaceful grounds, dim and fairy-like in the purple light of declining day—with their flitting figures of elegantly attired women and attentive cavaliers—and his own bizarre experiences since first he heard of the attack on Prince Melnikoff, was so amazing that he could almost question the reality of all that he had gone through.

It was with an absurd feeling of relief, for which he fiercely chided himself, that he failed to distin-

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gish in any of the strolling or seated couples the delicate form of Ermytrude escorted by the tall Russian. Indeed, as he approached the door, he saw Prince Boris emerging from one of the French windows of the drawing-room. Such scraps of conversation as reached his ears from the interior had no savor of tragedy.

"Shall I play to hearts?"

"Double hearts."

"Are you satisfied?"

Someone cried to the prince,—

"You can cut in at this table now if you like. One odd trick settles it."

"No, thanks," he said. "I am going to smoke in the garden. There are so few fine evenings in England that it is a pity to miss one."

He heard Frank's quick tread on the path, and turned sharply.

"Hello, Armstrong!" he said. "I thought you had gone to London?"

"I went there after I parted from your Highness this morning. But urgent private affairs, as we say in the Service, have brought me back."

The prince appeared to hesitate a moment.

"I suppose you have come to see somebody?" he inquired.

"Yes. Indeed, I was about to find Carlingham and ask him to bring you into council."

"Me! You have returned at this late hour to see *me!*"

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A rustle of skirts near the window caused Frank to say hurriedly,—

“Do you know where Carlingham is?”

“Is his presence indispensable?” asked the Russian, with a careless hauteur that disdained the possibility of being overheard.

“Who are you talking about?” cried Lady Eryntrude, appearing suddenly. “Mr. Armstrong! Can it possibly be you?”

“I trust the day’s wanderings have not made me unrecognizable,” he laughed, made master of his emotions by reason of the bitter knowledge that these two had evidently intended to pass out together into the garden.

“You come and go so mysteriously,” she said, innocently, for a girl budding into womanhood can place a man on the rack without knowing the torture she inflicts.

“My presence at this late hour certainly requires explanation,” he replied. “I really came to see your brother—and Prince Melnikoff.”

“A polite way of telling me that I am *de trop*. Very well. I forgive you, and will try to find Jimmie.”

She vanished. The Russian, manifestly annoyed, controlled his temper sufficiently to say with loud-voiced candor,—

“It must indeed be important, Mr. Armstrong, this business which brings you so unexpectedly from London.”

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"It is, or seems to be, at present. I would not intrude on you otherwise."

Melnikoff smiled, came nearer, and lowered his tone.

"You make me curious," he said. "Permit me to express the hope that it does not concern the stupid incident of this morning."

"I fear that the two are bound up so closely that your Highness will recognize the connection even more clearly than I do."

"Then I must decline to discuss the matter. It bores me."

The prince's affable manner suddenly changed to an air of extreme reserve. He turned on his heel, and would have re-entered the drawing-room, had not Armstrong, though bitterly resenting the disagreeable task imposed on him, said quietly,—

"Someone must hear me. If not you, I am bound to appeal to the authorities. I have met Ivan Stephanovitch, and his sister, Natushka."

Had the Russian touched a live wire he could not have started back from the window more rapidly. His handsome face was distorted with rage as he grasped Armstrong's shoulder and almost whispered,—

"You are bold, my young friend, or you would not mention those names to me. Let me warn you in turn I am not the man to permit any insolent meddler to interfere in my affairs."

His mien was so domineering that at any other

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time Armstrong would have flung back the words with quick defiance. Now, realizing that many things were at stake, and anxious only to disentangle himself from the net which fate was spreading before his feet, he retorted coolly,—

“Keep your threats for those who fear them, Prince Melnikoff. I am here to-night not to meddle but to help. In Lord Carlingham’s presence I will explain myself.”

The other growled an oath in Russian.

“Why drag *him* into it?” he demanded, fiercely.

Frank was ready for this thrust. On no account would he hint at solicitude on behalf of the woman he loved.

“Because it is by the merest accident that he is not in my place. He, too, has met one of the persons I have named. Had he traveled to London to-day he would probably have been brought face to face with the other. Here he comes. Be good enough to bottle up your wrath until you hear what I have to say.”

Prince Boris was obviously disturbed, but he was silenced by Armstrong’s icy indifference to his lordly wrath. At any rate, he held his tongue for the moment.

Carlingham, after his first exclamation of surprise, quickly perceived that something of grave significance had brought his friend back to Ascot. He led the others to his own bedroom, where they could talk without being disturbed. As the three young

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men were mounting the main staircase, Prince Melnikoff's French valet asked his master to grant him a word. Whatever message the man delivered, it was of interest. The prince glanced at his watch, murmured an instruction, and rejoined the others.

Armstrong lost no time in placing them in possession of his adventures. Prince Melnikoff's face lost its puzzled expression when the Englishman described the similarity of the marks on the knife-handle to those engraved on the opal.

"It is nothing," he interrupted impatiently. "Ivan and I are of the same house. We are Cossacks of the Don—'fellow-clansmen' you call it here."

"I recognized him," went on Frank, "and accosted him in Paddington Station. I did not know at that hour that a woman's body had been found in a pond——"

"Pooh! Some poor creature who committed suicide," broke in the prince again.

"The newspapers say it is a clear case of murder. However, that is a matter for the police. In England, Prince Melnikoff, as you are doubtless aware, such discoveries are not hushed up. But the really vital thing is that this man, becoming infuriated by a harmless remark of mine, almost forced me to accompany him to a house in Charlotte Street, where I saw a young woman—a beautiful Circassian or Georgian I thought her—whom he introduced as

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your plighted wife. Before I met her he had made the same assertion, and backed it up with threats. Surely it would not have been a friendly act had I left England without telling you of this strange *rencontre*, or merely informed the authorities."

Now, it was clear to both Armstrong and Carlingham that, as the narrative progressed, the Russian regained his wonted good-humor.

Indeed, when Armstrong paused he laughed.

"Is that all?" he cried. "Poor Ivan is a lunatic. The girl is not his sister. She is his ward, the daughter of a friend. My conscience is quite unburdened with regard to her. There was some sort of a foolish compact made in infancy by our respective parents. Is a man to be bound by such folly nowadays?"

His words were plausible enough, and his manner that of profound relief. But Armstrong's purpose was not to be brushed aside so lightly, though he realized that Prince Melnikoff seemed to dread hearing something wholly at variance with the revelation that was so startling to English ears.

"No matter what grounds Stephanovitch had for his statements, they concerned you and you only," he said. "Naturally, I have no reason to thrust myself into your private affairs, nor would I have come here to-night, were it not that a murder is publicly reported—a murder which surely seems to have a close bearing on the attack of which you were the victim this morning."

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"I don't think you ought to feel sore with Armstrong," put in Carlingham, looking fixedly at the Russian. "Nine men out of ten, in his position, would have shifted the responsibility off his shoulders by calling at the nearest police-station."

"Oh, of course, I am exceedingly obliged to him!" cried the prince. "It is hard to make my position intelligible to you matter-of-fact Englishmen. My country is in a transition stage. Revolutionary ideas are fighting against feudalism. How would a community of British Radicals have fared under the Tudors? Answer that question, and you will begin to understand modern Russia. I have enemies whom I have never seen, whom I have never injured, whose grievances, whether real or imaginary, I cannot redress. This man, Ivan Stephanovitch, saw me this morning——"

"Before or after the bomb was thrown?" broke in Lord Carlingham.

"After. Indeed, I met him near the lodge. I stopped the car when I saw him, and that was how I came to miss my opal. He was there to-day as a friend. To-morrow, or next day, should he become aware of circumstances which would render my marriage with the charming Natushka impossible, he may prove my bitterest foe. Am I to blame?"

Armstrong felt the quiet irony of the words, but he contented himself by saying,—

"May I ask your Highness if you have reason to believe that Stephanovitch was not connected in

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any way with the death of the woman found in the pond?"

"I am quite certain of it. And now I am sure you will pardon me if I hurry away."

He quitted them, seemingly careless what construction they placed on his attitude. He had all the impatience of a man in love. Beneath, there waited Lady Ermyntrude—and the garden: why waste time over a fruitless discussion?

"I have discharged a very unpleasant task," said Frank to his friend. "It does not call for further interference on my part. I am off now, and can leave for Paris to-morrow as I intended."

"There is something underhanded about the whole affair," growled Carlingham, his usually bright face clouded with thought. "Any other johnny would have been anxious to probe thoroughly into an incident which is, to say the least, highly suspicious."

"You mean the presence of our anarchist acquaintance at Ascot to-day?"

"I hardly know what I mean except this—that I'm dead against the notion of having a Cossack prince, with his family feuds and attendant bomb-throwers, as a brother-in-law!"

"Is his highness your sister's accepted suitor, then?" asked Frank, quietly, though it cost him an effort to meet Carlingham's anxious eyes unflinchingly.

"Not quite that, perhaps, but the next thing to it."

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"He is a great man, and very popular. Lady Ermyntrode will have a splendid career."

"Oh, rot!" was the ungracious comment. "Don't try to spoof me, Frank. And, look here, don't hurry away to-night. A police inspector called to-day, and said that letters with the Saratoff postmark were found in that unfortunate woman's pocket."

"It is quite impossible," said Armstrong, firmly. "Thus far I have been forced into action, much against my will. What would Prince Melnikoff say, what would your sister think, if they heard I was busying myself further in the prince's affairs?"

"Give me Stephanovitch's address!" cried the other, after gazing moodily through the window into the deepening gloom without.

Frank hesitated.

"You will not do any good by mixing yourself up with these people," he urged.

"Good or ill, I am the only one who will lift a finger to secure Ermie's happiness," said her brother, vehemently. "There's my father! He will simply do what the mater tells him, and *she* thinks that to be called 'Princess' Something-or-other is a sort of beatitude. As for Ermie herself, she's only a girl, full of dreams and wonderful aspirations. I don't think she cares a red cent about this chap, but she fancies she will play the part of Providence to downtrodden millions. Damn it, Frank, I am the only person in the family with any brains."

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Were it not for his own somber thoughts, Armstrong could have laughed at this angry young egotist. He wrote the Russian's address, and the two walked through the grounds to the lodge, where Frank's cabman was told to await his return.

But the vehicle had vanished.

The station was nearly a mile distant, and Armstrong, instead of having ample leisure to catch the last train to London, would be compelled to run the whole distance if he wished to be in time. The lodge-keeper's wife threw some light on the disappearance of the cab.

"A gentleman came from the house about ten minutes ago," she said. "He asked the cabman why he was waiting, and the man said he had brought a fare from the station. 'Oh,' said the gentleman, 'he is staying all night. I will pay you. Drive me to the station.'"

"A gentleman from the house!" cried the astonished Carlingham. "Did you know him?"

"No, my lord."

They were all alike strangers to the woman, who did not even recognize Lord Valletort's heir at first until she looked closely at him.

"But what was he like? It was a most extraordinary trick. No one was leaving to-night."

"He was a short, thin gentleman, my lord. I think he was a Frenchman."

"We haven't such a person staying with us!" he cried, still more amazed.

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"This is a day of queer events," said Frank. "Anyhow, I must run for it. Good-by, Jimmie."

"Just a moment, sir," said the woman, anxiously, as she feared a complaint might be made to the owner of the house. "Can you ride a bicycle?"

"Yes."

"Then you can have my husband's, and if you leave it at the Station Hotel he will call for it in the morning."

"The very thing," he assented. "I am greatly indebted to you."

Hence, the spiriting away of his conveyance was no serious matter. He reached the station in good time, and sharply scrutinized the waiting vehicles in order to find his own driver.

He could not see the man, so he walked straight to a first-class carriage and took a corner seat. Happening to look out, he saw a "short, thin gentleman," apparently a Frenchman, reach the departure platform from across the rails. It was Prince Melnikoff's valet, whom he had seen on the stairs at The Cedars little more than half an hour earlier.

Instantly Frank realized that the prince's servant had directed the cabman to set him down on the arrival side of the station, possibly to hinder any inquiry being made in case the infuriated fare left at The Cedars managed to put in an appearance before the train left.

It was an extraordinary fact that twice in one day Armstrong should have set out for London from

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different towns, and on each occasion be confronted with some individual whose fortunes were bound up with those of the Russian prince.

“If I were superstitious,” he said to himself, “I would recognize the hand of fate in this coincidence. As it is, I defy fate. Indeed, I am a fool to trouble myself about these things.”

CHAPTER VI

TRAPPED

CARELESS whether or not the valet recognized him, Armstrong hurried to the nearest taxi-cab, and he was set down at his chambers in Jermyn Street in a surprisingly short time. He was tired, anxious to forget his perplexities in sleep, yet no sooner had the front door closed behind him than he was confronted with a fresh bewilderment.

The proprietor of the house, a retired butler, emerged from the basement. He had evidently been on the watch for his tenant.

"Just a moment, sir," said the man. "There have been some queer goings-on here during your absence."

He glanced cautiously up the main staircase. Some other occupant of the flats was descending.

"Will you kindly step into my sitting-room, sir?" he continued, in the low tone of the confidential and discreet servant.

Frank followed him, wondering what new marvel would be crowded into this day of surprises.

"Now, Mr. Tomkins," he said, when they were alone, "what is it?"

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“Well, sir, you hadn’t been gone many minutes when a lady came to see you—a remarkable-looking young lady she was, too.”

Instantly Armstrong guessed who this mysterious visitor might be.

“Was she a foreigner?” he asked.

“She was so much of a foreigner that nobody could make out a word she said. But she had a piece of paper with your name and address on it, and—begging your pardon, sir—I thought it was your handwriting.”

Mr. Tomkins smiled knowingly, but Frank was too amazed to make any effort to dispel the worthy proprietor’s doubts.

“Yes,” he said, impatiently. “I imagine it was a Russian lady whom I have met.”

“Ah, that’s it!” cried the other. “What between me and my wife, she having been a lady’s-maid who traveled a bit, we can generally get along with scraps of French and German, but your friend, sir——”

“She is no friend, a mere acquaintance.”

“Anyhow, sir, she is a powerful fine young woman, and she caused a rare fuss here.”

“In what way?”

“She came in a cab, sir, and first of all she held out a handful of silver, meaning me to pay the cabman. She had a big cloak on, and I didn’t see her extraordinary rig-out until she came in and showed me the paper, talking at me all the time like one o’clock. My missus came upstairs, and be-

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tween us we made her understand that you were out. That brought tears, and she sat down on the stairs, meaning to wait until you came back. Of course, that wouldn't do, with gentlemen and their friends coming in to dress for dinner, and by that time Mrs. Tomkins had spotted her dress—which was just like that of the dancing-girl on the curtain of the Alhambra.”

Frank would have enjoyed the recital were it not for the unexpected nature of Natushka's visit, and its probable relation to affairs at Ascot. He knew that to hurry Mr. Tomkins in his narrative would be fatal to its coherence, so he contented himself with a nod of recognition.

“Well, sir, we brought her in here, and the poor young thing calmed down a bit. You see, she seemed to realize that we would let her await your return. All at once, after she had been sitting quietly for an hour or so, she heard me answering an inquiry at the door, and my missus said she never in all her life saw anyone look so frightened. She knew the man's voice, I suppose.”

“What man?” cried Frank, who itched to shake Tomkins's story out of him.

“I'm coming to him. He rang and asked for you. I said you were out. Then he asked if a young lady had called to see you, and I'm blessed if he didn't describe the girl in the sitting-room.”

“Did he speak English?”

“Oh, yes, sir, as well as any of us!”

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"Surely he was not a very tall, strongly-built man, with heavy features, clean-shaven——"

"Not a bit like him, sir. He was quite a nice-looking old gentleman with a beard, and he said the lady was his daughter."

"Oh!"

"That's exactly what I said, sir. It changed the venoo, as the lawyers say. So I just invited him to step in, and as soon as he set eyes on the poor girl crying in one corner he began to pitch into her in their own lingo. But he wasn't nasty to her. I will say that for him. He seemed to be urging her to do something, and at last she went away with him."

"Was that all?"

"It was, and it wasn't, sir. Mrs. Tomkins and I both agreed that the young woman gave us a kind of entreating glance, as much as to say, 'Ask Mr. Armstrong to come and help me.' She got into a taxi quietly enough, and they drove off together."

Frank glanced at his watch. The hour was late, but he thought it best to demand an immediate explanation of Natushka's visit.

He was soon carried to the neighborhood of Charlotte Street. To avoid observation, he alighted at the corner, and strolled up the opposite side of the street in order to survey the Russian's abode, and see if there were lights in any of the rooms.

As he approached the house, he became aware of a commotion. A man was hammering at the door

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and making noise enough to wake the Seven Sleepers. A policeman was there, too, and a sudden altercation sprang up between the officer and the strenuous person who demanded admission so vigorously.

"Look here!" protested the constable, "you can't go on with that racket all night. There's nobody in."

"But it ees important, M'sieur. Dey are here. My master tell me so."

"It doesn't matter what your master told you. You are disturbing the whole street. Can't you see the house is empty?"

The policeman stepped back, and flashed his lamp over the windows. The blinds were not lowered. Apparently no one had been in the front rooms since night fell.

"Just one more leetle knock, and I go," appealed the Frenchman, in whom Frank promptly recognized the prince's valet.

If the man did not thump again so loudly on the knocker, he pulled the bell energetically. Armstrong heard its jingle across the width of the street.

It was useless. After a prolonged wait, the foreigner turned away with a bitter imprecation. His business was evidently of a nature that aroused his anxiety to an extent not often seen in a servant who merely endeavors to carry out his employer's behests.

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Followed by the somewhat suspicious constable, who regarded everyone speaking broken English as a doubtful character, the man walked towards the well-lighted area of Tottenham Court Road. There he sprang into a motor omnibus going south. Armstrong boarded the next 'bus, which, fortunately for him, endeavored to get ahead of its predecessor before reaching the advantageous stand opposite the Horse Shoe.

The two vehicles raced down the thoroughfare, and a woman with parcels settled the fate of Number One, which pulled up. Hastily paying his fare, Frank alighted and entered the Frenchman's vehicle. The man was sitting in a corner, and there were only two other passengers.

Armstrong took a seat near him, and, speaking French, said, affably,—

“I heard you paid for my cab at Ascot. How much do I owe you?”

For an instant the man was stupefied. Then he seemed to recall the speaker's identity.

“*Cré nom!*” he exclaimed. “It is impossible.”

“Not at all. I borrowed a bicycle. But I forgive you. Prince Melnikoff is an imperious person.”

“M'sieur! I am bewildered. I do not know what you mean.”

The valet was endeavoring to gain time, to gather his scattered wits. Armstrong decided to press him hard.

“It is of no account,” he said, “especially since

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you failed to forestall my visit to Ivan Stephano-
vitch."

"You—followed me!" gasped the man.

"More than that. I know why you journeyed so
hastily to London. Natushka had visited my apart-
ment."

He thought, by using names, to disconcert Prince
Boris's messenger so utterly that a valuable dis-
closure might be blurted out.

"Do you know where she is?" was the prompt
question.

Frank smiled.

"I may answer your questions afterwards," he
said. "At present you must answer mine. What
was your object in going to Charlotte Street to-
night?"

"We cannot talk here," muttered the other.
"Come with me. I will bring you to those who
know more than I."

Not another word would the man say until they
quitted the omnibus and walked towards Soho Square.

His attitude puzzled Armstrong. He seemed to
be frightened, a timid nature mixed up in events so
dangerous that they overpowered him. A consum-
mate rogue must be a good actor, and the French-
man was a past master in the intriguer's art, though
his companion was too impressed by his apparent
state of terror to remember the coolness with which,
earlier in the evening, he had spirited the cab away
from The Cedars.

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They halted outside a house which was let to various occupants, judging by the row of small lettered tablets, each with its electric bell, on one side of the door.

The Frenchman entered confidently enough.

"Come," he said, "Ivan must be here."

They mounted the stairs and entered a flat on the third floor. The staircase and landings were unlighted. The darkness was intense. Frank gave no thought to personal danger. The puny Frenchman was not of a type to inspire distrust of that character. So may a small and harmless-looking reptile be of a most deadly and vicious type.

"Have you a match?" asked the valet, pausing in front of a door, and fumbling with a key.

"Yes." Frank produced a box.

The lock was too stiff for trembling fingers.

"My hands are not strong," said the valet. "Give me the matches. Perhaps you can turn the key."

The man was so anxious that he stuttered, and his swarthy face was livid.

Though surprised at this renewed agitation, Frank did not hesitate. He stooped to negotiate the lock while the Frenchman struck another match. The door opened with unexpected ease. Armstrong straightened himself, and was about to allow the other to enter before him when he was attacked so suddenly from behind that, for an instant, he could not recover his balance.

TRAPPED

A sinewy hand gripped his throat, a knee was placed against his back, and, while thus bent and powerless, he was thrown violently into the dark interior of the flat. The door slammed, and the key was turned in the lock. Even as he sprang to his feet, enraged and ready to fight for his life, he knew that he was a prisoner.

CHAPTER VII

NEW SCENES AND OLD MEMORIES

His first sentient thought was to reach the wall. Stretching out a hand, he touched a smooth surface, and with quick noiselessness planted his back against the protection thus afforded in the event of another cowardly onslaught. Then he listened, with every muscle braced for strenuous combat.

Even in his hot anger at the way in which he had been trapped he retained his ready judgment. He knew that no attack could have been prepared for him. The Frenchman had undoubtedly been taken by surprise, but, with the cunning of a fox, had planned an easy method of stopping further surveillance.

Even while Armstrong waited, breathlessly intent, for the slightest sound of approaching danger, he heard the banging of a door beneath. The valet was now in the street again, and hurrying away, chuckling over the discomfiture of the man who thought him a weakling, ready to be scared by the first sign of failure.

The prisoner gradually came to the conclusion that there was none other but himself in the set of

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apartments. He almost laughed at the simplicity with which he had handed over his matches. But a habitual smoker often has a loose vesta or two in his pockets, and, feeling diligently through his clothes, he was delighted to find a worn and raveled wax match, the head of which was intact.

With the utmost care, and heedless of burnt fingers, he struck it on the sole of his boot, and the first tiny gleam revealed a gas bracket in the hall. There was a quick rush of escaping air, proving that the light had not been used for some time. Then, to his great relief, while the match still flickered, the gas came, and he lit it.

Conquering the impulse which prompted an effort to rush into the street and undertake a useless hunt through the narrow thoroughfares of Soho, on the chance that he might encounter the man who had so skillfully hoodwinked him, he surveyed his surroundings.

Four doors opened out of the central passage. The place was meagerly furnished. When he had examined each room he formed the opinion that it was not actually tenanted by anyone, but used as an occasional refuge, a rendezvous.

In the largest room were two tables, several chairs, and a collection of empty bottles and tins, suggesting the preparation of meals which needed little or no cooking. In another apartment he found a bed; beneath it, a tin trunk, empty, save for a few papers.

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These were unopened copies of French newspapers, and some cuttings from German and Italian prints of Socialistic character. The newspaper wrappers showed that they had passed through the post. They were addressed to "Mons. Jacques Dumanet," at a number in Shaftesbury Avenue, and Armstrong realized that the name was an *alias*, as "Dumanet" is the French equivalent for "Tommy Atkins."

Satisfied that the deserted flat would yield little else to detective research, he pocketed one of the wrappers, and secured a poker from the sitting-room. The outer door was locked, not latched, and the valet had taken the key.

Extinguishing all the gas-jets save that burning in the hall, Armstrong began his assault on the lock. It was no child's task. He was compelled to batter in a portion of the iron guard before he could use the poker as a wrench. He fully expected that the unavoidable noise would attract the attention of others in the building, but there was only one way out, and that was *via* a smashed lock.

At last he succeeded. He opened the door and looked into the darkness of the staircase, so far as the light burning within served to illumine it. No one appeared. Evidently, the occupants of the remaining flats had either not heard the racket or were wise people who minded their own business.

He turned out the gas and groped a slow passage down the stairs. He had no difficulty in reaching the

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street. Out of curiosity, he walked into Shaftesbury Avenue and looked at the house named on the newspaper wrapper. As he surmised, it was a dingy shop, devoted to the sale of Continental journals and a miscellaneous assortment of other goods which no reasonable being could ever wish to purchase.

He did not know how tired he was until he reached his own rooms. Then it needed an effort to undress before he fell asleep. With the morning came a more fixed determination to free himself from the snares which beset him during these final hours of a spoiled holiday. He wrote to Carlingham a brief summary of events since they parted, posted the letter, and quitted Charing Cross Station by the 11 A.M. train for Paris.

Three days later he joined a P. and O. steamer at Marseilles, and found himself in the familiar environment of Anglo-India, utterly cut off, as it seemed, from all further participation in the lives of either Lady Ermytrude Grandison or her high-placed Russian wooer.

Certainly, a young officer returning to his Indian regiment, without special ties or powerful home influence at work on his behalf, might reasonably expect that the bitter-sweet romance of the past month was a chapter in his life now closed forever. The next fortnight would see him nearing the Coral Strand, and, learning once more how to make life comfortable in a temperature of a hundred-and-an-anything.

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At this critical moment in Armstrong's career the British Foreign Office suddenly woke up to the fact that Russia and Persia had appointed a Boundary Commission to settle a disputed frontier near the southeast corner of the Caspian. The way of the Russian bear towards the Persian lamb is suspiciously akin to that of the wolf in the fable, so Whitehall thought it would be well if the backs of the Shah's representatives were stiffened by an official of the British Embassy at Teheran. The man deputed for this duty was admirable in every respect save one—he knew no Russian.

In this dilemma the Foreign Office appealed to the India Office, and a clerk in the latter establishment made the remarkable discovery that the latest "passed interpreter" was *en route* to India—would reach Aden next day, in fact.

Hence, when the "China" anchored in the bay of the cinder-heap, a cablegram was delivered to "Lieutenant Frank Armstrong," instructing him to land at Aden "for further orders." It was mysterious, and, in July, annoying, but the first duty of a soldier is obedience. Frank and his baggage were rowed ashore in a boat manned by Arabs. That night he was given a tiny cabin on a gunboat, which took him through the Persian Gulf, and, after a broiling journey up-country, he found himself at Teheran.

In company with Mr. Claude Egerton, C.S.I., a young diplomat skilled in the wiles of the East, he

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traveled to Asterabad, where the Boundary Commissioners had assembled. Here a long wrangle took place before the Russians would consent to the proceedings being witnessed by two Englishmen. London and St. Petersburg became diplomatically hot on the topic, the Shah was browbeaten by both parties, and at last, after five weary months of talk, the Commission set to work. Meanwhile, Armstrong was gazetted to a captaincy.

At irregular intervals he received letters from home. One missive, in which Lord Carlingham gave Prince Melnikoff's explanation of the valet's queer behavior, evoked a dour smile.

"My man thought Mr. Armstrong was interfering in an *amour* of his," said the prince. "It is not reasonable to suppose that I would mix myself up in such a trivial affair."

The Countess of Valletort seemed to be so set on her daughter's marriage to the Russian that her son thought it best to desist from active interference.

"I can only cause a first-rate family row," he wrote, "and, after all is said and done, Ermie seems to like the fellow. Still I handed it to him on the *amour* proposition—went so far, in fact, as to tell him that you were far more likely to 'interfere' with the master than with the man in that respect."

Armstrong's heart thumped somewhat faster than usual when he read that, but the latest news to hand was positive. The Countess was going to the States to visit her relatives, but the Earl, Lady Ermyn-

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trude, and Lord Carlingham were invited to spend the winter on Prince Melnikoff's estate at Bannofka.

"This arrangement seems to clinch matters," was Carlingham's comment. "Ernie has accepted him, and the marriage takes place in town next April. Personally, I am more convinced than ever that my sister does not love him, but is fascinated by her dreams of sovereign power. Poor old girl, I hope she will not be disillusioned. Anyhow, we swoop down on the Volga some time about Christmas. Write to me there. When sis and the pater start homeward, if you are still drawing maps in the vicinity of Asterabad, I shall try and join you for a few weeks."

And then followed a puzzling paragraph,—

"The other day I ran over to Ascot in my car, and called at the police-station. The police inspector told me that the mystery of the woman found in the pond had been solved. During a brawl in Soho a man was knifed, and in his possession was discovered a letter, signed 'J. D.,' which said that Vera Sassulitch had been 'removed' for treachery. The poor creature's name was Vera Sassulitch, as proved by documents she carried. Of course, no one pretends that this is a satisfactory explanation of a woman's death in England, but it reveals the motive of the crime, and exonerates Melnikoff from even a passive connection with it. Perhaps we were led by circumstances into doing him an injustice."

Armstrong smiled wearily as he read how his

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friend, too, was falling under the spell of the Russian prince's magnificence. How, indeed, should anyone associate his power and wealth with the fate of a female nihilist done to death on a June morning in an English wood? The idea was monstrous, incredible, yet he believed in his soul that, if Prince Melnikoff told all that he knew, the police would be able to put a different aspect on the murder of the hapless Vera Sassulitch.

Although devoted to his profession, and glad of the opportunity which singled him out for special service, Frank was conscious that day of a restless, disturbed feeling foreign to his nature. The low, sandy hills bordering the Caspian were more dreary; the Persian encampment looked even dirtier than usual; the trim mess-tent of the Russian officers, where he would dine that evening, held less prospect of enjoyment; even the company of those vivacious hosts threatened boredom.

In truth, Lord Carlingham's letter brought with it a revived picture of Ermytrude, and, during a bitter hour, Armstrong hated Prince Boris with an intensity of which he was ashamed when his mind swung back to its normal state.

Indeed, there was somewhat of a reaction when he joined the Russians at dinner. He was animated, gay, talkative to a surprising degree. The meal had hardly ended before he offered to settle a bet as to whether any man had ever walked more than eight miles in an hour by procuring a work of

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reference from his tent in which statistics were given.

It was quite dark when he crossed the small plain that divided the Russian from the British camps. A fixed rule with both parties was to carry arms after night fell, as the wild territory they were surveying was the haunt of robber tribes, whose impartial forays had, in the first instance, caused the delimitation of frontier to be undertaken.

Recent snow had rendered the ground smooth and noiseless. Hence, as he neared his tent, his footsteps gave no warning, and he was considerably surprised to see one of his native servants rummaging among his papers.

Then he remembered that, on the rare occasions when a European mail reached him, he had suspected that someone was tampering with his baggage, though the idea had vanished when none of his belongings were missing. Now he had caught the culprit red-handed.

Wondering what motive inspired the man, he came stealthily nearer. To his amazement he saw a seemingly illiterate Persian not only reading, but copying, Lord Carlingham's letter by the light of a small lamp. He ran forward and the man turned. His swarthy skin became green as he looked into the barrel of a revolver.

"Tell me why you are prying into my correspondence, or I will blow your brains out!" cried Armstrong, sternly.

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"Worshipful One, I pray you pardon me," whimpered the man, falling on his knees.

"Speak, or I fire," was the demoralizing answer.

"I am paid twenty roubles for a copy of each letter in which I find the name of Prince Melnikoff, oh, Merciful Master!"

"Paid! By whom?"

"By one whose name I know not. He is a Cossack in the Russian escort."

"How many letters have you copied?"

"Four, Protector of the Weak."

"And how came you, who are able to write and read English, to be in my service?"

"I was a clerk in Biskra, and I was bidden join you at all cost. I was paid two hundred roubles for the journey, and another hundred the day I reported success."

Frank remembered that the man pestered him to be taken on as an extra servant, and, as he seemed to be intelligent and very willing, there had been no reason to regret the transaction hitherto. He kicked the trembling wretch out of the encampment, and gave strict orders that he was not to be readmitted within its bounds on any pretext. But the question firmly planted in his mind was,—

"What motive inspired Prince Melnikoff, or someone acting in his name, to be so anxious to procure copies of the correspondence of a man buried in the wilds of Northeast Persia?"

Truly, it was a curious recrudescence of a per-

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plexing episode in his career, an episode he deemed dead and buried long ago, without leaving other ghost than a woman's face, or other memory than a dream of what might have been.

CHAPTER VIII

A NIGHT OF SURPRISES

"I DON'T think I like Russia, or this part of it, at any rate," said Lord Valletort, as he looked disconsolately through a window of the breakfast-room in the Palace of Bannofka, and surveyed a frost-bound landscape traversed by the plain of the Volga. The river itself, pent in its sheath of ice, was not visible, but its course was marked by the passing of an occasional loaded sleigh, or squad of Cossacks.

"Oh, I find it charming!" said his daughter.

"Charming! That word is in every girl's mouth," he growled. "What is there 'charming' about it? On one side of a frozen river a pile of rocks; on the other an ugly plain, which is a swamp when the snow melts. Take my advice, Ermie, and don't live here!"

His lordship had never before been known to string so many words together in connected sense. Indeed, there was some excuse to be made for his peevishness. He missed the comfort of life in London, the placid content of days ordered by the almanac, of evenings at his club, of discussions with

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others like himself, who summed up nearly every political question as "d—d Radicalism."

"But Boris says we shall be in residence at Bannofka at least four months each year," insisted Ermyntrude.

"Silly notion," was her father's comment.

"It really isn't if we endeavor seriously to build up the state into a model which shall tend to elevate all Russia. There are roads to be made, and schools to be erected, and a railway to link up the interior villages. The people are to be taught to take an intelligent interest in their own affairs, and encouraged to develop a communal life such as one sees in the smallest places of any importance in England."

"Communal fiddlesticks!" he sniffed. "I don't know where you get such nonsensical ideas from. Not from me, certainly."

"Poor dad! You must be very stiff after that long sleigh drive yesterday."

"Stiff! I was frozen! And to think of *living* here! Ugh!"

His lordship shivered, and turned away from the unpleasing prospect without, but his discontented mood gradually yielded to the interior warmth, and the gratifying scent of breakfast.

Ermyntrude, strong in the superior wisdom of twenty, remained near the window, and smiled as her eyes roved over the sunlit plain, its surface sparkling now as if it were powdered with diamonds.

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Of all the countries in the world, Russia is understood the least outside its confines. In popular imagination it is a land of leaden skies and unrelied gloom, where snow falls constantly, and such cheering gifts of nature as spring flowers and singing birds are unknown. No picture could be more untrue. It certainly does not wear the garden-like aspect of England, nor has it the trim cultivation of France, but it possesses a fascination of its own, and the severity of the climate in winter is much maligned. At Bannofka, when the thermometer had finally dipped below zero, the air was keen but invigorating, and the far-flung vistas of a purple and gray landscape were solemnly beautiful.

Lord Carlingham and his sister enjoyed themselves unfeignedly. The New Palace, in which they dwelt, was a comparatively modern structure, replete with every invention to conquer the intense and penetrating cold. It stood in the midst of ornamental grounds, at the very base of a precipitous rock, to which clung the gaunt walls and defenses of an old castle, mostly in ruins.

Prince Melnikoff had gathered a brilliant party to grace his hospitality, and do honor to his promised wife.

Each day, and far into the night, was a round of festivities, ranging from bear hunts, sleigh-drives, and tobogganing to private theatricals, bridge, and dancing—principally in a ballroom fashioned after the *salle de danse* at Versailles.

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Of course, there was little in common between an English country-house and this mansion on the banks of the far-off Volga. The domestics were foreigners for the most part, excepting only a few trusted officials and the meanest servitors. There were no tenantry nor local gentry. A bodyguard of Cossacks or a horde of huntsmen accompanied all outdoor excursions, and affairs were conducted within the palace with the smooth ease of a first-rate hotel. Peasants were seen occasionally, somewhat as stage accessories to a Muscovite drama, but the members of the house party, including even the Russian notabilities present, regarded the moujiks with less interest than a scientist bestows upon a beetle.

Existence was picturesque, lively, unreal as stageland, with the exception that the English guests, thinking themselves the actors, were really seated comfortably in the stalls.

Lord Valletort alone, pining for repose, disturbed because he was expected to talk, had blundered on to the truth by accident. Yet it was ordained that even he, in a measure, was to be rudely awakened from his selfish indolence, for no Greek tragedy was ever truer to life than the story Bannofka was about to unfold from its ice-bound records.

Ermyntrude's head was up in the skies, and her brother had frankly yielded to the charm of novelty. The boy was a keen sportsman, and he now found himself in a hunter's paradise. Prince Boris

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was a boon companion on the days when he was able to join the smaller band which devoted every hour to rifle or fowling-piece. Here, in the natural combat of man against beast, he was in his right place. His giant stature and great strength rendered him proof against difficulties and dangers which might have daunted a smaller man.

Once Carlingham saw him save a huntsman's life by literally smashing the skull of a huge bear with the barrel of a broken gun. On another occasion, the prince, unaided, held a sleigh from following a pony over a precipice, the animal having shied at a wolf unexpectedly aroused from a thicket. There was nothing more serious involved than the loss of a small Ukraine Arab and a sleigh-load of rugs, but, as a feat of strength, it was wonderful.

Carlingham was not a great admirer of his prospective brother-in-law; yet it was impossible for an active and athletic youth to witness the Russian's cool daring and marvelous physical powers without yielding him the admiration such attributes always command.

Towards the end of February the guests began to thin in number. Some fled to the Riviera to participate in the close of a brilliant season. Others were called north to St. Petersburg by official duties, and Lord Valletort congratulated himself on the fact that, after a disagreeable journey, he would soon join the Countess in London, whither her lady-

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ship had returned from America to prepare for Ermyntude's wedding.

"After to-night," said the prince, when Ermyntude and he were sitting in a palm-screened alcove watching the dancers, "we shall not muster sufficient people to make a quadrille really lively."

"It will be a pity," said the girl. "I have enjoyed myself here very much."

"You could say nothing more gratifying. The time is at hand, perhaps sooner than you think, when you will be in name, as you are now by acclamation, the acknowledged queen of the revels."

"That is a forbidden topic," she said, smilingly.

"Ah, but why? To-night, of all nights, my heart must break the seal you have imposed on my lips. Do not be angry, sweet one, but who is there I can trust if not you? Events are marching in Russia. Life is an easy matter in this great palace, but the nation, young yet, is suffering from growing-pains. I have been in communication with St. Petersburg recently, and to-day I am officially appointed to a post hitherto held by me nominally. I am governor of the province!"

"Oh, I am glad!" she cried. "I knew you had ambition. All you needed was the incentive."

"And you supplied that."

She blushed, and cast down her eyes. She liked Prince Boris least when he wooed most ardently.

"I meant," she said, "that you had not found

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your life's work, and a man devoted only to a fashionable existence is a mere male *mannequin*."

He drew nearer to her.

"Do not look at life so seriously, my pretty philosopher. You are made for love, not for high politics, thank Heaven! Ermyntrude, you must permit me to speak openly. If I would be worthy of the trust reposed in me by the Tsar, I must remain at my post during the whole of the present year. Will you not stay with me?"

"I? How is that possible?"

"Let us get married immediately. Why wait until April? Your father and brother are here. Your mother can reach us in four days. Dear girl, make me happy by saying 'yes.'"

Notwithstanding the tacit engagement existing between them, Ermyntrude had always insisted that the prince and his people were on trial with her. If she did not think she would prove a helpmate worthy of the exalted rank of her suitor, she was at liberty to withdraw from the compact. Men who heard of her stipulation smiled, some women sneered, a few sighed, and those who sighed said, "She does not love!"

The prince had humored her wish, and the tense passion in his voice to-night was a new thing. It startled her. She was bewildered by his sudden attack. She strove to rise, in her momentary agitation, but he detained her gently.

"Listen to me, Ermyntrude," he whispered.

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"My dearest desire is to fall in with your slightest wish. Why should we parade our wedding in London? We are happy here. Let us crown our happiness by marriage."

"You have taken me utterly by surprise," she murmured. "I have never thought for one moment——"

"But you will help me in my career, dear one? That is why my request is so unexpected," he broke in, eagerly.

"Have you spoken to my father or to my brother?" she asked, striving desperately for some excuse that would serve to postpone an irrevocable decision.

"No. It is for you to decide—for you to make me strong enough to overcome all obstacles. For love of you I could hew my way through a wall of iron."

"I—I do not know what to say," she faltered.

Her world had suddenly grown gray and dim, and some inward monitor warned her not to determine the one grave step of her life so hurriedly; yet she would not be a woman were she not flattered by the homage of such a man as Prince Boris Melnikoff.

"Act according to the dictates of your heart," he whispered, drawing her shrinking form closer, and fascinating her with the ardor of his eyes.

"Give me a little time," she panted. "I—cannot—bind myself to-night. To-morrow, I promise, we shall settle matters once and for all."

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"No. Now! now!" he said, pressing her to his breast.

"Please—let me go. Indeed, indeed, I am grateful for your love, and honored that you should single me out from the many women who would be proud to be your wife. But I am very young, and ever since I came here I have not given heed to the true purpose of my visit. I beg of you to grant me yet a few hours of freedom."

"Ermyntrode, it is not freedom. It is bondage while we are kept apart. As my wife you will be all in the world that I hold dear."

It was strange that she should continue to struggle against a fate which promised the happiness and fortune offered by this determined wooer. And she might have yielded then to his demand—for the man loved her with an intensity that caused her, for the first time, to feel a tumult hitherto unknown—had not Lord Carlingham chanced to pass.

"There is my brother!" she cried, almost hysterically. "Let us be advised by him."

"No," was the hoarse answer; "my fate rests in your hands. I will accept no man's arbitrament. See how I trust you. I agree to wait for my answer until to-morrow. Not a moment longer."

"You are very good and generous," she said, quietly disengaging herself from his arms. "Really I fear I am not worthy of you. I can only plead a girl's hesitation in such an all-important matter as marriage. But, believe me, Boris, I shall think very

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seriously of what you have said, and I hope my morning's answer may be satisfactory to you."

With an effort, he regained his wonted air of courtly grace. He took her hand and bent to kiss it, a foreign act which would be out of place in an Englishman, but which he performed with a courtesy that robbed it of all semblance of affectation.

"Until to-morrow, then," he said. "I must be content to exist as a suitor awaiting judgment, though not wholly devoid of hope."

No attitude could be better devised to win her sympathy. It savored of absurdity that this noble-looking man, a Prince of the Russian Empire, and one occupying an almost regal position, should be so humbly dependent on the spoken word of a young girl. Even Ermytrude herself was conscious of this phase in their relations, and had the prince been content to suggest an early date for their marriage under ordinary conditions she could scarce have gainsaid him.

At the first opportunity, she fled to her own apartments, there to argue out the problem so suddenly thrust upon her. Although the whole building was heated with hot air, there was a cheerful fire in her boudoir. She dismissed her maid and drew a chair near to the grateful warmth. Being a young person who flattered herself on her capacity for looking facts squarely in the face, she determined then and there to subject herself to a species of cross-

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examination which should reveal the true state of her feelings towards Prince Boris Melnikoff.

It must be admitted grudgingly that this very lovable and beautiful girl thought far more of the prince than the husband. She must not be blamed. Her mother had taught her to view matrimony as a grocer views bacon—as an excellent thing in its way, but chiefly as a matter of buying and selling. It was creditable to her intelligence that she had ennobled and expanded the idea into a vague design of benefiting millions of people who would be subject to her. How, she did not inquire. Was it not sufficient that their ruler was her confessed slave?

But to-night an uncanny twist was given to her reflections. What was this love which inflamed the eyes and thickened the voice of her lover? What was the potent spell which brought this great man—a spoiled child of fortune perhaps, yet dignified and forceful in his relations with all the world—captive to the feet of a young and inexperienced girl? The question thrilled, yet exasperated her. Surely it was a woman's lot to love; yet here was she, on the eve of a momentous decision, casting about for any reason save that which—Heaven be thanked!—has sufficed for men and women since the Creation!

She had reached a fretful stage in her analysis, and might perchance have frightened herself with a sudden glimpse of the truth, when a light tap on the outer door caused her to wheel round quickly in her chair.

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“Kto tam?” (“Who is there?”) she cried, being able to use a good many Russian phrases. Then she bethought herself. Probably her father or brother wished to see her.

“Come in!” she said, and the words were hardly uttered before the door opened.

An elderly man, clad in furs—a man with piercing black eyes and a long beard, whose expression was at once stern and benignant—stood before her. The particles of ice glittering on his beard showed that this unknown and most unexpected visitor had not been in the house many minutes, and his attire was that worn by all Russians who brave the elements in winter, being an amalgam of fur, felt, and leather.

Surprise kept her tongue-tied. Ermyntrude was no coward. Not fear, but sheer wonder, was her dominant emotion.

“You are Lady Ermyntrude Grandison?” said the stranger, speaking in excellent English.

“Yes,” she cried, rising and facing him.

He advanced a step, but did not attempt to close the door.

“Do not be alarmed, I pray,” he said. “My visit is untimely and unannounced, but it was essential that I should see you to-night, and, although Prince Melnikoff would have me thrown piecemeal to the wolves by his Cossacks if he knew of my presence, I have dared to come to you.”

His words no less than his manner reassured her.

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Yet she resented the implied condemnation of her lover.

"Prince Melnikoff would permit no such fate to overtake those who visited me without ill intent," she said.

"Child," he said, mildly, "you know not his highness, nor yet the man who addresses you."

"What can your business be at this hour? How is it that you come to my rooms unannounced?"

"My business is to preserve you from one who is urging you to marry him without delay. I am here because the tie that unites the Russian to his kinsman is stronger than the allegiance of German hirelings to their master."

Ermyntrude was certainly amazed now. That this extraordinary visitor should be able to roam at will through the corridors of the palace was a strange enough fact, but it transcended all bounds of probability that he should know of Prince Boris's passionate declaration of an hour earlier.

The door yet remained open. Anyone passing outside must see both her and the fur-wrapped man who stood in the center of the room. She ran past him, closed the door, but retained hold of the handle. He faced her, but remained in the same spot.

"You are brave," he said, "and a woman who is brave should be clear-sighted. Do you know why Prince Boris wishes to marry you?"

"Because he loves me," she replied, instantly, and

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there was a ring of pardonable pride in her voice.

The man bowed, with a ready grace that his clumsy garments could not wholly conceal.

"That might well be his excuse," he said. "But you are in Russia, milady, a country where man is cast in different mold from those of your race. The love of princes is a furnace which exhausts itself by its vehemence. Prince Melnikoff is no exception to the rule. Have you ever heard, in your innocence, of what is termed a morganatic marriage?"

Though the air was gratefully warm, this extraordinary stranger, with the manner and voice of a patriarch, seemed to bring with him a chill blast of the bleak steppe without.

"I scarcely understand," she said, unsteadily.

"In your code of honor," he went on, looking at her fixedly, "do you recognize difference in rank or social position as providing sufficient excuse to invalidate the marriage ceremony?"

"Of course not!" she cried, her face suddenly a-flame.

"In Russia, some think otherwise. Prince Boris is one of these. He is married already. He married my daughter, Olga Sassulitch. To-day a courier brought him a decree signed by the Tsar, declaring the ceremony morganatic. By law he can marry you; are you satisfied with such a union?"

The room seemed to swim in a mist before the girl's eyes. She thought, for an instant, she was

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going to faint. But she forced herself to say, though the words almost choked her,—

“It is false! It cannot be true! Why do you, an old man, dare to come to me with such a lie on your lips?”

CHAPTER IX

ERMYNTRUDE'S MISTAKE

"It is false!"

The cry was of outraged pride, not the despairing outburst of a broken heart. Ermyntrude, for the first time, was brought face to face with the grim reality of life, and she resented it bitterly.

Her companion threw aside his outer fur robe with a weary gesture, and seated himself. She saw now that he was bent and infirm, though not with age.

"I am glad you are English," he said, without a trace of vehemence in his voice, though her scornful repudiation of his words might well have angered him. "Were you a Frenchwoman I would not have dared to tell you the truth, for, valueless as I hold my life, I must not die yet. But *you* will not shriek aloud for guards to seize me, because I have risked all in the hope that further evil may be prevented. You will listen to me. I can give you proof."

It was impossible to resist the conviction that this man, however mistaken he might be, meant her no harm. His candid admission that he had gained an entrance to the palace by the help of confed-

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erates, his frank recognition of the peril thus incurred, helped to restore Ermyntrude's wits.

"Do you mean," she said, slowly, "that Prince Melnikoff has a wife still living?"

"Yes. Had it pleased God long ago to take her from a world of misery it had been better for her and for those who love her."

"But why should the prince seek to do me this monstrous wrong? I am no village maid whom he can cast off at pleasure. My father is a British peer. Prince Melnikoff would be hounded from society were what you say true."

He threw out his hands to stay her protest.

"You do not understand me yet!" he cried. "It is my daughter whom he wrongs, not you. Your position is recognized and secured by law. Were it not so, why should I seek to torture you, a mere child, with this disclosure? I would go to your father and count on his assistance. But, under the Tsar's edict, you will be Princess Melnikoff. When you are older you will know that some of the great ladies of Europe are in the same category. Your father might laugh at me. You, a woman, who may have dreamed that she was loved for her own sake, to whom the thought of another's suffering would be horrifying, may take a different view."

He seemed to think there was some chance of rank and wealth gaining the day, even in the mind of this innocent girl. He spoke with bitter irony of the claims of law as opposed to those of justice and

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honor. Now, he did not even look at her, but bowed his head between his hands, and awaited her questioning, if she had aught to ask. This attitude of hopeless dejection appealed to her more than any words. She no longer felt anger or bewilderment. It was borne in on her that one who had dared so much to see her was not there to deceive, but to make plain certain vital considerations hitherto withheld from her knowledge.

“You spoke of proofs,” she said, quietly.

He raised his head and gave her a mournful glance.

“I can produce them,” he said. “My name is Vladimir Sassulitch. At one time I was the leading merchant of Saratoff, the town where you quitted the railway when you came here. My daughters, Olga and Vera, were reputed beautiful. The people called them the Lilies of the Volga. Boris Melnikoff, then a young officer in the Imperial Guard, said he loved Olga. He asked her, as he has asked you, to consent to a speedy marriage. I acquit him of voluntary wrong-doing, though he brought sorrow to me and mine. The ceremony was a private one, but his father lived, and when he heard of it, nearly a year afterwards, he repudiated his son’s marriage. That was not to be endured. My girl appealed to St. Petersburg, and her protest was sent back to Prince Ivan Melnikoff, who was permitted to judge his own cause. His son could not interfere, being engaged with his regiment in a small campaign on

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the Samarkhand border. My daughter was torn from me, knouted through the streets, proclaimed a vile creature, and thrust into prison. There, enfeebled with distress of mind and body, she contracted smallpox. That was sufficient. She was released, disfigured and half-blind. I left her this morning, a poor, blighted woman, who is slowly dying. Her sister Vera joined the revolutionaries, and Vera's dead body was found in a lake near your house in England many months ago. Proof! Do such stories of family life in a Russian province require proof?"

"Does Prince Boris Melnikoff know of these things?" demanded Ermyntrude, and there was a light in her eyes that had never before found an abiding-place there.

Again came that gesture of hopeless despair.

"He has seen Olga once since her disfigurement. It sufficed!"

"And you, her father, have dared to warn me, to brave his wrath if he discovered your mission. Why have you done this? I am nothing to you. You cannot hope to be revenged on him through me."

His worn features lit with a savage exultation. The passion that sprang into his voice almost frightened her.

"Through you, no! His fate is in other hands. I am here because I would spare you. Child of a free country, what would you do in this land? Leave it! It is accursed!"

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"Then I am, indeed, indebted to you!" she cried.

"I cannot explain each motive of many which compelled me to seek you. Prince Melnikoff has hitherto contented himself with spending his revenues on a life of pleasure. Now he is about to rule his faithful people. The existence of my deserted Olga will not long bar his marriage. She is dying. He knows it, and were she the only hindrance he would have waited. He does not fear her. Why should he? She is almost blind, and dying, a ruined soul in a wasted body. But there are those whom he does fear, and that is why he wishes to marry you. By the Tsar's orders he is here to crush them, and his marriage will force their hand. As for me and my daughter, we are worthless, mere worms to be trodden underfoot should we dare to cross his path."

What new peril was he foreshadowing? Vaguely realizing that she had been plucked from the verge of a precipice, Ermytrude was anxious to learn all that Sassulitch could tell.

"In what way do I become a pawn in this game of which I have no knowledge?" she demanded.

Ere he could answer, the door opened slightly.

"Come, brother," whispered a voice.

He rose instantly.

"I must go," he muttered. "Be advised by me. Tell none what I have said. Above all else, do not let Prince Melnikoff suspect that you have heard

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of or seen me. I ask this, not for my own sake, but for yours. Remember, no matter what your rank in England, *you are in Russia!*"

He was gone, silently and ghost-like as he came. Ermyntrude, fearing lest the warning summons of his friend came too late, listened intently for indication of a scuffle or voices raised in anger. She opened the door noiselessly, and looked into the corridor. There was no sound. She supposed that Sassulitch had approached and quitted her apartments by the servants' staircase of that wing of the palace. Once clear of the corridor, he would attract little or no notice from the ordinary domestics, as one man in traveling costume in winter on the Volga differs from another only by the number and costliness of his furs.

Yet she waited, for had there been any likelihood of his capture no consideration would have restrained her from rushing to his assistance. It was not that she accepted implicitly all he had said. Ermyntrude was really a bright and clever girl, acute and intellectual, as became her lineage and education. But her ideals had been rudely shattered, and, with the awakening, came no small share of native shrewdness to sustain her.

Perhaps these terrible insinuations, these hinted mysteries, might be part of a definite scheme against the prince. She believed Sassulitch's story, yet fain would have it substantiated. Therefore, were he arrested, she was prepared to risk everything to save

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him, but she was resolved not to condemn Melnikoff absolutely until further proof of his dissimulation was forthcoming.

As she waited, motionless, peering through the half-open door, she heard the yelping of wolves in the forest that stretched its dark mantle to left and right of the palace. Within were light and warmth, soft carpets, rare pictures, electric lamps, and snug rooms luxuriously furnished; without, the snow-covered, frost-bound earth, the silent trees, the white banks bounding the ice riband of the river, with wild animals prowling in search of their prey; and the man who had endured such sorrow that he feared nothing more was furtively stealing into the night, to return to his stricken daughter. Below, in the billiard-room and card-rooms, were smiling women and joyous men, Prince Melnikoff the gayest among them. What a contrast of extremes!

It was long before she slept. Oddly enough, now that the first rush of resentment had passed, she experienced a distinct feeling of relief. Hitherto a cloud of sentiment, the glamor of imagined duties and glories, had lifted her into the empyrean. Now that she was rudely brought to earth, she was delighted to know that no irretrievable step had been taken.

“I am too young to think of marriage,” she told herself. “Why should I risk unhappiness when I have all that is denied to so many girls? Dad won’t care if I never get married, and mother can be cured

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of her propensity to fly at high game. Thank goodness, I shall not be a princess!"

When you are twenty, and not in love, it is a simple thing to laugh when Cupid makes a wry face. Ermyntrude did not trouble about herself at all. What really perplexed her was her promise to answer Prince Boris in the morning. By some means she must avoid that final ordeal. She would plead insistently for more time, support her father in his anxiety to return to England, and then graciously dismiss his highness by letter.

It was so easy when planned that way. There remained but one perplexing thought. If that poor woman in Saratoff, the discarded wife who had been so cruelly treated, were really about to die, what were the other compelling circumstances which induced the prince to press for an early marriage? That they existed could not be doubted. They were so patent that Vladimir Sassulitch had conjectured from them the prince's proposal, with which he could not, by any chance, have been acquainted otherwise. Here was a puzzle! What a pity he was called away at the moment when an explanation was imminent!

At last she fell asleep. In the morning, not without fair cause, she pleaded weariness, and breakfasted in her room. Her brother came to see her, and the sight of his cheerful, glowing face, ruddy and bright after an early sleigh drive in company with an *attaché* of the French Embassy at St. Petersburg, was grateful to her.

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"Jimmie," she said, "you are here at the right moment. I am worried."

"What's worrying you, sis?" he inquired, with quick solicitude.

"Last night Prince Boris again asked me to marry him."

"He does that once a week, so far as I can make out."

"Don't chaff me, there's a dear boy. I fear I have been somewhat to blame. I undoubtedly led him to believe that I would leave Bannofka engaged to him, and that our wedding would take place in the spring."

"That was the arrangement provisionally blessed by the mater."

"Jimmie, I want you to be serious. I suppose one ought to be in love with a man before one marries him?"

"It is safer, else there may be trouble afterwards."

"I don't love Prince Boris. I was doubtful at first. Now I am quite sure."

"All because he asked you once too often?"

She hesitated a little while. She wished her brother to espouse her cause, yet was desirous not to tell him, just then, of the extraordinary events of the preceding night. Her feelings were wounded, and she did not wish to parade the fact.

"I hardly gave it the necessary thought," she said, "but the matter has now become imperative.

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Prince Melnikoff wishes me to marry him at once, within a few days; he suggests telegraphing to mother to bring her here for the ceremony."

"The deuce he does! What's the hurry?"

Carlingham's language might be flippant, but he saw clearly enough that his sister's seriousness was not assumed. Ermyntrude sighed deeply, and her air of distress ill accorded with talk of a wedding.

"I do not know," she said. "The prince speaks of political duties which will detain him in this district during the whole of the present year. But, Jimmie dear, when I regard matrimony from such a close standpoint as four or five days, I—I am terrified—I shrink from it."

"Then don't take him, sis," was her brother's hearty counsel. "I have not ventured to say anything to you before about it, but I was never stuck on the notion of your marrying a Russian. There are plenty of good chaps of our own race on both sides of the Atlantic without hitching up with a Cossack prince."

"I am so glad you agree with me!" she cried. "But this is a matter which requires some tact. I promised him an answer to-day. Candidly, Jimmie, I am rather afraid of him."

"Do you want me to hand him the frosty negative on your behalf?" he laughed.

"No. That would not be right. But, if you were me, would you not put off a definite reply un-

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til we have reached England, and then write to him?"

"Why not face the music at once?"

"Because we are here in his house, and I must admit that I have given him every reason to expect a different answer. I want you to stir up dad to get away as quickly as possible. I know he is anxious to go. With you and me to help, he will be off almost immediately."

"I suppose it can't be avoided," said her brother, ruefully. He had not expected this development, and was looking forward to an extended programme of sport during the next few weeks, as it was an understood thing that they were to remain at Bannofka until the middle of March.

"What else is to be done?" she asked. "I must not remain here under false pretenses, so to speak."

"Well, I am with you there all the time, sis. But, look here! When next you think of engaging yourself to any fellow, keep your head out of the clouds, old girl. I was always quite sure you didn't care a rap for Prince Boris, fine chap though he is. Now, had you made goo-goo eyes at Frank Armstrong——"

"I never make goo-goo eyes at anybody," she cried, sharply, "and I don't want to marry any man for at least ten years!"

Then she turned him out, on the plea that her maid was waiting, but Carlingham was a shrewd youth, and he had seen the blush that greeted Arm-

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strong's name. And, indeed, Ermyntrude was wondering why he had mentioned his friend at that moment. Mr. Armstrong was nothing to her. During the last days of her acquaintance had he not sedulously avoided her? And that is a proceeding on a man's part which no self-respecting girl will tolerate.

"I think that a brother is the least sympathetic of a girl's relations," she said to herself. "What a surprise it will be when I tell him all that has taken place!"

She encountered Prince Melnikoff at luncheon. She was pale, and too excited to eat. He interpreted these symptoms favorably, and lost no time in escorting her to the depths of a splendid winter garden, in which the plants and flowers of more temperate climes bade defiance to the outer cold.

She nerved herself to undeceive him without delay.

"I have thought over what you said last night," she began.

"And your answer is 'Yes,' Ermyntrude," he cried, eagerly.

"No. I cannot be your wife."

"What! You must be mad!"

In a gust of uncontrollable anger he struck a marble-topped buhl table, and the hard stone splintered into fragments under the blow. The action, no less than the sudden anger in his voice, stirred the girl into hostility. What right had he to pester her in this manner, and seek to wed her under con-

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ditions which would be bewildering even if they were devotedly attached to each other?

"I have decided that I am not suitable to the exalted position you offer me," she forced herself to say, though a note of sarcasm crept into her words.

The long, delicate hands which seemed to be incapable of delivering that terrific blow at the table were now clenched in a fine effort at self-control. Even his voice lost the ring of fury when he pleaded,—

"Ermytrude, you shall not commit this folly. What girlish fancy possesses you? During many months I have regarded you as my affianced wife. What have I done now that you should spurn my suit merely because I ask you to advance the date of our marriage?"

The fair seeming of his demand exasperated her. Not on her shoulders, but on his, rested the blame. She had never professed to love him, but it was intolerable that he should charge her with fickleness. Too young yet to conceal purpose in speech, eager only to vindicate her refusal, Ermytrude forgot the counsels of prudence. She confronted him boldly, with indignation flashing in her eyes.

"How dare you ask me to be your wife, under some fanciful decree granted because of your rank, when you have a wife living?" she cried.

His glance blazed back at her. He was too passionate, when aroused, to adopt a mere subterfuge.

"Who told you this?" he whispered, hoarsely.

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"That you shall never learn from me. But is it not true? Did you not marry Olga Sassulitch? Have you not deserted her cruelly? Yet you insult me by offering a marriage which is no marriage, by a ceremony which no English girl would regard as sacred."

Something rose in the man's throat and seemed to choke him. For an instant, Ermyntrude was alarmed. Prince Boris was so overwhelmed with rage that no articulate words would come. She turned to leave him, but he caught her in an iron grip, and she could not escape unless she screamed for help—an almost inconceivable thing in the circumstances. He held her thus for a long time, until, at last, he found utterance.

"I am sorry this thing has happened," he said, slowly. "I would have given my life sooner than cause you pain. My only excuse is that I loved you."

His humble attitude, after the first outburst, was so unexpected, so pitiful, that the girl's eyes filled with tears. Had she been unjust to him? Was he in truth a man maligned and misunderstood?

"I think, in any case, our marriage would be a mistake," she murmured. "I am told that you may expect your freedom before many months have passed. By that time you will have forgotten me, and you will find among your own people a bride far more worthy than I to become a Princess Melnikoff."

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She was so agitated that she did not perceive the quick start of surprise which her words evoked. And to her very great astonishment, his response seemed to favor a friendly understanding between them.

"I shall not press you to reveal the source of your information," he said, regaining his self-possession with marvelous rapidity. "Clearly it reached you since our conversation last night."

He paused, and she answered not.

"Is Lord Valletort aware of your decision?" he asked.

"No. I deemed it a matter best discussed between you and me. Indeed, I did not intend to speak so definitely to-day. We must leave Bannofka at once, and I thought that it would be better to write. I only spoke so openly in self-defense."

He smiled bitterly, but with deference.

"I thank you for your forbearance," he said. "I shall be angry with you only if you attempt to curtail your visit. Let us, at least, be friends."

CHAPTER X

THE WAY THEY HAVE IN RUSSIA

ERMYNTRUDE, thinking she had accomplished a disagreeable task, was more than ready to help her host in concealing all evidence of strained relations.

Lord Carlingham, too, was glad that a *modus vivendi* had been arranged. He did not take his pretty sister's love affairs very seriously, and his mind was set on participating in certain sporting events fixed for the next few days. So, at a family conclave, each member whereof was swayed by vastly different inclinations, it was decided that they should leave the palace for England within a week.

Each day now witnessed a diminution in the number of guests. Every morning, sleighs set out with merry jingling of bells and loud cracking of whips along the highroad to Saratoff, the nearest railway station.

Ermyntrude paid little heed to the departure of the other ladies. Prince Melnikoff was so consistently courteous to her, and so steadily avoided all semblance of thrusting needless attentions upon her, that she flattered herself he agreed with her in think-

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ing they might be excellent friends but an ill-matched couple. It was more than ever apparent to her that, although she had visited Bannofka to study the people and learn something of the country which she might be led to adopt, she had really seen no more of the land or its inhabitants than a passenger in a Pullman car sees of the towns and scenes through which he is carried in luxury.

A glimpse, indeed, had been vouchsafed to her, and it was far from pleasing. But Prince Melnikoff spoke of governing, of being a ruler, and this implied law-courts, offices, crowds of officials, civil and military. These things existed, no doubt, but they were not at Bannofka, which was utterly isolated, a city unto itself.

On the fourth of the seven days the party at dinner consisted of only eight persons, and four of these were outside guests: namely, a military engineer and his wife, and General and Madame von Schenck. They came from a winter camp across the river, and Ermytrude noticed that a strong escort of Cossacks rode with them.

She imagined that this parade was in mere recognition of the General's rank, and happened to speak of it to him, as he had taken her in to dinner. He was an outspoken man, a Russian characteristic in private life.

"My dear young lady," he said, "have you lived so long in Bannofka without hearing that the country is disturbed?"

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They were conversing in French, and Ermytrude, who spoke the language well, did not dream of giving the word *trouble* its political significance.

"Had you any difficulty in crossing the Volga?" she asked.

"I mean that the peasants are in revolt," he said, raising puzzled eyebrows. She was startled, but tried to conceal her agitation.

"How odd that I have not been told such exciting news!" she said.

"There is nothing remarkable in that. The stupid people will not come near the palace. You are too well guarded. But we soldiers are unpopular just now, so we take precautions, especially when there are ladies in the company."

"But surely there cannot be a revolution in full progress and no one the wiser save the insurgents and those who are suppressing them?"

"Such things are not unknown in Russia."

"What is the cause of the outbreak?"

"It began with the refusal of certain recruits to go to Central Asia. In three villages mutilation was adopted wholesale in order to avoid military service. Then, in the neighborhood of Tsaritsin, a holy eikon became a miracle-worker. People crowded to the little chapel from all sides. Cholera broke out, and they had to be dispersed by force. It was useless to try and prove to them that the so-called miracles were partly fraud on the part of a hard-up priest and largely self-delusion."

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"Has there been any fighting?" she demanded, utterly astonished by the General's disclosures.

"Hardly anything worthy of the name. The villagers are too wise to meet troops in the open. In the depths of the forests, and in the impenetrable thickets which line many of the ravines running down to the Volga, they have hiding-places from which a whole army corps could not dislodge them."

"How long, then, will this sort of thing continue?"

"Until the spring. They will sneak back to their fields as soon as the earth can be tilled. The police will arrest certain known ringleaders, and send them to the island of Saghalien, and the locality will calm down for another period of years."

"Are you alarming my English guests?" put in Prince Melnikoff, genially, at this stage. The hint was sufficient. General von Schenck changed the conversation, but Ermytrude's coolness had allowed it to go far beyond the bounds Prince Boris would have permitted had he but known.

During the evening it was arranged that the prince should take his friends from England to a monastery at a place called Dukhof next day, where they would see the ivory seat in which the robber, Stenka Razin, used to sit while he directed operations against vessels passing up and down the river.

"I suppose we shall not be waylaid *en route*?" said Ermytrude. She regretted the words the mo-

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ment they were uttered, but Prince Melnikoff only laughed at the idea.

“A number of villagers attack *me!*” he cried. “They would indeed have faith in the miraculous eikon ere that project entered their minds. As it happens, the district we shall traverse is one of the loneliest and most picturesque in this part of South Russia. You must not fail to see it before you fly away to the police-guarded streets and squares of London.”

When she went to her apartments, her maid, a pleasant-faced Frenchwoman, pointed to a letter lying on the dressing-table.

“It was placed there after miladi dressed for dinner!” she cried. “I found it, just as miladi sees it, when I came here an hour ago.”

The missive bore no stamp. It was correctly addressed, and Ermyntude, like every other woman, turned it over and examined the envelope curiously before she opened it. She wondered who had adopted this surreptitious method of communication, but wonder rapidly yielded to something akin to fear when she read,—

“Dear Madam,— It would have been better for you and your relations had you departed from Bannofka sooner, though it is probable that you would not have been allowed to go. On no account accompany Prince Melnikoff to the Dukhof Monastery when the excursion is proposed to you. It will be wise if you dissuade your father and brother from taking the journey. They should insist on departing instantly for Saratoff and Moscow. In any event, you must not visit Dukhof.”

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The letter was unsigned and undated. It was written in good English, but in a caligraphy difficult to decipher. Ermyntrude, who was beginning to distrust everything she saw or heard, resolved at once to do what she ought to have done sooner.

"Julie," she said, "go and ask Lord Carlingham to come to me. He is in his room, but he will not yet have retired."

Her brother obeyed the summons quickly. Dismissing the maid, she told him of the visit of Vladimir Sassulitch; of his startling revelations; of Prince Melnikoff's tacit acceptance of the man's statements; and, finally, of the letter, which she handed to him.

"You are pretty deep, Ermie," he said, his brows wrinkling over the unknown handwriting. "Why didn't you tell me these things sooner?"

"Don't blame me, Jimmie," she said, humbly. "I acted for the best. I thought that my own folly had brought me into a position of some difficulty, and I resolved to extricate myself without dragging dad and you into the quarrel."

"But Prince Boris took the knock quite decently, you said."

"You have seen that for yourself. No one could have behaved better than he during the last few days. I feel quite ashamed of myself, though I have not altered my mind in the least degree. I admire him, but I can never marry him—now."

Carlingham sniffed. He bent over the letter again.

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"This mysterious cartel suggests dangers which it does not describe," he said. "And the writer evidently knows the prince's affairs almost as well as our friend knows them himself."

"That is the most alarming feature of it," she said, looking about the beautiful room apprehensively, as if she expected some apparition to appear.

He laughed. Her action warned Carlingham that he must not frighten her.

"It is sheer nonsense that we should bother our heads about local intrigues," he said. "Within forty-eight hours we shall be packing. Candidly, I shall be pleased to see you back in town; but, if Melnikoff asks me, I shall come here again next year."

"But what shall we do about the excursion tomorrow? All arrangements are made. I heard the prince giving instructions for the sleighs to be ready at ten o'clock."

Lord Carlingham hesitated. When, at last, he made up his mind, he arrived at the decision which nine out of ten Britons would have reached in his place.

"Look here, Ermie," he said, "Melnikoff has treated us royally. We have nothing to complain of, either in his words or actions. He has even dealt with you better than you deserve, for, what between you and the mater, he certainly expected you to marry him. Now, I say that the right thing to do is to chuck that letter in the fire, go with him

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to this blessed monastery, keep our eyes open to see what the game is, and leave Bannofka, as we came to it, on the best of terms with our entertainer."

"This man—Sassulitch—if he is the writer—specially warns me against going there."

"What excuse can you give?"

"I can be indisposed."

"Well, do as you like. It is hard to see what mischief can happen while dad and I are with you."

Dubious still, she yielded to his advice.

"There!" she said, watching the letter curling into black wisps as it was consumed by the flames. "I agree with you, Jimmie. I will go with you to Dukhof, and sit in the robber chieftain's chair, if it pleases me and looks clean."

"I suppose you lock your doors before you roost?" asked her brother, with a laugh.

"Julie has a spare key. Since my weird visitor put in an appearance, I bar myself against other intruders."

Next morning they set off soon after ten o'clock. The thermometer registered fifteen degrees below zero, but the sun was shining in a cloudless sky, there was no wind, and the air was exhilarating as champagne. Two sleighs stood at the door. Into the first of these Prince Melnikoff handed Ermyntrude, who was cloaked in sable and fox, her feet being incased in felt overshoes. The comfortable vehicle was loaded with furs, and a bearskin,

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wrapped around her feet and ankles, rested on a hot-water bottle.

Prince Boris looked a splendid figure in a tight-fitting astrakhan coat and cap, while the driver, his curly beard shining with oil, was a picturesque personage in a three-cornered fur hat and a huge padded coat tightly strapped around his waist by an embroidered belt. A team of three fine horses champed impatiently at their bits. Over their quarters was spread blue silk netting, to prevent the snow spurned by their flying heels from being flung into Ermytrude's face, and the reins were covered with blue silk and held in the driver's two hands.

It is one of the joys of Russia to hear, if you can understand, the way in which the ivostchick alternately cajoles and abuses his team. Now he caresses them as "little doves;" in half a minute he condemns them as "cursed hounds." The animals understand him. He achieves far more by language than by use of the harmless little whip which he carries horizontally in front of him in his right hand.

To-day Prince Melnikoff was in his liveliest mood. His talk was of Petersburg, of the court, of the subtle distinctions between the aristocracies of Europe. He had never been a more interesting companion. He treated Ermytrude as an old friend, and there was not the slightest suspicion of the discarded lover in his manner.

She enjoyed the drive immensely. The prince had

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not erred when he described the scenery as picturesque and lonely. The road wound through wooded gorges and across rocky valleys, and an escort of fierce-looking Cossacks seemed out of place in this deserted land.

They reached the monastery in time for lunch. They saw the famous ivory chair, and Ermyntrude fulfilled her vow by sitting in it. Her action was unexpected, and it seemed to create some excitement among the quaintly attired monks who were doing the honors of Dukhof. One of them sprang forward to prevent her, but he was too late. Prince Boris, who flushed a little, said something in Russian, and the monk drew back, but the English people saw that he and his brethren crossed themselves.

"What is the matter?" inquired Lord Valletort, who, as an orthodox Protestant, was scandalized by the idolatry which he saw in evidence on all sides.

"Surely a pirate's chair cannot be regarded as sacred," said his son.

The prince explained suavely.

"It has a legendary significance," he said. "Lady Ermyntrude cannot be suspected of designs on my patrimony, but if a Russian were to sit there he would incur some risk."

"Of what?" asked Ermyntrude, bouncing up quickly lest the chair should have some occult influence of dire import.

"Of causing a scare among the monks. But there

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is a fine view from the tower. We must not miss that."

Obviously, his highness did not wish to pursue the subject, but Ermytrude already regretted her hoydenish act, and she fancied that the monks looked at her askance during the remainder of her stay.

The day was far advanced when they set out on their homeward journey. The prince was assiduous in his advice that they should keep eyes, ears, and nose well protected by their furs now, as the cold grew intense after the sun had vanished. The ravines which looked so beautiful by day were dark and forbidding enough in the declining light, but the road of frozen snow was perfect, and the three hours' journey promised to end as pleasantly as it had begun.

They were yet ten miles from Bannofka, and buried in the gloom of a path cut through a strip of forest, when suddenly the darkness was lit with spurts of flame, and the air trembled with the discharge of firearms. Their Cossack guard traveled in two contingents, one in front and one in the rear. Though taken completely by surprise, the men unslung their carbines or gripped sword or lance to repel this unexpected and outrageous attack. Instantly a fierce *mêlée* took place, a number of vague forms on horseback dashed past, and there was a vast amount of yelling and promiscuous shooting.

The horses in the leading sleigh, which held Ermytrude and the prince, flew ahead in a mad gallop.

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Soon they were out on the open plain again, and Melnikoff, yielding to Ermytrude's frenzied anxiety on behalf of her father and brother, helped the coachman to pull the frightened animals on to their haunches.

"Try not to be too greatly alarmed," he said. "Neither Valletort nor Carlingham will be hurt. The attack was intended for me. Possibly their sleigh was overturned in the snow, and that accounts for their non-arrival. You saw yourself that my men routed the cowardly brutes instantly."

The girl was distraught. Even in the terror of the moment she remembered the warning she had disregarded.

"Oh, save them, save them!" she wailed. "They have harmed nobody. Why should they be made to suffer? And it is all my fault! Had it not been for me they would never have come here!"

The prince evidently thought it best not to check her lamentations, but he bent over her and rearranged her furs, lest she should suffer from the piercing cold. At last, they both heard the thud of hoofs, and he cried cheerfully,—

"Here come my Cossacks! Now you will see that you have no need for fear."

But the news brought by the escort was in no wise reassuring. In the confusion of the fight, the second sleigh had left the track and upset. When the insurgents cleared off into the somber woodland they had carried Lord Valletort and his son with

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them. Probably they were taken as hostages, and would come to no harm. But to pursue the rebels into the recesses of the forest by night was impossible. So said the prince, and, despite Ermytrude's sobs and tears, the horses renewed their homeward gallop.

So the weeping and despairing girl was brought back to the palace, and she entered its gate distraught, quite frantic with grief, though little realizing as yet that her own plight was worse than that of her father and brother. They might be prisoners in the hands of fierce men, but she was a prisoner in the hands of a Russian autocrat who loved her, and who meant to force her into marriage.

She was destined soon to learn the amazing truth.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNEXPECTED TELEGRAM

ONCE fairly started on its work, the Boundary Commission made an end speedily. No one wished to remain in that deserted corner of the world an hour longer than was necessary. As Muscovite anxiety to steal a few more versts on the way to the Persian Gulf was checked by the presence of the British representatives, pillars were built and imaginary lines were agreed to with remarkable celerity.

The Russian officer, until well-armed Japan rose from the sea, invariably regarded his British *confrère* as his hereditary foe. Nevertheless, he was always courteous and hospitable, and of late years he had learned to look East rather than West when the talk at the mess-table ran to war.

"I hear you are going to London to report to your Government," said Colonel Derjavin, chief of the Russian mission, to Armstrong the night before they separated.

"Yes," said Frank, smiling cheerfully. "I was on my way to India when sent here, and now, by good luck, I shall see England again before I re-join my regiment."

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“How do you return?”

“By way of the Persian Gulf and Aden.”

“Have you ever visited the Caucasus?”

“No.”

“Then why not come with us? There is a steamer lying off the coast to ferry us to Baku. We all go on to Moscow, and that is your nearest way home. You will be in London by that route before you reach Aden if you go south.”

“By Jove! the notion never occurred to me,” admitted Frank, “and there are few things I would like better.”

His chief, Mr. Egerton, gave ready sanction to the scheme, only wishing that he could have taken the trip himself instead of marching back to malodorous Teheran.

Five days later, Armstrong, with his Cossack friends, crossed the magnificent pass over the Caucasus by that ancient road which, for thousands of years, has been one of the chief thoroughfares between Europe and Asia. Notwithstanding the piercing cold, he had an immense advantage over the summer visitor in the perfect clearness of the atmosphere. Moreover, his new friends, privileged beyond ordinary mortals, rushed the hardest part of the journey, doing in ten hours what it takes the average traveler a whole day to accomplish.

From Vladikavkaz to Moscow they enjoyed all the comforts of a well-equipped train, and thus it befell that Armstrong entered the Riخان Station in the

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city of the Kremlin on the day following that on which Lord Valletort and his son were carried off by the Bannofka rebels. Of that exciting event no word appeared in the newspapers. On the map, Saratoff is near Moscow, but Russia is a land of enormous distances, and, although the rail connection between the two places is direct, they are five hundred miles apart. Still, there would have been no news of the outrage had it happened in Moscow itself.

It was a mere whim, the outcome of the chance which led him to be well on his way homeward nearly a month in advance of due date, that caused Frank to telegraph to Lord Carlingham,—

“Returning London from Persia. Wire if you can meet me here or at Saratoff.—Armstrong, Moskova Bazar Hotel.”

He wrote the message in Russian, thinking that an English version might be mutilated, or evoke the suspicion of ignorant officials at Saratoff. Carlingham, of course, would have no difficulty in getting it translated, even if he failed to make out its purport. Having dispatched this friendly message, behind which there was hardly a shadow of thought for the girl who was now little more than a sad, sweet memory, Frank went to a theater.

There are moments in a man's life when just such a harmless act as the dispatch of the telegram serves as the spark which fires a powder magazine. Many lives, much sorrow, and not a little happiness depended on those few words winging their way across

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the snow-covered wastes. Sitting in the stalls, watching a noted *tragédienne* moving an easily swayed audience to tears, the young officer little dreamed that he had written the first lines of a tragedy far more lurid and heartrending.

The telegram reached Saratoff about seven in the evening. It was transmitted thence by private wire to Bannofka Palace. The official who received it made two copies. One he placed in his pocket; the other he sent by messenger to Prince Melnikoff.

At the moment, his highness was endeavoring to comfort Ermyntrude with a prediction of the speedy release of her father and brother.

"My officers," he said, "have captured some of the rebels, and they state emphatically that the two Englishmen are alive and uninjured."

"But what is the object of this senseless outrage? How can two utter strangers be regarded as valuable hostages?"

Ermyntrude was not of a lineage which produced weeping and hysterical women. When the first paroxysm of anguish had passed she was outwardly cold—white and unemotional as a marble statue.

"It is probable that the rebels hope that their rank, and particularly their race, will insure liberal terms being granted to their captors."

"I cannot understand how such an ambushade came to be planned so effectively," she said, fixing her eyes steadily on his downcast face. "There was a strong guard of Cossacks, yet these men cut the es-

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cort in two and snapped up the occupants of one single sleigh, without, as far as I can learn, a single casualty taking place among the two parties."

"Who told you that palpable absurdity?" cried Prince Boris, his sympathetic air changing to a quick alertness, which did not escape her.

"This morning, reflecting on all that has happened, I thought it strange that after so much firing and hand-to-hand fighting no injuries were reported among your troops. I sent my maid to inquire. There are no wounded men in hospital."

"You forget that the affair took place ten miles away. The nearest and best-equipped hospital was in the military camp across the river. Messengers were dispatched there to bring ambulance sleighs and doctors. Moreover, two sotnias of Cossacks were warned to be in readiness to take up the pursuit this morning."

"Oh, that explains it! Then there were some casualties?"

"Five of my men were killed and sixteen wounded. The insurgents lost nearly thirty."

"How terrible! What is the cause of this rising? Stolid peasants, such as I have seen here, do not revolt for such simple reasons as those given by General von Schenck."

"I wish you would not press me too closely on that point."

"I must! In common fairness you ought to tell me the truth. You have fenced with me all day.

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This morning, when I wrote telegrams to my mother and to the British Ambassador at St. Petersburg, your servants informed me that strict orders were given forbidding the dispatch of any message not visé'd by you. When I requested an interview, I was told you were on the Dukhof Road, directing the operations of the troops. That was a lie! You had not quitted the palace."

Very beautiful Lady Ermytrude looked in her icy indignation. Prince Melnikoff sighed. He felt that, no matter what the means, she must be persuaded out of this critical and suspicious mood.

"I confess I have avoided you," he said, humbly. "There were reasons, reasons which I beg of you not to force from me."

"Prince Melnikoff," she said, vehemently, "the lives of my father and brother are at stake. Why do you torture me with stupid qualms as to whether or not I am fit to be trusted with your secrets?"

"It is not my secret," he said. "It concerns you, Ermytrude."

The tenderness in his voice was not assumed. Though the man was acting, when his passion for this fair girl overpowered him he became natural again, and, even in her subdued excitement, she felt that he was speaking from his heart.

"I implore you to be candid," she said. "It is agonizing to remain in this place all day and believe that things which I ought to know are being withheld from me!"

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"You will hardly credit——" he began.

"Tell me," she insisted, "are my father and brother alive?"

"On my honor, I believe they are. Nay, I am sure of it."

"Why are you sure?"

"Because—because I know why they were captured."

"Go on. If you do not, I will quit Bannofka within the hour, and seek redress elsewhere."

"Ermyntrude, do not be cruel. This extraordinary occurrence is bound up with our marriage."

"Our marriage!"

Her lips dilated with the tense scorn aroused by his words: her lips parted, and her bosom heaved tumultuously. Had he lost his senses, that such an explanation was vouchsafed to her?

"It sounds incredible," he murmured, huskily. "Nevertheless, you cannot choose but believe me. Can you calm yourself sufficiently to give me a patient hearing?"

Calm! Was she not calm with despair, with a foreboding of evil that refused to be stilled? For answer, she sank into the chair from which she had risen. She sought to read his soul in his face, for his seeming honesty only lulled the doubts stealthily creeping into her brain.

"I have enemies," he went on. "Though my power here is that of the Tsar himself, I cannot hold such a position without arousing hatreds which are

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all the more bitter because they are unreasonable."

"Yes," she broke in, "there are some here who wish well to your guests, and who are better able than you to foresee perils which might beset them."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"I was warned not to take the journey to the monastery."

"Warned—by whom?"

"That I do not know. A written message was delivered to me. I showed it to my brother."

Now it was the prince's turn to quiver with excitement, or, it might be, anger.

"But why did you not tell *me*?" he said.

"Because my brother thought, and I agreed with him, that it would be a poor return for your hospitality to let you think we paid heed to anonymous communications. Oh, if only I had followed that unknown friend's advice! I feel in my heart that he spoke with good reason. Even then, it would seem, the attack had been planned—and by whom?"

They gazed at each other in silence for a little while, the girl openly scornful of this autocrat who could not protect his friends from dangers well known to others, the man eager to convince her that his one thought in life was to serve her. She was the more collected of the pair. Her sparkling eyes alone betrayed the stress of her emotions, but Prince Boris had flushed deeply, and he seemed to be strangely at a loss for words.

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"You asked me to hear you," she said, at last. "Well, I do not flinch from any ordeal that can help my father and brother. In what way can a talked-of marriage between you and me affect them?"

"You place me on the rack!" he cried. "How can I make matters clear to you when you hold me responsible for an evil I could not avert, after concealing from me the treachery of my own household? This is a part of the earlier plot to destroy my happiness. Even here, in my palace, I am surrounded by spies."

"Are you alluding to the knowledge conveyed to me of the existence of your deserted wife?"

It was unwise to taunt him thus, but Ermytrude was careless whether or not the question hurt. Had he understood a woman's nature better, he would not have shirked meeting her earlier, and the incident of the forbidden telegrams still rankled in her mind.

She felt that she was encompassed by the unknown, and, in her present highly-strung state, his allusion to the broken-off marriage was utterly repugnant. She realised, with the intuition of her sex, that some sort of bargain, of concession to expediency, was to be proposed to her, and she resolved bitterly to dispel the conceit, if it existed, before the Russian brought himself to put it forward. But she forgot that when a Russian is scratched a Tartar is revealed. Prince Melnikoff's color deepened, his

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eyes blazed, and there was a harsh note in his voice as he replied,—

“I am not one who permits his plans to be thwarted, either by secret traitors or avowed rebels. You are in no fitting mood to listen to me now. Tomorrow, when I come to you with news of Lord Valletort and your brother, you may be inclined to trust me. At any rate, mere gratitude then should serve to curb your unruly tongue.”

“Rescue them!” she cried. “Bring them to me alive and uninjured, and I will believe nothing base of you!”

“What do you suspect?” he almost shouted. “Do you think I am a party to some wretched plot which led to their capture?”

“I do not know what to believe. Why are you preventing me from communicating with my mother?”

“Summon her here,” he said instantly. “Say that you are ill, that her presence is needed, but do not refer to this mishap on the Dukhof Road. Accept my assurance that all will be well, and spare me the sensation that will be aroused if you spread abroad the news of this outrage. I can silence lying tongues here. In England I am powerless.”

“Do you value your reputation as a newly-appointed governor more highly than the welfare of those whom I love?”

“You are unjust to me. How can exaggerated statements in the English press help me to deal with

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armed fanatics here? Be reasonable. Write your message and it will be dispatched."

He strode to an escritoire, and handed her some notepaper. Then his rough manner changed, and he put a hand on her shoulder.

"Let me help you," he said, gently. "Say to your mother that her presence here is urgently required for family reasons. Ask her to leave London to-morrow. Best of all, sign it in your father's name."

She hesitated. His advice seemed to be well-intentioned, yet she hated these tricks and subterfuges.

"No," she decided. "I refuse to write lies. They are in the air here, I think. For the rest, I shall do what you ask."

A servant entered, and handed a telegram to the prince, who glanced at it hastily. Written in crabbed Russian characters he caught the word "Saratoff" and the name of a Moscow hotel. The telegraphists had badly bungled Armstrong's name. He was about to read it carefully when Ermytrude asked,—

"Is there any news from the troops?"

"No," he said. "This is from Moscow."

He told the man to wait and take Lady Ermytrude's message. When it was written, she handed it to him.

"There," she said, "that should be emphatic enough without alarming her unduly."

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He turned to permit the light to rest on the paper. Watching him, her eye fell on the other slip which he held in his hand, and she fancied it was addressed to Lord Carlingham.

“Is not that for my brother?” she asked, suddenly.

Then Prince Melnikoff troubled to decipher the document. He muttered something in Russian, and his teeth met with a snap.

“No,” he said, “it is from my agent in Moscow. It demands immediate attention. Your message to your mother is all right. Forgive me if I leave you now. Rest assured you will soon be freed from anxiety.”

He quitted her hurriedly. He appeared to be in a rage over something. Ermyntrude went to her apartments. On the way she noticed that the faces of the servants were strange to her. In her dressing-room she found Julie, her maid, in a flurry.

“V'là donc, miladi!” cried the Frenchwoman, “the house-steward is a fool! There have been changes. I cannot find a domestic who speaks French, and I do not understand this barbarous Russian.”

Ermyntrude was silent, but her heart fluttered. She was afraid. Some intangible evil threatened her. She longed to hear from her mother.

CHAPTER XII

THE INTERLOPER

ON returning from the Narodney Theater to his hotel, Frank Armstrong asked if there was a telegram for him.

Yes—one had arrived a few minutes ago. Indeed, its cover was yet damp from the steaming process to which it had been subjected by an inquisitive *employé* in order to open it and learn the contents. That was not what the hall-porter said, but it was the fact.

The message read,—

“Lord Carlingham and the Earl of Valletort are in the interior on a shooting excursion. They will be absent nearly a month.—MELNIKOFF.”

He smiled.

“His highness evidently means to choke me off,” he said to himself. With the thought came a sharp twinge of reflection. Ermyntrude was there, and the Countess, of course, had joined her.

In a little while the distinguished party would hie to London, and there would be a grand wedding in St. George’s, Hanover Square. Well, thank good-

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ness! he would be in Meerut or Lucknow by that time. The young goddess with the dreamy eyes was not for him, though had her station in life kept her out of the orbit of princes and similarly irresistible suitors he might have hoped to win her love.

Having nothing better to do, he wrote and posted a letter to Lord Carlingham, briefly describing his journey, and regretting the chance which now prevented them from meeting. Then he went to bed. He slept soundly until aroused by a loud knocking at his door, and a voice calling,—

“Nobility, here is a telegram for you.”

It was some minutes before he could grasp the significance of the vague words he perused with sleep-laden eyes. In the first place, it came from Atkarsk, a small station near Saratoff. Secondly, it was addressed to “Frek Armistronk,” which might presumably represent his name; and lastly, its contents, in fluent and correct Russian, ran,—

“Remain in Moscow until I join you. Do not write or telegraph to me. I am coming to see you.—LORD CARLINGHAM.”

It was an odd production, looked at in any light. Carlingham would be very unlikely to prefix his courtesy title to his name—unless, indeed, he wished to make his identity certain. Again, how could Armstrong reconcile the statements in the message with those of Prince Melnikoff, whose answer was undoubtedly a response to his own telegram? Alto-

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gether, the affair was puzzling and slightly mysterious.

Breakfast, and close scrutiny of a railway guide, were equally helpful. He gathered that the telegram was dispatched from Atkarsk at the hour the mail train from Saratoff passed through. So Carlingham was actually *en route!*

Well, that was a pleasant thing in itself. But why this stipulation that he, Armstrong, was to leave Bannofka severely alone? The letter posted over-night could not be recalled. In any case, there was nothing in it to cause the least uneasiness, no matter whose hands it fell into. He had purposely omitted any reference to Lady Ermyntrude, nor did he hint at any further effort on his part to meet her brother. He pondered over the contradictory elements in the affair for a long time, but finally gave up the problem as insoluble. Already his experience of life told him that a man might as well seek the philosopher's stone as try to read the future. Being a contented youngster, and full of the joy of life withal, he determined to spend his two days in sightseeing, because, if Lord Carlingham had set out from Saratoff that morning, he would not reach Moscow until the following evening.

Pursuing this programme, and not deterred by cold so intense that the weather-wise folk predicted an early thaw, during the afternoon he climbed the three hundred and forty-two steps of the Tower of

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Ivan the Great in order to have a good look at Moscow.

A man of the workman type was seized with the same mania about the same time, and so, apparently, was a stout person in furs, whom Frank had noticed in other parts of the Kremlin. Being young and active, Armstrong mounted the staircase rapidly. The workman, too, a sinewy man, followed close on his heels, but the fat man panted far in the rear. Before Frank reached the topmost balcony, the workman came quite close to him.

"Nobility," said the man, "you have had a telegram from Atkarsk?"

Sheer amazement caused Armstrong to stop.

"Walk on, nobility," said the other. "He beneath is a spy. I pray you listen to me, and believe that I am a friend. One comes to you by train from Saratoff. Do not leave Moscow until he sees you. It will be best if you remain in your hotel. Should you go out, drive in a closed kibitka. There are those here who do not wish you well. I cannot tell you more, because I do not know. I have been asked to give you this message. You must not be seen speaking to me. That is all, nobility."

Now, in any other part of the wide world Armstrong would not have accepted without question this curious warning, delivered behind his back in a low, distinct tone, as the two passed upwards—he would assuredly have challenged the man and demanded an explanation of his cryptic utterances. But in Rus-

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sia, where men are shadowed by sinister influences, where it is possible to leave your house on some trivial errand and never be seen again unless a friend happens to enter some distant fortress or is sent to the penal settlement of Saghalien, Frank knew that his counselor might have good reason for secrecy and circumspection.

Indeed, the workman swore roundly, in a loud voice, that all the views in Holy Russia were not worth so much trouble, and retraced his steps. Armstrong persevered. On the top the wind was biting, but he bore it until the "spy" labored into sight.

"It is a fine view from here," said Frank, cheerily, the two being the sole occupants of the elevated platform.

"It is," agreed the other, who seemed to be in a bad temper, and not without excuse, for adipose tissue, heavy furs, and tower-climbing do not go well together.

"But the cold is very keen," went on Frank, determined to have a good look at the second of his queer followers.

"St. Nicholas! you are right," said the other.

"But the spectacle! That is magnificent."

"Oh, yes, nobility."

The stranger seemed to have little liking for the exercise, and less for the conversation, which had been thrust on him. He turned away, and pretended an interest in the glittering pinnacles and domes of the Kremlin. At last Armstrong descended. His

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hired carriage was waiting. As he drove off, the stout individual emerged from the doorway. The man might be a clever detective, but he had not counted on that terrific ascent. He was out of action for the time.

Frank now gave serious thought to the odd events of the past few hours. It was, indeed, a marvelous thing that he could not come within measurable distance of Prince Boris Melnikoff or his surroundings without being lost in a maze of doubt and intrigue.

Rather as a relief to his troubled mind than as a matter of urgency, he unpacked the notes he had taken of the work of the Boundary Commission, and began to draft his report. The steady labor involved brought peace. Soon he was more interested in Persia than in Russia.

Evidently, this attitude on his part perplexed somebody. After he had dined and was wavering between "Phèdre" at the theater and a treatise on Usbeg Tartars in his room, he was asked to go to the hotel bureau. There a polite official requested the pleasure of seeing his passport. Such a proceeding, in the Russia of to-day, is quite unusual in the case of reputable foreigners traveling through the country. Armstrong was sure that some person of influence had urged the authorities to make things uncomfortable for him.

The police agent was surprised when the document was produced. It was a Foreign Office passport, visé'd by the Russian Ambassador in London, and

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indorsed by the Governor of Baku, the latter authorization having been obtained by the Cossack colonel who brought him over the Caucasus.

"It is in perfect order, gospodin," said the man, gravely, returning it to him.

"But why have you examined it?" demanded Armstrong. "Why have you chosen me, out of dozens of people in the hotel, for this personal scrutiny?"

The policeman shrugged his shoulders, but made no answer.

"You are obeying orders, of course," went on Armstrong. "However, I shall make it my business to report the matter to the Ministry of the Interior. I regard the incident as an affront."

The man vanished. The hotel *employés* groveled. Here was one who dared to question the proceedings of the all-powerful police.

The next twenty-four hours left him, so far as he knew, without further surveillance. He grew impatient as the hour for the arrival of the Saratoff train passed, and nothing happened. He was beginning to think that some stupid hoax had been perpetrated on him when, while dressing for dinner, a letter was slipped under the door of his room.

He heard the rustle of the paper on the carpet, and darted to the door to look out. A serving-maid was hurrying away along the corridor. He called to her, but she whisked out of sight. The letter it-

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self was as perplexing as the manner of its delivery. It had not long been written, and it read,—

“Sir,—I, Vladimir Sassulitch, sent you the telegram from Atkarsk in the name of your English friend. Prince Melnikoff has lied. Your friend and his father are not absent on a shooting excursion. They are prisoners in the hands of Prince Melnikoff's adherents, who pose as outlaws. Lady Ermyntrude Grandison is virtually a prisoner in the palace of Bannofka. She will be cajoled or forced into a marriage with the prince, as the price of the deliverance of her father and brother. I have warned her in the past; but, unfortunately, she did not understand my motives, and it is probable she has inadvertently revealed something to Prince Melnikoff, as my helpers in the palace are suspected and removed. Some of them will die.

“You, as an Englishman and a friend of the family, may be able to help Lady Ermyntrude and the others. That is why I have come to Moscow to see you.”

There followed elaborate directions as to the manner in which, by using various doors of the Salon des Variétés, he could baffle any pursuer, reach a side street, and walk rapidly to a house not far distant, where a man would be in waiting to guide him when he uttered the single word, “Angliehnin” (Englishman).

Armstrong disliked and distrusted this melodramatic proceeding. He knew not what wild adventure it portended, and the statements in the letter were hardly credible. Nevertheless, the name of the writer, coinciding with that of the woman found dead at Ascot, and the undoubted knowledge the man possessed of his telegram to Lord Carlingham, brought

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him to the rendezvous. In case of a trap being laid for him, he secured the letter in his dispatch-box, after copying its instructions. Then, if he was arrested, it would be available to prove his good faith.

It was not until he stood face to face with Sassulitch, and heard from the man's lips a faithful and surprisingly minute account of all that had taken place at Bannofka, that he realized the full extent of the plot against Ermyntrude, no less than the risk of the enterprise to which he was now asked to commit himself.

On the one hand, the girl was to be tricked into a marriage which would extricate Prince Melnikoff from many difficulties and place him firmly in the saddle as Governor of Bannofka and autocrat of a province as large as Scotland. On the other, were she rescued in time, there would be marshaled against her helpers all the might of a ruler who disposed of men's lives and fortunes, whose real power was greater than that of the Tsar, because untrammelled by State policy.

Above all, Armstrong had only the word of a broken man, of one admittedly a friend, if not an active member, of the secret organization which burrows, mole-like, beneath the surface of Russian political life, and against which Tsardom wages incessant war. And then, Ermyntrude might be willing to marry the prince. Sassulitch said she was not, but her brother had actually written him the date fixed for the ceremony.

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The way was dark and vague, but his hesitation did not endure. If he could see Ermyntrude herself, a word from her lips would dispel the cloud that obscured recent occurrences at Bannofka. He agreed, under certain restrictions, to meet Sassulitch at the Riazan Station next morning, and travel with him to the Volga.

Late into the night he wrote, and ended the draft report. He inclosed it, with a letter, to his London agents, asking them to hand it to the Foreign Office if he did not send fresh instructions within a fortnight. Then, in the early hours of a bitterly cold day, he went openly to the Riazan Station, and left Moscow by the Saratoff train.

At that very hour, Julie, Ermyntrude's maid, was crying hysterically at her mistress's knees. She had been an involuntary witness of the hanging of the telegraph operator at Bannofka. He had copied a message once too often.

And Ermyntrude, pallid and wide-eyed with terror, was murmuring a prayer for help. Unnoticed among the pile of letters and newspapers which daily reached the castle from England, lay Frank's letter to her brother. She had opened it, thinking that existing conditions sanctioned the action, and therein she read the plain record of Prince Melnikoff's duplicity.

What did it all portend? Towards what fate was she drifting? Her mother had telegraphed that she was ill and unable to leave London. Was that a lie, too?

CHAPTER XIII

ERMYNTRUDE YIELDS

THE final disillusionment of Ermyntrude was not long deferred.

She discovered that a luxurious palace might be quite as secure a prison as the orthodox structure of grim cells and forbidding walls. Though no actual restrictions were placed on her movements, she was conscious of an unobtrusive but persistent espionage. Appeals to Prince Melnikoff fell on deaf ears. He had schooled himself to a steady display of good-humored politeness. Her bitter words, her threats, her reproaches, were met by the same easy-going tolerance.

"My dear lady," he would say, "you have made up your mind that I am a scoundrel. Well, it is not for me to protest."

Concerning her father and brother she received no definite intelligence. The motive which inspired their capture still remained as vague and shadowy as on the night of that unhappy excursion to the monastery. The prince reiterated his assurance that they were not only uninjured, but in good health. For the rest, he had no information.

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To the girl's acute perception he seemed to be awaiting some issue, preparing for some important and far-reaching move; and, until the hour was ripe, he restrained his words, his actions, almost his thoughts. He did not thrust his company on her. He always came cheerfully at her bidding, tried to comfort her by hopeful prophecies of a speedy end to her anxiety, and effaced himself when she began to question him as to the many strange things that aroused her suspicions.

In the first place, a letter came from Lady Valletort which showed that the illness reported in her telegram must have been remarkably sudden. The only *malaise* which afflicted her ladyship was the lack of a fixed date for her daughter's marriage. Secondly, Ermyntrude knew for certain that her letters and telegrams were not dispatched.

She tried bribery, and apparently with success; but a waiting-maid who promised ready achievement in the matter of forwarding messages from the distant town of Saratoff pocketed Ermyntrude's notes for hundreds of roubles, and earned envious distinction by reporting the fact to the house-steward.

Taught a degree of caution by recent events, Ermyntrude did not reveal her knowledge of the prince's action in regard to Armstrong. She realized that one man, at least, had met his death through helping her. Undoubtedly, the unfortunate telegraph operator was in league with Sassulitch and his friends,

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and she did not want to embroil the young officer in danger on her account.

Already a morbid terror of Russia was sinking into her soul. This land, so vast, so sepulchral, so curiously unemotional to the eye, was yet rent and seamed beneath its cloak of snow by volcanic passions and lava streams of unrest.

She, at times, felt as if she were afloat on an uncharted ocean. Each day there came to her newspapers and letters—the latter read and resealed before they reached her—containing news of the outer world, chatty items about her personal friends, arrangements for meeting in London or the Highlands. All around, beyond the impassable barrier of snow-covered plains and frowning hills, the world seemed to move in its accustomed ruts; but here, in Ban-nofka, where a few days ago fashion and pleasure had a favored haunt, she appeared to be remote, alone, cut off from humanity. No longer did the Russians possess the similitude of fellow human beings. She began to regard them as a race apart. Even Prince Melnikoff, with his fine presence and courtly air, was a Cossack hetman rather than one who bore the impress of cultured society.

The only creature from whom she could seek solace and companionship was her maid, and that naturally vivacious Frenchwoman was not a little alarmed by what she had seen and heard in this weird land, so far removed from her beloved Paris.

There is supposed to be a community of interest

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between Russia and France, but it is based on a very candid ignorance of each other's qualities. Julie, at any rate, trembled when she encountered any of the superior officers of the prince's household, rated the servants, and weepingly confessed to her mistress that it would be a happy day for both of them when they crossed the frontier never to return.

While matters were thus electrical, a veritable bombshell, in the shape of a letter, overwhelmed Ermyntrude. Prince Boris sent a servant to request the favor of her presence in the morning-room.

"His excellency wished me to add that he has news of great importance for mademoiselle," said the man, in whom Julie joyfully recognized a compatriot—the prince's valet.

Ermyntrude hurried off at once. The valet, having seen her safely down the stairs, returned.

"Well, Julie, my cabbage, what news in Bannofka?" he asked, with an air of much gallantry—for Julie was pretty.

In London, she would have boxed his ears for addressing her so familiarly. Here, she was too anxious for a gossip with a compatriot to pay heed to the nice distinctions of the servants' hall.

"News!" she cried. "Heaven! How can you ask? It is you who should bring the news. Here is miladi distraught, and milord her father and milord her brother imprisoned in the hands of desperates. What do we know, we others? Can we ask the snow,

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or these greasy Russian pigs? Where have you been? When did you come here? I have not seen you since we left London."

"Easy, little one! So many questions are confusing. But have they not treated you well?"

"We have been fed and lodged; yet it is a jail, this palace."

"Nay, a cage for singing-birds, rather. Say then, Julie—my master marries thy mistress, and I marry the maid, eh?"

"Neither one nor the other, monsieur. Miladi will never wed the prince, nor am I to be picked up, like an old shoe, by the first man who passes."

"Listen, cherished! I liked thy pretty face in England, but I had no time for courtship in that land of fogs."

"Maybe there were other drawbacks?"

"Of what kind?"

"Perhaps, like thy master, thou art married already."

Monsieur "Dumanet," whose usually pallid face was brown from travel, scowled unpleasantly.

"By blue," he said, "your tongue wags a trifle too fast."

"You like it less than my looks, I fancy?"

"Chut! You forget you are in Russia. Here they have a proverb about women. 'The hair is long but the mind is short,' they say."

"Such proverbs are suited to their savage speech. Nay, monsieur, do not come too near. I am a little

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bit afraid of your blond prince, but if *you* try any tricks I will scratch your eyes out."

"Foolish girl! Then you can whistle for news."

"And you can whistle for another wife, you lump of putty. So can your giant of a master, too."

He leered at her scornfully. Apparently about to pulverize her with some statement, he snapped his fingers and quitted her, nor did a little laugh, well calculated to explode his wrath, serve its object. Whatever his intelligence, he kept it to himself. But Julie soon heard it.

Ermyntrude found Prince Melnikoff awaiting her. This morning he was attired in an official uniform, which well became his finely proportioned frame. He bowed her respectfully to a chair.

"I have a letter for you," he said.

"Only one?"

He passed the retort unheeded.

"It is from your father," he went on.

Instantly her face lit with animation. She sprang towards him impulsively.

"Oh, give it to me!" she cried. "Surely it contains no evil tidings."

"Hear me one moment, I beg," he said, quietly, though apparently he felt the stress of some strong emotion, and his eyes looked into hers tenderly. "As I have told you constantly, your father and brother are safe. This letter reaches you exactly as the Earl of Valletort sent it. But I cannot help guessing its contents. I have known for many days, ever since

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his capture, in fact, that he would write to you, and I have good reason for being aware of its nature. I might have told you sooner, but you would not have believed me. At least you will credit your father's statements. Read for yourself. Pray make no hasty decision. I will answer truthfully any and every question you put to me afterwards."

She, perforce, caught the restraint, the almost mournful note, in his voice. At the moment she had little thought for anything save that thrice-precious letter, but she saw that he walked away at once, halting at a distant window, and looking out at the faintly discernible line of the frozen river.

Trembling with eagerness, she examined the envelope. It was addressed to her, and the writing was unquestionably her father's. But the letter itself!

"My Darling Girl [wrote the Earl of Valletort],—I hasten to relieve the suspense under which you must be laboring. Your brother and I are well in health, if somewhat tortured in mind, but only on account of the anxiety you are enduring.

"I am unable to give details of our whereabouts, nor indeed, write other than the terms whereby we may regain our freedom.

"These can be stated briefly enough. I am told that the province of Bannofka is on the verge of a civil war. In any other country the revolution might be regarded as already an accomplished fact, but here it seems, they order things differently. The whole crux of the situation centers about the marriage of Prince Melnikoff. I am informed, and your brother confirms the truth of the statement, that the prince's father agreed, some years ago, that his son should marry the daughter of a rival claimant of the title, and thus dissolve a long-standing feud.

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"The girl is a daughter of a Circassian mother, and Prince Boris Melnikoff, who is much older, upset the plans of the seniors by contracting a clandestine marriage in his youth. This marriage, the validity of which is doubtful according to Russian law, has been finally dissolved by an Imperial edict, and I am assured that, in any case, his wife is at the point of death.

"Hearing of his projected marriage with you, to which credence was lent by the Tsar's ukase, the hostile Cossack tribe is up in arms, and determined to force him to carry out the arrangement made nearly twenty years since. This he refuses to do. He, a gentleman of refinement and good breeding, declines to accept as his mate an illiterate girl, whom Lieutenant Armstrong met in London and described to your brother as an odalisque. For this I find it hard to blame the prince.

"The outcome is a very serious and critical state of affairs, a threatened *émeute* on a gigantic scale. Prince Melnikoff believes, and his supporters hold the same view, that if he were irrevocably married to someone absolutely fitted, by birth and social position, for the high estate of the Princess Melnikoff, the existing crisis would die a natural death. The question for you to decide is—will you marry him at once?

"If you are married according to the rites of the Greek Church, the union will be binding in Russian eyes. You can meet your own scruples by quitting Bannofka immediately, and going through the ceremony again in London when his so-called morganatic wife is dead.

"I have told you the circumstances as well as your brother and I can grasp them through the aid of a French interpreter. Probably, they are quite accurate in a general sense.

"I cannot explain my capture further. That is forbidden. But I do add my solemn counsel. Act as you see fitting. Let no threat deter you from following the dictates of your heart. If, as has seemed possible, you feel that Prince Melnikoff is a worthy and desirable husband, marry him, subject to the stipulations I have named. The day you become Princess Melnikoff, your brother and I will be set at liberty. But, if

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you think this course will not conduce to your happiness, reject him, whatsoever the result.

"I might have written to you within a few hours of the raid had I consented to forego this qualified advice. I refused quite emphatically; but to-day I am told that I may write as I think fit, restricted only by the consideration that I am a prisoner, a sort of hostage, with your brother, for the proposed marriage.

"Again assuring you that we have endured no ill effects from our confinement, and reminding you that this letter has been carefully scrutinized by those who support Prince Melnikoff as against his and his father's enemies.—I remain your loving father.—VALLETORT."

After perusing this remarkable document, the genuineness of which was indisputable, Ermytrude stole a glance at Prince Boris. He was still standing, with hands clasped behind his back, gazing at the external plain. Again she read the letter. From every aspect it was amazing. Evidently, her father had decided not to pain her by suggesting what the alternative would be if she spurned the hand of her imperious suitor. Yet the earl was manifestly not opposed to the match. During these later months he had come to look on it as an assured thing, and the only word of dissent that fell from him was his condemnation of Bannofka as her permanent residence. It was odd that her brother had not been allowed to write; but the probable explanation was that the Russian "supporters" of the prince believed a father's word would be all-powerful. How bewildering, too, that Armstrong's name should crop up as a witness to the existence of the Circassian—

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her rival—and that her brother should know the fact, yet never reveal it to her! Again she looked at the prince. He had not moved. Certainly, her father's statement—and even in that tragic hour she almost smiled to think of the effort it had cost him to write such a long letter—tended to exonerate this man, who, with all his faults, loved her to distraction. Her heart softened towards him, but her clear brain called for caution. She resolved to test him to the uttermost.

“Prince Melnikoff!” she cried.

He came at once, his glance anxious and wistful.

“Well,” he said, “have you aught to ask?”

“Yes. You told me you guessed the contents of this letter?”

“I think so. May I read it?”

“Is that pretense necessary?”

He winced as though she had lashed him with a whip, but he forbore to protest.

“I am sorry,” she said, more gently. “I admit that this time I may be mistaken.”

She passed the letter to him, and he scanned its closely-written lines eagerly.

“Yes,” he said, returning it to her, “that is all true.”

“What will be the outcome if I decline the terms offered?”

He bowed his head.

“That is the only question I cannot answer,” he

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murmured. "The issue is in the hands of others. I am powerless."

There was silence for a little while. Then the girl spoke with cold deliberation.

"I do not love you," she said.

"Unhappily, that is so."

"You have almost taught me how to hate you."

"It was not my doing. I am the victim of circumstances. Were you restored to your father's arms, and safe in London, I would crush these reptiles beneath my heel."

Never was girl placed in more extraordinary predicament. Yet Ermyntrude was spared the worst alternative that can be offered to a woman. Had she loved another her plight would indeed have been piteous. And she felt the uselessness of any frenzied appeal in behalf of her father and brother if she refused Melnikoff's offer of marriage. They were wholly in the power of sullen, half-civilized men who would stop at no measures, draw back from no extremes. To win their way they would resort to death, even to torture. The thought was terrible, but it inspired her. Of what avail was further questioning? Why endure the misery of delay?

"When can this mock marriage take place?" she asked, suddenly.

The prince started. His face flushed. He came a little nearer.

"I must send to Dukhof for the Prior," he mur-

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mured, thickly. "It can be arranged for this evening."

"I shall be ready."

His eyes gleamed with sudden fire.

"Do you mean that?" he almost shouted, so vehement was his passion.

"Surely you understand!" she said, coldly. "I shall abide strictly by the conditions of my father's letter. I cannot be your wife in other than name until Olga Sassulitch is dead."

Disappointment loomed through the fierce joy in his face.

"You are indeed cruel," he said, hoarsely; "yet I promise that it shall be as you say."

"On your honor?"

"On my honor."

"Then I, too, promise to marry you."

He bent over her, trembling.

"At least a kiss, Ermyntrude," he whispered.

But she shrank from him, fearing lest her hardly-won fortitude would desert her. She summoned all her strength, and rose to her feet.

"That is not in the bond!" she cried, and fled from the room, crying pitifully.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MIRACULOUS EIKON

A GREAT many Russians, like a great many other people, wear their religion on their sleeves. In no other country are the outward and visible signs of deep religious convictions so numerous and so striking, yet he would be an unreliable guide who claimed for the Muscovites a high standard of ethics or morality.

In that strange land, ceremonial counts for more than sincerity of belief. Where else would a highway robber kill a man and loot his goods, yet refrain from eating a piece of cooked meat found in the victim's vehicle because it was a fast day! It is on record that a thief broke into a church which contained a jeweled image of the Madonna, and experienced great difficulty in extracting the gems from their settings, so he vowed to St. Nicholas that he would place a rouble's worth of candles before his shrine if the worthy man helped him in the sacrilege! These are not fanciful statements, but extracts from the law reports, and it is necessary to appreciate such traits in the national character to understand the

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fantastic scene which took place in the ancient chapel of Bannofka that night.

The old castle crowning the hill behind the palace contained the chapel, which, like the remainder of the structure, was almost in ruins. To render it serviceable, its fractured walls were patched with boards, and covered with tarpaulins without, and draped with green silk within.

It formed an annex of the main building, though the gable wall formed part of the fortifications, and the flat roof, in ancient times, had supported several cannon. There was a reason for this peculiarity of construction. A small circular window looked out across the plain of the Volga, and admitted the first beams of the rising sun into the gloomy interior. Directly opposite was placed a miraculous eikon, a half-length representation of St. Stanislaus, of which the face and hands were painted wood, while the remainder of the figure and drapery consisted of an embossed metal *plaque*, richly ornamented. The background was of dull gold, and in the eyes of the image were stuck a couple of diamonds or brilliants.

As the castle could only be attacked from this side, tradition had it that when an enemy approached, the holy man's eyes shot fire and the features worked in indignation, with the certain result that the assailants would be driven off with great loss.

Everyone knew this story, and no one believed it, yet, among the hundreds resident in the great palace beneath, there was not a Russian who did not

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regard the eikon with a reverent awe in which superstitious fear held no small share.

Again, as the venerated image in an orthodox chapel is usually placed in a corner facing the door, and as this eikon faced the round window—entrance to the chapel being gained from a corridor directly beneath the frame—the window itself was known as “Stenka’s door,” the legend being that the founder of the Melnikoff line used to depart privately by that means after paying homage to St. Stanislaus, and carry out some distant foray while ostensibly carousing in his own apartments.

From these facts two things may safely be assumed. The Russian attendants who opened the chapel for the marriage ceremony took care to be numerous and well supplied with lights; and they were not too eager to enter the gloomy galleries, or search the ruined chambers of the castle, even if such precautions had been deemed necessary.

Seldom has British-born maiden of high degree made such strange preparations for her wedding as Lady Ermytrude Grandison. There was but one thought in her mind. To save her father and brother from deadly peril she would fulfill her compact to the letter. They must be set at liberty immediately; they must all be free to depart for England forthwith; and, if ever she became Princess Melnikoff in reality, it must be of her own unfettered volition. These were her conditions, and the prince had plighted his word to obey them.

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She knew that her chief danger lay in the interval between the marriage and the arrival of her relatives, and she meant to make that interval as short as possible. Meanwhile, she must be ready to protect herself. Among her brother's belongings, several days earlier, she had found a small loaded revolver. It was an easy matter to construct a pocket in an underskirt and carry the weapon concealed. She was firmly resolved that either she or Prince Melnikoff should die ere the promise under which she married him was broken.

The release of the prisoners was another matter. She sent her maid for Prince Melnikoff.

"How do you propose to obtain the freedom of your prisoners?" she asked when he hastened to her.

"My prisoners!" he exclaimed, yet a submissive gesture seemed to show that he refused to quibble with words.

"I anticipated your anxiety on that account," he went on. "The man who brought Lord Valletort's letter has returned with a message from me briefly announcing our contemplated marriage. When the Prior of Dukhof signs the register, the book will be carried to the monastery, and, with it, if you think fit, a letter from you to your father. The register alone will be accepted as evidence by the men who are safeguarding the prisoners. On its production, Lord Valletort and his son will be sent here at once. Of course a letter would help."

"At what hour are we to be married?"

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"At nine o'clock."

"And when can I expect to see them?"

"About eight hours later."

"You know where they are, then?"

"No. I can only guess the time from the guarded statements made by the messenger."

"Very well, I shall have the letter in readiness."

As he turned to leave her a little smile lit his handsome face. He had evidently steeled himself against her coldness.

"Ermyntrude," he said, "one does not get married every day. Will you sup with me after the ceremony?"

Not a morsel had she eaten in his company since the night of the attack.

"Alone?" she inquired.

"Unhappily, Bannofka is denuded of guests," he said, and there was not the least hint of impatience in his voice.

"If you choose to send for General von Schenck and his wife, or those other people whom I met here at dinner, I shall be glad to join you. Not otherwise."

"I do not choose," he replied, sadly, adding, as an afterthought, "I trust you will raise no difficulty as to accepting my escort when we drive to the chapel."

"Drive? Is that essential?"

"Quite. One cannot walk in this weather, and the ascent is steeper than you think."

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"Will there be—many witnesses?" she inquired, hesitatingly.

"Some members of my staff, and nearly all the officials of the household. The men of the body-guard, too, will wish to attend."

This sudden glimpse of publicity startled her, but it was too late to draw back now. Too late! She shuddered, yet maintained an icy composure.

"Very well," she said, "I shall be ready when you summon me."

Not often had a bride been so unhappy yet so coldly resolute as Ermytrude during the few hours of freedom before her wedding. The protestations of the alarmed Julie were of no avail.

"You will not act in such haste, miladi!" cried the distressed maid. "Why not demand that the prince waits until the arrival of Madame la Comtesse?"

"Each hour of delay means graver risk for my father and brother," said the disconsolate girl.

"Oh, but it is fierce and sad, this country of snow," sighed Julie. "I know not what to say. I fear miladi is doing a reckless thing. If miladi loved the blond prince it would be all right. As it is, I do not like this marriage."

"Hush, Julie, you do not understand. Thank Heaven, if I do not love my future husband, I love no other man."

The Frenchwoman shook her head. Not thus had she pictured the new life of her young mistress.

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Ermyntrude would gladly have confided in the girl, but she was true to her caste, and resisted the temptation. After all was said and done, she, the prince, Lord Valletort, and her brother seemed to be more or less the victims of relentless fate. Even Prince Boris had refused to invite Madame von Schenck to Bannofka that evening because he, too, disliked the manner of their union, and wished to withhold knowledge of its peculiar features from the outer world. That, at least, was how she read his curt refusal, and she was partly right.

When the time came to dress for the ceremony, she selected a traveling costume of black cloth.

"Oh, no, miladi," protested the scandalized Julie, "that will not be *convenable*. If one *must* wed, it is as well to be *gay*. Who would think of going to the church in such a temperature, wearing sealskins and felt boots! Anyhow, miladi must look her best. Here is a skating costume of salmon color. *Cré nom!* it—it is not a wedding dress, but better than black!"

Ermyntrude cared not a jot. This was no marriage. It was a bargain, a price demanded for the liberty, perhaps the lives, of her dear ones. She would pay it and be thankful. But her real marriage, if ever it took place, should be held in England, and not in a gloomy Greek church surrounded by armed Cossacks.

So it was with a quaking heart and a firm air that she went to the great entrance-hall of the palace at

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the appointed hour and found Prince Melnikoff awaiting her. He affected to be in high spirits.

"It is not much like an orthodox wedding, Ermytrude," he said, as he arranged the wraps around her and seated himself by her side in the sleigh at the door. He could have said nothing more in accord with her tumultuous thoughts.

"Let us not discuss it," she answered, quietly. "I am anxious to get the formality over. My letter is written."

Her steady resolve to pose as a mere bargainer seemed to have the effect of choking back all sentimentality on the part of Prince Boris. He did not speak to her again until they reached the dismantled gate of the fortress, where they were received by a guard of Cossacks carrying blazing torches.

"I must warn you," he whispered, "that it is a Russian custom for the groom to kiss the bride as they enter the church door."

"You have broken other Russian customs in the manner of your wooing. You must break this one also," was her calm reply.

He did not try now to conceal his annoyance, but she cared not. The nearness of the irrevocable found her absolutely cold. Her gloved hand touched the hidden revolver, and the presence of the weapon seemed to comfort her. Prince Melnikoff, however, helped her to alight, and made no pretense at an embrace.

At the door of the little chapel they were met by

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the Prior of Dukhof, whom Ermytrude recognized as the monk who endeavored to prevent her from sitting in the ivory chair. A palace official offered the Prior a silver salver laden with bread, fish, and salt. The dignitary touched the articles with the tips of his fingers, murmured a benediction, and they were taken away.

The light of many torches, lamps, and candles revealed a carpet of crimson silk, and along this the priest preceded the couple. As they went they were strewn with a mixture of hops, barley, oats, and grains of silver, which the Cossack officers carried in small wicker baskets.

At last, they reached the chancel, and stood, side by side, in front of the altar. The Prior was about to break into a sonorous chant—and Ermytrude was wondering whether or not she could refrain from shrieking a protest—when a giant figure leaned far out over the rails of the gallery above and roared,—

“Cease your praying, Batushka! This mockery cannot be allowed!”

At this extraordinary interruption every eye was lifted, and not a few ready hands flew to their swords. But before anyone could speak or more, an amazing thing happened. The Colossus in the gallery, a man of great stature, which was accentuated by the furs wrapping him from head to heel, suddenly turned and looked at the sacred eikon of St. Stanislaus.

Then, everyone on the floor beneath—Ermytrude, the prince, the Prior of Dukhof, and the crowd of

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officers, soldiers, and servants—discovered that the face of the saint was working in a paroxysm of fury, while his right arm, with clenched fist, stood out menacingly from the frame.

The effect on the spectators was electrical, though in any other country save Russia it must have been a wildly impossible one. Even Ermytrude, undeniably alarmed as she was, and with nerves strung to an almost unbearable tension, saw only a startling trick in the grotesque rage of the image. But the Russians broke into wild yells, torches were overthrown and candelabra upset, and a hundred or more seasoned soldiers, who would have faced any foe in the open field, ran pell-mell for the door.

Before one could draw a breath a horde of peasants poured into the chapel from the vestry, a tiny room in which the Batushka had robed himself but five minutes earlier. The newcomers were neither ghosts nor demons, but substantial-looking moujiks, and Prince Melnikoff's wits came back at the sight of them.

"To me!" he roared, springing in front of Ermytrude, and drawing his sword.

The chapel was of no great height. The gallery was not more than ten feet from the floor, and the giant whose outcry had first interrupted the proceedings sprang from the balustrade like a huge bear, and alighted on Prince Boris's back, sending him headlong to the floor with crushing force.

The men who had not yet reached the doorway,

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seeing this descent of a terrific being from the darkness of the roof, became frantic with superstitious terror, but some of those outside, especially the officers, were rapidly regaining their senses, and now strove to force an entry into the building. It was not long ere they succeeded; their first spasm of fright having passed, they were ready to face a legion of fiends.

They only found Prince Melnikoff lying dazed where he had fallen; near him was the stupefied Prior, his brain reeling under the effect of the "miracle."

No one was seriously injured, apparently not a blow had been struck, but of Lady Ermytrude Grandison there was neither sight nor sound. She had vanished completely, and a daring young Cossack officer, who snatched up a torch in order to examine the vestry, could find no trace of a door. But he was a gallant boy, and he had heard many a tale of crafty priests and credulous peasants.

"Let us not yield to further folly, my friends!" he cried. "What will our prince say to us? We have been tricked. Surround the castle! Give the alarm! The rebels have carried the lady off. They must not escape!"

CHAPTER XV

THE ESCAPE

THE sensational incidents in the chapel seemed to Ermyntrude to be of that stuff which dreams are made of, but into these unreal surroundings was suddenly projected a note of personal danger. The forbidding aspect, the defiant cry, of the man in the gallery were far more impressive than the antics of a metal *plaque*, in which her incredulous gaze had at once detected the face and arms of a human being.

Not knowing what the stranger had said, she imagined that it was his warning and not the wonder-working eikon which sent the Russians flying, panic-stricken, to the exit. Moreover, the overturning of candelabra and the throwing down of torches plunged the chapel into an eerie gloom. She saw Prince Boris sent headlong to the stone floor with an assailant on top of him. The astonished Prior was pitched sprawling into a recess, whilst his acolytes were fighting with the Cossacks to gain the safety of the courtyard.

Little wonder, then, that she should yield to alarm. When someone caught her hand she shrieked wildly

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for help, but her benumbed faculties revived when a well-remembered voice said, in English,—

“Have no fear, Lady Ermyntrude! It is I, Frank Armstrong. I am helping your friends to rescue you. Come with me!”

Though this wonderful thing had happened, she could not refuse the evidence of ears and eyes. She knew Armstrong's voice; even in the dim light afforded by a few solitary candles she recognized his face. In that thrilling moment she did not think of asking the why and the wherefore of a marvel that far transcended the bogey of the eikon's intervention. Conscious only of a great joy that here was one whom she could trust, she clung to his arm, went with him into the vestry, and obeyed unhesitatingly when he asked her to follow him through what looked like the open door of a large cupboard. He held her tightly, as the darkness in front was impenetrable.

“We are in a level corridor,” he whispered. “Now that you are safe, there will soon be a light.”

There was a shuffling of felt-clad feet behind them, a door was slammed and bolted, and a man carrying a dark lantern flashed its rays over them.

“That was neatly done,” he whispered, with a quiet chuckle. “The lady is not going to faint, I hope?” he added.

He spoke French, so Ermyntrude stammered that she was not afraid, nor was there any reason why she should faint.

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"Follow me, then," he said. "We have no time to lose. Those Cossacks will soon be on our track, and a worm-eaten panel will not keep them in check more than a few minutes."

He led the way rapidly along narrow passages and down steep stone stairs. A score of men followed Ermytrude and Armstrong, and their hurried movements showed that even in these long-disused labyrinths of the ruined castle they did not deem themselves safe from speedy pursuit.

At last the descent became so continuous and the air so musty, without a tinge of the crisp, tingling cold without, that the girl said breathlessly to her companion,—

"Where are you taking me to?"

"To your father and brother." He could have given no more unexpected answer.

"I promised to marry Prince Melnikoff as the price of their deliverance. Did he deceive me to the last?" she gasped.

"Not knowingly, perhaps. It was not in his power to free them."

"But my father wrote to me. I have his letter."

"Surely Lord Valletort would never sanction such a compact!"

"He did, in a sense. You must not blame him. Perhaps we are acting mistakenly. Can we not stop? It is not yet too late to set matters right."

She felt his twinge of indecision, though she could not realize its maddening cause. For Armstrong was

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tortured by doubt. To succor the woman he loved he had imperiled his career, yet her impulsive words meant that this marriage was not distasteful to her. Had he, then, risked uselessly not only his life and liberty but his commission as a British officer by aiding and abetting a rebellion against the Tsar's authority? Had he been drawn into a desperate adventure merely to serve the ends of political desperadoes? Would his foolish meddling in this affair be fraught with dire consequences to those whom he wished to befriend? Ah, life was bitter as gall in that moment, but he throttled all thought of self, and gave heed only to the interests of the trembling girl by his side.

"Soon we will reach the end of this passage, which emerges into a thicket," he said. "The exit is so narrow and difficult that pursuit can be stopped by one man. There we can halt, and decide what is best to be done."

It was as he had said. They climbed a broken stair and reached a tumbled-down arch. A gust of cold air showed that they were in the outer world once more. The darkness was dense, but the tiny gleam of the lantern carried by their guide fell on the trunks of trees and the interlaced branches of the huge thorn-bushes for which the district is famous. Ready hands were beginning to hurl big stones through the half-buried doorway, when Armstrong bade them desist.

"The English lady says it may be necessary for

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her to return. You must await her pleasure!" he cried.

A murmur of astonished protest arose, but it was silenced instantly when he who acted as leader spoke.

"Not so loud, my friend. We are not yet out of danger. What folly is this?"

"Lord Valletort, in a letter, counsels his daughter to marry Prince Melnikoff, and she is willing to take that step." Both men used the French language purposely, and Ermytrude broke in vehemently.

"No, no!" she cried. "I consented to marry him, it is true, but only to save the lives of my father and brother."

"He was playing on a girl's fears," came the stranger's angry retort. "Not even a Russian governor would dare to murder a British peer and his son in cold blood in order to gain his ends. In any event, your relatives are not now in his power. Their jailers are either dead or captives themselves by this time. Your readiness to accept Prince Melnikoff's statements, young lady, left us no option but to proceed to extremes."

She was stung into defending her motives by the unjust assumption that she was a willing bride.

"You do not know what you are saying," she almost sobbed. "I am here because I recognized in Mr. Armstrong one in whom I might trust. To him alone shall I give any explanation of my actions, but I demand, in the first place, some enlightenment as to the events of the past five minutes."

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“That, at least, can be supplied,” said Armstrong, taken aback by the girl’s inexplicable attitude. “I happened to be in Moscow. I telegraphed to your brother, and received a reply which I now know to be a forgery inspired by Prince Melnikoff, against whom there are, in Bannofka and elsewhere, many men banded together, some for personal reasons, others because they are hostile to the government. They knew some, at least, of his secrets, because their emissaries found me in Moscow, where Prince Melnikoff’s spies also were watching me. I was told that you had refused his highness’s offer of marriage, that he had determined to force you to marry him, and that his own retainers, acting under his orders, had carried off your father and brother so as to frighten you into compliance with his wishes. There cannot be the slightest doubt of this last fact. Since I left the train near Saratoff last evening I have heard so many details from the men who planned your rescue that I am quite convinced their story is true. Yet, Lady Ermytrude, if these drastic steps were not necessary——”

“Oh, do not be hard on me!” she pleaded, for her own suspicions bore out each word spoken by Armstrong. “See, here is my father’s letter. I could not choose but believe him.”

Ermytrude was no longer the careless, light-hearted girl Armstrong had parted from at Ascot. Her sweet face was drawn and twisted with suffering. She spoke with the voice of a woman who was

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ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of those she loved.

"You are called upon to decide an issue that might have puzzled Solomon, I admit," said Frank, forgetting his own perplexities at sight of Ermyntrude's distress. "It is absolutely certain that if you were the Princess Melnikoff at this moment the lives of your father and brother would be in greater danger than they were before. These men are outlaws. They know every yard of the forest. They are better acquainted with the castle and palace of Bannofka than Prince Boris himself. This evening nearly a thousand men surrounded the monastery in which the captives were lodged, and it is practically certain that they would carry the place at the first assault."

"Monastery! Can you mean the monastery of Dukhof?"

In her excitement she broke into English, and her voice became hysterical.

The French-speaking Russian, who had followed their eager words with the utmost impatience, seemed to grasp the meaning of that despairing cry.

"Yes," he said, fiercely. "Aristocrats and monks will ever be found on the same side. You have been thoroughly deluded, mademoiselle. Do you wish to return to your worthy prince? If so, you must choose quickly."

His rough speech no longer evoked her resentment. Rather was she conscious that she owed an apology

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to this man and his companions, who had dared so much for her sake.

"Never!" she cried. "Take me to my father. He will tell you how he, too, has been misled."

"It is well," was the answer, given a trifle more graciously. "We have not a second to lose. The hounds are giving tongue."

The energetic action of the men grouped near the arch was eloquent of danger. Several of them toppled a giant boulder into the cavity. When it was securely lodged, they jammed other large stones behind it, in such wise that nothing short of a powerful explosion would shift it from the interior of the passage.

"Listen!" said one, enjoining silence.

They could hear plainly the noise of many feet stumbling up the broken stairway. At last, the foremost pursuer encountered the impassable obstacle offered by the great rock. They heard him swear fiercely, and Ermytrude recognized Prince Melnikoff's voice. But how changed from the smooth accents of the polished man of society. Primeval passions were revealed in those harsh words. It was well that she knew not what he said, or she must have stopped her ears in horror.

"Oh!" she whispered, turning timidly to Armstrong. "I thought he was hurt. I saw him lying senseless in the chapel."

Frank found it necessary to press a hand on her

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shoulder by way of answer; somehow, it seemed to be a natural thing to do. Another voice spoke, and the prince's frenzied imprecations were again audible. He gave an order which Ermyntrude did not understand, but she imagined that some Cossacks vainly endeavored to prise the stone out of its resting-place with their swords.

Then came a snap of steel and a sharp cry of pain, and the would-be bridegroom relieved his surcharged feelings with more words of fury.

Silently their guide held his lantern aloft, and signed that they should follow. Ermyntrude, with an odd sigh of contentment for a disappointed bride, caught Armstrong's arm in a trustful clasp.

As well as she could judge, they crept with bent head along a passage cut through the network of trees and undergrowth until they reached a place where Armstrong told her she must crawl on hands and knees for a few yards.

The man with the light went first, and endeavored to illumine the path as well as he could, and Frank, close behind, encouraged her with the assurance that she had not far to go. Yet she was thankful when she emerged from that choking thicket into a starlit road, and saw half-a-dozen sleighs drawn up beneath the outer fringe of trees. Her hands and face had been protected from the terrific thorns by her stout furs, but she knew that her dress was torn, and one knee ached abominably from a knock against a stone, but of that she said never a word.

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Quickly the whole party took seat in the sleighs, the Russians stowing themselves away in a marvelous fashion, and the ponies trotted up a road which wound through a valley she had never seen.

"Of course, you did not know what Prince Melnikoff was saying in the underground passage," said Frank, soon after they had started.

"No, I can follow the language very little, if even it is spoken slowly."

"Well—among other things—he gave orders that a troop of Cossacks should ride instantly to Dukhof and bring Lord Valletort and your brother to Bannofka to-night. 'I must lime the twig for the bird in another place' was a proverb he used."

"But this is beyond even his power now, you said?"

"It must be. Our friends here have laid their plans thoroughly."

"Oh, he is a bad man, and I hate him," she murmured, brokenly, almost on the verge of tears. "I can never thank you enough for what you have done——"

A bright glare suddenly flashed into the dark vault of the sky. Subdued cries came from the sleighs behind, and for a moment the horses were pulled up.

"Oh! what is it?" cried Ermytrude, tremulously, dreading some new catastrophe on this night of surprises.

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“The beginning of the end, mademoiselle,” said the chief Russian, savagely. “The Chapel of St. Stanislaus, the wonder-worker, is on fire. He has wrought his last miracle. It betokens the fall of the house of Melnikoff.”

CHAPTER XVI

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THAT night there was no piercing wind. The temperature had changed with the remarkable rapidity peculiar alike to the steppes and the alluvial river plains of Muscovy in autumn and spring. When Ermytrude, bound to her wedding, set out from the palace of Bannofka, the thermometer registered several degrees below zero, yet her second sleigh drive, begun not an hour later, was taken in a milder atmosphere, little, if any, below freezing-point.

This dramatic variation was due to a warm southerly breeze which had suddenly sprung up, bringing a breath of sunnier lands to frost-bound Russia. When it had passed, too early harbinger of the day when the Volga might finally doff her mantle of ice, the cold would be intense as ever. If, as sometimes happens, the unexpected warmth continued for many hours, a thaw would set in and each smooth road would become a hopeless slough of mud.

Hence the Russians among the little party hailed the grateful respite with mixed feelings. Although pursuit into their fastnesses, already a matter of peril and difficulty, would be rendered practically im-

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possible, they would experience precisely the same drawbacks in attempting to smuggle their English friends to some distant town on the line of rail.

But Ermyntrude neither saw nor heeded the anxious looks they cast towards the Caspian. Clouds in that direction meant rain, and rain beyond the Caucasus implied a thaw in the north. They wanted frost and snow, for these hardy Russians were Lapps as well as Tartars. Even in the cities their night-watchmen would sleep contentedly in the streets while the breath froze on their beards.

The noiseless journey was soothing to the girl. There was not even the jingle of the sleigh-bells to break the brooding silence of the night, and it was but natural that she should pour forth the tale of her troubles into the sympathetic ear of Frank Armstrong; he, in return, made her acquainted with many events of which she had been in ignorance. She was particularly interested in his meeting with Ivan Stephanovitch and the beautiful Circassian.

"You will soon know both of them," said Frank. "Ivan is the man who shouted from the gallery of the chapel. He should be in one of the other sleighs, though I do not remember seeing him again. It is hardly probable he would come to any harm, as it was on his personal knowledge of the castle, and of the peculiar properties of the eikon, that we based the chance of successful intervention."

"But the girl? She was not present?"

"No. It seems that his tribe have a hiding-place

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in these hills. It has never been revealed. Neither death nor torture has extracted the secret, for a very good reason. No individual knows it wholly. It is a secret held in sections, so to speak. The Circassian awaits us there, with Lord Valletort and your brother, I hope."

"How can we be taken there if the path is unknown?"

"I cannot tell, but I imagine we will be blindfolded."

She tightened her grasp on his arm, an involuntary admission of her complete dependence on him that was delightful, if somewhat embarrassing.

"We will share the disagreeable necessity with others," he explained. "Stephanovitch says there are seven divisions of the road, and a certain number of families are intrusted with the guidance of the others over a special section which is a sort of hereditary trust. It is not very clear to me. I did not listen carefully, as I was preoccupied—by other thoughts."

"Were you thinking of me?"

"Yes."

"How good of you to take such a risk for the sake of a girl who—who was almost a stranger to you."

"Hardly that, Lady Ermyntrude."

"Please do not use my title. It grates on my ears—here."

"Am I to call you Ermyntrude, then?"

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“Yes—Frank. Surely I can afford to drop ceremony under present conditions.”

He swallowed something. Her altered tone arose from gratitude, he told himself. Yet the situation was dangerous.

“Certainly we are but reverting to earlier days in this same land,” he said, with a becoming gravity.

“Do you know,” she confided, “I was held fast in a sort of open-eyed nightmare until I heard your voice in that dreadful chapel. That seemed to call me back to every-day life again. I think if someone were to thrash me soundly for the folly which prompted my visit to Bannofka I would feel quite happy. Not too hard a thrashing, you know. Just a slap or two, and a kiss to make friends again.”

She was thinking of all the trouble she had caused, but Frank could not help saying,—

“On those terms I might almost harden my heart to chastise you.”

“But you will be sure to remain near me if I have to be blindfolded?” she murmured.

Her half-hysterical state accounted for her words. It was, indeed, a marvelous thing to find this gracious and stately young aristocrat in such melting mood. She was blithely unconscious of the fact that the man by her side might be stirred beyond bounds by her complete surrender to the feminine desire for protection.

“I promise,” he said, quietly, with a steady resolve not to take advantage of the utterances of an

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unguarded moment. "But do not exaggerate a mere precaution into a peril. I honestly believe, from what I have heard, that these people really desire to see us quickly and safely out of the country. They will settle matters with Prince Melnikoff in their own way."

The mention of the prince's name turned her wandering thoughts back into their earlier channel.

"I think—if I had married him—and my parents wished me to become his wife in reality—I would have killed myself," she said.

"Oh, you must not yield now to morbid notions of that sort."

"I mean it. I am not one to be coerced. I feel sure, if I loved a man, I would worship him. Prince Melnikoff tried to force me into marriage. I yielded, because my stupid pride had led others into danger. But the chief ornament of my wedding-dress was a loaded revolver. Now that I am aware of his highness's methods, and the value of his promises, I fancy I would have used it."

After that, no matter how he might be tempted, Armstrong knew he could not utter a word capable of being construed as love-making. The girl was pouring out her heart to him, and he respected her innocent intent.

Nevertheless, her confidence stirred his blood into riot. The belief that she loved the Russian prince had tortured him during many a silent hour. He realized now that she had never harbored other

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thought than a natural inclination to achieve the dazzling social prominence offered to the woman who became Prince Melnikoff's wife—an inclination expanded and elevated by Ermytrude's own lofty conceptions of the duties attached to the position. The dominant instinct in Armstrong was chivalric. He was of the old order of knighthood, whose first duty was to help the weak, and fate had thrust him into a medieval romance, with all its glamor and dangers. He positively glowed with happiness. That sleigh-ride into the gloomy ravines of Stenka Razin's stronghold on the Volga was an excursion into Elysium. He drew his companion more closely to his side, and his voice vibrated with quiet joy as he said,—

“We yet have far to go, Ermytrude. Let me arrange this fur over your face. There is no fear of frost-bite. Close your eyes for a little while. Perhaps you might sleep for an hour or two.”

“It is so good to hear one's own language in the mouth of a friend,” she whispered, dreamily. “I am, indeed, tired. I have not slept, save in fitful moments, ever since we were attacked on the Dukhof road. What a strange experience a battle must be! That was a make-believe fight, but to poor ignorant me it looked very like the real thing.”

“There now,” he said, as one might soothe a restless child. “No more talking, and no dreams of battles, please.”

For a long time there was silence. Of course, un-

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der such circumstances, any attentive young man would place his arm round any attractive young woman. Why not?

Frank thought that she slept. He was mistaken. She was thinking, wondering, trying to sort out the true from the false.

The stillness of the atmosphere, the warmth of the furs, the bright stars overhead, the solemn blackness of the trees merging into the stark outlines of cliffs from which the strong wind that prevailed earlier in the day had swept the latest downfall of snow, all contributed to the magic and mystery of this midnight journey into the wilds.

To lie restfully in a sleigh is only possible where roads are little used. Popular thoroughfares, even covered deeply with hard snow, become worn into ruts, causing the runners to jerk every now and then with a dislocating wrench destructive of all physical comfort. But the forest nomads had long since left the solitary track used for hauling timber. Their hardy ponies were traversing the intricate depths of a winding valley, crossing and recrossing a frozen stream every few hundred yards, and seemingly making for a gap in the hills towards the northeast.

Armstrong found himself speculating on the chance of pursuit by Melnikoff's Cossacks. The passage of six heavily-laden sleighs must necessarily leave tracks which might be followed. He did not learn until later that the ponies were shod with shoes reversed, whilst any skeptic who disregarded these

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indications would ultimately reach a village of woodcutters and charcoal-burners, situate two versts along a beaten road from the point where the trail quitted the forest. But there were other safeguards of a wholly unexpected nature.

About two o'clock, in a spot that looked wilder, and, if possible, more deserted than any that had gone before, their French-speaking friend asked them to alight.

"Can mademoiselle walk a little way, or shall we carry her?" he inquired.

Ermyntrude would walk.

"Have we far to go?" she said.

"About fifteen minutes through the trees will bring us to the mine."

"What mine?" cried Frank.

"You will see," was the smiling answer. "At any rate, you will see the entrance. For the rest, you must trust to me and the others."

They were asked to observe certain precautions as they quitted the sleighs, walking on bowlders and bare rocks for some little distance until they plunged into the belt of trees that surrounded the glade in which they had halted. Soon they reached another open space in which there were evidences of recent labor, piles of timber fashioned into pit-props, and heaps of ore and refuse. A track, scored with the runners of heavy sleighs, led up the hillside. To Armstrong's critical gaze, helped by the dim light of the stars, it seemed that their long and slow drive

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had led them into a pass that crossed the northern watershed of the Volga.

Again judging by the stars, he believed they were not far distant from the river, and, if Ermyntrude's description was correct, they must be comparatively near the Dukhof Monastery. This puzzled him, but questioning was useless. He contented himself with assisting her up a steep ascent, and taking mental notes as the whole party plunged into a narrow cleft in the side of the hill.

On every hand there were indications of a mine, and doubt was soon set at rest when the darkness demanded a light, and the dancing gleams of a torch showed that the rocky walls were meeting over their heads. They were in a great cavern; from the roof depended glittering icicles, which, in a little while, as they went farther into the heart of the mountain, gave place to stalactites of gorgeous hues.

They had no time to admire the weird beauty of the place. The floor, covered with shale and small lumps of ore, was difficult to walk on, but their guides hurried ahead until, abruptly leaving the main vault for one of its innumerable side aisles, they came face to face with a gallery staircase hewn in the rock.

They mounted to the apparent level of the roof of the big cave, and here Ermyntrude and Armstrong were told to sit in wicker chairs slung on poles, of which there were several piles in a recess.

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Then they were blindfolded, though so insecurely that Ermyntrude, woman-like, did not scruple to lift the bandage clear of her eyes, and Frank's mask fell around his neck before he had been carried a hundred feet. The majority of the Russians, however, submitted themselves to the same process, and fell in, in two long lines, behind guides to whom they were attached with ropes.

Before the change of carriers and guides had been twice effected, Frank saw that each set of men was acquainted with different galleries, or workings, as a miner would term them, and a stranger would lose himself instantly in that dismal labyrinth, wandering about until he met his death by a fall or by the slower process of starvation.

The party turned right and left, clambered up and down irregular tunnels, followed some passages for three or four minutes and others for as many seconds. Six times its members changed from being leaders to being led, until, at last, they faced another great stair of stone, and here the chairs were no longer needed.

"Well—what do you think of our retreat?" asked their Russian companion, smiling as he held a torch aloft to light the way to the stairs.

"Are we in the very middle of the mountain?" inquired Ermyntrude, who was more scared by this experience than by any of the queer happenings which had gone before.

"No, mademoiselle. We have walked through the

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hill. You have seen the way in for our friends. When day breaks, you will be shown the way out for our enemies."

Already they were sensible that the atmosphere was cooler where they stood. After someone had gone ahead and answered a challenge, they went up the stairway, and found themselves in another gallery, higher and wider than hitherto. To reach it they passed through a narrow door roughly fashioned of thick copper plates. Its lofty confines were darkly illuminated by a log fire at the farther end, and a number of recumbent figures stretched on low wooden platforms showed that this was the general sleeping-place. Some few men were squatted near the fire. They rose when they heard the advent of the newcomers, the sleepers woke up, and instantly a babel of voices relieved the tension of that silent journey through the black Inferno which led to this haven.

Ermyntrude, more nervous now than at any time for hours, whispered to Frank,—

"Ask them if my father and brother are here."

"They are not," he said, striving hard to give his words a calm assurance which he was far from feeling. "That was the first inquiry made by our companions. There has been some delay, they say."

"What can have happened? If the monastery were attacked is it possible that——"

"Ermyntrude, you have endured so much that you will not give way to idle fears now. Why conjure up

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visions of unlikely dangers? A thousand things may have conspired to hinder our friends, who declared to me unhesitatingly that the rescue of Lord Valletort and his son was a simple undertaking compared with the affair in the chapel. Let us hear what they have to say about it."

He led her to the Russian who had taken the command throughout, yet his glance searched for the giant form of Ivan Stephanovitch. He had not seen the man at any stage of their journey, nor was he present now, when the glow of the logs rendered it possible to distinguish one man from another.

"We have no news of any sort," said their informant, readily. "The attack on the monastery was planned to take place at nine o'clock, the hour fixed for mademoiselle's marriage. It could not fail. But there is a delay. Mademoiselle need not be alarmed. Her friends will soon be here."

"Have they to travel any considerable distance?" asked Frank.

"No. It is a difficult country, and there may have been a breakdown, a sleigh upset, many things in fact. Will not mademoiselle rest a little while?"

"Where?" she cried.

"There is an apartment which you can share with another lady who honors our fortress with her presence for the time."

"Who is she?"

"Monsieur your friend has heard of her. Her name is Natushka, daughter of Prince Nicholas

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Stenka. She is the hope of our tribe, the promised wife of Boris Melnikoff. Believe me, mademoiselle, she is a friend, though you have never seen her."

Ermytrude, for some reason, shrank from the prospect of close companionship with this mysterious and beautiful stranger.

She turned impulsively to Armstrong.

"Do not leave me," she said. "Please tell them that we must not be separated until my father and brother arrive."

"Will not Mademoiselle Natushka receive me also?" said Frank, thinking that this offered the best way out of a difficulty.

"Assuredly," was the prompt answer, and their guide piloted them through another door and along a short passage, until they again felt the night air on their faces, and, above a screen of bushes that grew along the rough wall of a gallery, they could see the sky once more.

Frank, almost involuntarily, stepped across to the low balcony of rock and gazed out. Even in the faint light afforded by the stars he could distinguish a scene of unexpected grandeur. He was looking at a far-flung panorama of forest, mountain, and plain from an eyrie in the side of a precipice. Far beneath he saw the black carpet of the tree-tops, and on either side stretched the wings of a magnificent mountain amphitheater.

But he was almost startled by a sight that was

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oddly reminiscent of other days and events long past.

In front, apparently some miles distant, lay the smooth plain of the Volga, but at the exact point where the valley merged into the lowlands stood three small conical hills, each the size of its fellow, and so symmetrically proportioned as to suggest three pyramids, though they must have cost immense labor if fashioned by man's hands.

He had no time to form even a vague theory as to the significance of these snow-covered emblems of the Melnikoff dynasty, for his trained ear had caught the faint reports of rifle-firing, spasmodic and fitful, as if a miniature battle, an affair of outposts, was being fought by night.

Ermyntrude, full of wonder at the solemn dignity of the scene, did not instantly hear the far-off musketry. But their guide heard it, and said, sharply,—

“That is the way out for our enemies which I spoke of. The Princess Natushka's apartments are situated at the end of the gallery.”

Frank once more took Ermyntrude's arm, and led her in the wake of the Russian towards a somber recess. He did not wish her to know that there was a fight in progress. What did it mean?

Had the revolting peasants failed in one part of their undertaking? How would the imbroglio end if the Earl of Valletort and Lord Carlingham were actually in league with Prince Melnikoff's support-

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ers? Here, indeed, would be a distilled madness with which all else would be insipid by comparison!

Ermyntrude, happily ignorant of this new and amazing doubt in her companion's breast, and quite confident again now that she was not to be parted from him, whispered:

"This is like a chapter in a story from the *Arabian Nights*. Is Natushka really very beautiful?"

That is a dangerous question for a young man to answer when propounded by a young woman. In some respects, Armstrong had been very lucky that night, and his star did not fail him now, for he was so thoroughly nonplused by the absence of the Earl and Carlingham that he said at random:

"I have almost forgotten her appearance. I remember that she was very strikingly dressed—that is all."

"Oh," said Ermyntrude, who seemed to be quite satisfied by his vagueness.

And with that they passed under a heavy *portière* of felt and tarred canvas, waiting, with widely different emotions, while the Russian knocked loudly on a closed door deeply recessed in the rock.

CHAPTER XVII

A MIDNIGHT COMBAT

WHEN the Earl of Valletort and his son were spilled into the snow by the overturning of their sleigh, they fancied, not unreasonably, that their last moment had arrived. The sudden blaze of musketry from the dark belt of trees, the rush of mounted men, the clatter of accouterments and the wild cries of the Cossacks, followed by a suffocating plunge into a deep snow-drift, were incidents calculated to disturb the serenity of a Greek philosopher. Clear thought was impossible under such conditions. They knew that they were roughly backed into a sleigh, covered with furs, and tightly held in exceedingly uncomfortable positions where they could see nothing of their surroundings—but they knew no more.

The noise of the *mêlée* died down as quickly as it had arisen. The vehicle into which they were pitched, side by side, was driven at a fast rate, but in which direction they could not even guess. There was no jingle of sleigh bells, and on comparing notes subsequently they believed the sleigh was not that in which they were seated before the attack.

Lord Carlingham, after vainly endeavoring to

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rise, and being forcibly thrust back, face downwards, into his nest of rugs, resolved to risk any possible ill-usage to learn how it fared with his father.

"Are you wounded, dad?" he shouted suddenly.

To his surprise his captors did not stop him from speaking.

"No. I am all right," came Lord Valletort's reply. "And you?"

"O. K. What's the game?"

"Heaven only knows! Can you make these men understand? Surely there is some absurd mistake."

Carlingham, shaken though he was, endeavoured to build up some comprehensible sentence in Russian.

"We are Englishmen!" he cried, "friends of Prince Melnikoff. Why——" He could go no farther.

A voice broke in, speaking slowly, in indifferent French:

"You will not be harmed if you keep quiet. Offer no resistance. Ask no questions. You can talk to each other as much as you like."

But conversation under such conditions was not easy. After receiving his father's reassurance that he had suffered no injury worth mentioning, and bidding him be of good cheer, as an explanation of their extraordinary adventure must soon be forthcoming, Carlingham relapsed into silent wonderment. The horses were being urged forward at such a furious pace that he could not tell whether the sleigh was

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going towards the hills or the river. The position in which he lay was irksome in the extreme, and he was thoroughly worn out when the sleigh stopped after a drive that seemed to be unending. As for the Earl of Valletort, he was speechless with indignation.

Certain precautions were taken with the prisoners before they were allowed to rise. Strong sacking was tied over their heads, blindfolding them thoroughly, though the surrounding darkness seemed to be impenetrable, and their hands were tied behind their backs. Then they were led, as rapidly as their stiff joints would move, over a snow-bound path, up steps, along passages, and by devious turns, until Carlingham, who strove to count his strides and remember each turning, was hopelessly befogged.

At last they halted, their wrists were freed, the sacking was taken off, and they found themselves in a room gratefully warm and lighted by a couple of oil-lamps. By degrees they became familiar with their surroundings.

They were imprisoned in a building of immense solidity. Three rooms, where they had complete freedom of action, opened into a corridor, where a strong guard of stolid peasants was always on duty. By day a dim light was admitted through windows which looked out into a gloomy courtyard, surrounded by walls so hopelessly high that escape was out of the question; and the only glimpse of the outer world they could obtain was a small square patch of blue sky overhead. High up in the walls were deep,

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narrow recesses which might be windows. They judged that they were interned in the depths of some ancient fortress. Not once did it occur to them that they had been brought back to a part of the Dukhof Monastery, which was not exhibited during their earlier visit.

They were supplied with good, if somewhat rough, food. Lord Valletort declared that the fare was killing him, but his son knew better—secretly harboring the belief, indeed, that the hereditary Valletort gout might be cured by judicious dieting. Not one word of explanation of their captivity was vouchsafed until many days had passed, and the younger man began devising all manner of desperate and futile schemes to escape from the dreadful *ennui* and gloomy monotony of the prison.

Then there came one who spoke French, and with him took place the negotiations which resulted in the dispatch of the letter to Ermyntrude.

The two passed a restless day after the messenger had gone.

“A nice kind of hubby Ermie will have if this sort of thing is the mere kick-off in the matrimonial scrimmage,” growled her brother, discussing the pros and cons of their situation for the hundredth time with his father.

“Matters may not be so bad as they look,” said the earl, on whose intellect the comparative hardships he was undergoing had exercised an effect more surprisingly beneficial than he imagined.

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"Surely she can't be happy as Melnikoff's wife. Why, the fellow is sitting on the lid of a volcano coated with ice."

"Is that quite accurate? We have seen how the prince lives when abroad. We know something of his normal life at Bannofka. By chance, we have been drawn into a local disturbance, which, once quelled, may not recur for years, if ever. I remember, when I was a youngster, our place was attacked by a mob of hungry strikers. Had a Russian been our guest at the time he would have carried away a very distorted picture of existence in rural England."

Carlingham had never before heard his father string together so many lucid remarks. He looked curiously at him.

"You are taking things a good deal more coolly than I should have given you credit for, dad," he said.

The earl laughed.

"I am not greatly enamored of Russia," he cried, "but I don't believe that Ernie must necessarily be unhappy. I can quite see that, once Melnikoff is married, all the fuss raised about his obligations to this or that section of a Cossack tribe will die a natural death."

When night fell, and there was no sign of the expected courier, though the man told them they might receive news that day, they were disappointed. A meal was served as usual, and they ate silently, but

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when it was ended their drooping spirits were revived by a polite request that they should don their furs and felt boots. Their taciturn guards gave no further information, but Carlingham cried elatedly:

“This means either a wedding or a funeral—anything for a change!”

His father was no less excited, but their joy was somewhat damped when they were blindfolded again, and led forth from their prison with as much secrecy as when they entered it. Their hands were tied, too, but they were well treated otherwise, and permitted to sit upright in the sleigh to which their guardians conducted them.

Then they were driven rapidly for two hours, which seemed to be three times as long under the conditions. Finally, unbound and freed from the sacking, they found themselves standing in the reception hall of the Dukhof Monastery, where several of the monks offered a cordial, if quite unintelligible greeting. In reality, they had been driven round and round the spacious garden of the convent, but of that vital fact they were utterly in ignorance, and they would have testified freely that they had traveled at least twenty miles to a place which they had never quitted.

They were offered refreshments, but their main anxiety was for news, which, in the absence of an interpreter, was not forthcoming. Lord Valletort, however, made a discovery.

“This wine is the same as that given us by our

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friends the enemy," he said, after sampling the beverage set before him.

"I suppose it is a local vintage," said his son, carelessly; he was racking his brains to find easy Russian equivalents for questions he wished to put to the hospitable monks. At last he managed to make one of them understand.

"When do we go to Bannofka?" he asked, and the answer was simple enough:

"When the prince sends his Cossacks."

So they were only waiting an escort. That was satisfactory in itself. They must consume their impatience until some bustle in the courtyard heralded the arrival of the troops. It was, therefore, a remarkable fact that when the solemn stillness of the monastery was disturbed by external sounds a sort of panic broke out among the stalwart monks.

A bell began to peal irregularly, as though it was being jerked with frenzied haste, and pandemonium reigned when a man rushed in and yelled something which Carlingham could make nothing of. All around the great hall were hung arms, mostly intended for the chase, since these orthodox monks could kill bears and wolves with the best of Russian sportsmen. Every man, save one or two graybeards, seized spear, sword, or gun, and ran out into the courtyard. A lively fight took place in the gateway, several volleys were fired, and within a few minutes it became evident that a strong force of besieg-

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ers had made good their footing inside the outer wall of the monastery.

Even amidst the captives' anxiety, heightened as it was by their complete ignorance of the cause of the quarrel, Carlingham commented to his father on the amazing number of monks who appeared from the recesses of the place.

During their first visit, and now, before this unexpected attack, they had not seen more than forty of the so-called recluses. But the fight had not been in progress many seconds, ere gray-robed figures darted from all manner of doors and passages, and when the Englishmen looked out they could see at least a couple of hundred ecclesiastics offering a most vigorous and unclerical resistance to a dense mob of assailants.

The battle was no make-believe affair. Men fell dead, or crawled away brokenly, dyeing the white snow with their blood. The struggle became a series of single combats rather than the operations of organized forces. Owing to the thickness and strength of the garments worn by both parties, individual duelists gave and took the most desperate saber cuts and lance thrusts without receiving or inflicting serious injury. When a bullet got home, or a spear reached an unprotected throat, the case was different.

The cries of rage and passion were appalling, and both sides fought with the utmost fury. The reflected light of the snow-covered pavement, aided by a huge lamp over the gate and a few torches, re-

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vealed a ferocity on the part of the assailants and an equally furious defense by the monks that betokened a fixed resolve to settle old scores, whatever might be the motive of the present outbreak.

Lord Valletort and his son assumed, of course, that, for some unknown reason, their peasant captors had regretted their bargain, and were anxious to seize the prisoners again. It was impossible to stand by and see the monks defending them so strenuously and not make an effort to help. The light of battle leaped into Lord Carlingham's eyes, and even the gouty earl bethought him of half-forgotten days in the Guards, when he offered many times, but quite uselessly, to place his valuable services at the disposal of the War Office. Undoubtedly they would soon have been in the thick of the struggle had not a new movement manifested itself.

Some strategist among the defenders realized that by fighting in the open he and his comrades were playing the enemy's game. Overwhelmed there, they would be utterly defeated, whereas behind them lay strong walls and narrow passages capable of prolonged defense.

So he bellowed instructions; a fierce collected onslaught was delivered, momentarily driving back the peasants, and then the brethren rushed across the courtyard, entering the great hall and barricading the doors before the assailants had grasped the meaning of these tactics.

The two Englishmen were led up a staircase to a

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broad balcony, where they saw three rockets fired into the sky, apparently as a signal for help. Several monks armed with guns were brought to this vantage ground, and ordered to fire at the gateway, but their first volley was met by such a sustained fusillade from the besiegers that none of the marksmen dared show their heads above the parapet.

The enemy lost no time in the courtyard. A strong sleigh was brought in, lifted by a dozen men, and used as a battering-ram against the thick wooden doors, and obvious preparations were made to set the monastery on fire. But the door yielded, and the hand-to-hand battle was renewed in the hall.

It was evident that, save as a last resource, the monks would neither yield up their guests nor permit them to take part in the affray. They were taken to a higher part of the building, and one man told them that Cossacks would surely come in half-an-hour or less, so they assumed that there was an encampment within a few miles, where the signal rockets would be seen.

They refused, however, to remain in a place where they could neither see nor hear the progress of events beneath. Nothing but physical force would stop them, and, accompanied by the few elders of the monastery who stood by them throughout, they descended again to a point whence they could note the gradual and sanguinary forcing of the passages leading from the entrance-hall to the interior.

Here, to his very great surprise, Carlingham

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noticed two monks who were singularly like two of his erstwhile jailers.

It is a common occurrence for a stranger to be unable to distinguish one foreign face from another, but this sharp-eyed youngster had lived for several days in such close companionship with the heavy-faced moujiks that he could hardly fail to know them again, even in the uniform of their order.

He had scarcely convinced himself that he was not mistaken when a determined rush by the besiegers drove his father and himself up the stairs again, together with a mob of the defenders. They were seen by the enemy, and a voice cried, in good, clear French:

“Why do you stop in the midst of those wolves? Come to us, we are your friends!”

They were instantly swept away, and a hurried council resulted in their being taken, heedless of protests, back to the tower they had just quitted.

Carlingham, stamping about a room in which he and his father were locked, climbed into a recess where the dim light of the stars was visible through a window.

He smashed the dirty glass and wood-work with his foot, and looked out. Far beneath lay a square courtyard, and, even in the gloom, he was almost certain that he was gazing down into the walled inclosure from whose depths he had so often looked up during many weary days of imprisonment. He told his father, and the earl, scrutinizing the place,

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agreed with him. The mystery was so profound, so inexplicable in its cross-purposes, that they could not discuss it then. Moreover, they were interrupted. The door was unlocked, and they were brought out amidst great and joyful excitement. A sotnia of Cossacks had arrived, the surviving assailants were flying in all directions, and they were told they would be given safe-conduct to Bannofka as soon as the officer in charge of the troops was satisfied that the road was free from ambushes.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHAT THE VALET HEARD

JULIE LEMAITRE, Lady Ermyntrude's maid, yielded for a little while to a paroxysm of tearful fright when her mistress did not return from the chapel. At first, she paid little heed to the alarm displayed by the other servants. The rumor spread that there had been a miracle, attended by extraordinary manifestations, in the disused and legend-haunted sanctuary, but Julie, not knowing the language, attributed the mutterings and terror of the Russian domestics to the state of unrest which had possessed the household during many days. The flames darting from the summit of the cliff on which the old castle stood gave her the first real intimation that something uncanny had taken place. She found a French-speaking German, who made up for her previous ignorance by a fanciful and lurid narrative.

Following a dramatic exhibition of wrath on the part of the holy eikon, he said, there had been a terrible fight in the chapel between "revolutionaries" and the Cossacks. The prince was killed, the English girl, whom the Russians blamed for the

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whole catastrophe, was spirited away, and now hundreds of men were being burnt alive in the blazing ruins.

Small wonder, then, that an impressionable Frenchwoman should be driven to the verge of distraction by this spirited version of events. She saw her worst fears realized, her mistress in the clutches of a gang of cut-throats, and herself in dire peril, since the German made no secret of his dread that the hubbub in the old castle was merely a prelude to an attack on the palace.

Consequently, she hailed with extravagant thankfulness the arrival of the prince's valet, the so-called Jacques Dumanet. She deemed the man a rascal, but, in this dire extremity, he was at least a fellow-countryman, and he might be able to devise some measures for their common safety.

His first words reassured her to some extent.

"Pay no heed to these Russian pig-heads," he whispered. "They are all behaving like lunatics because some clever fellow masqueraded in the garb of a saint. It is nothing, believe me. The fire is an accident. Come with me to your suite. We cannot talk here, and I want your help."

"But where is miladi?" she gasped, agitated now as greatly by distress on Lady Ermytrude's account as by her earlier fears on her own behalf.

"I do not know. But there is one thing certain—she is with friends. Do you remember an English-

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man, named Armstrong, who was a friend of the family in England?"

"Yes. I used to think——"

"Well, he was in the chapel to-night. I went there to witness the ceremony, for, from what I knew, I had my doubts whether the marriage would really take place or not."

"Grace à Dieu! Are you speaking truly?"

"Name of a good little gray man!—why should I deceive *you*? Look here, Julie, you and I should be friends, not enemies. We should work in each other's interests. I swear I am telling you the truth. The proof will soon be seen."

"Proof!"

"Yes. Have you not heard that the prince is dead, and that there was fighting in the chapel? He is no more dead than I am. There was no fighting, hardly a blow struck, and not a shot fired. The whole affair was over in a minute. The lady has gone, it is true, but she went willingly with the man Armstrong. I know, because I was the only one who kept my ears and eyes busy, and did not gape open-mouthed at a fellow grinning through a hole in a painted image. Not even his highness knows that, mark you. Help me, I repeat, and we can make our fortunes."

The girl was momentarily becoming calmer, and her quick French wits began to work again. The valet's words sounded like the truth, and Julie was aware of Frank's presence in Moscow, for, like the

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majority of maids, she occasionally cast an observant eye over letters left in dress-pockets.

Dumanet, talking rapidly, and hurrying her away from the servants' quarters, had taken her arm and squeezed it tenderly to emphasize his statements. She reasoned that, at the present critical juncture, he was more useful as an ally than as a discarded suitor, so she said, with a certain demureness,—

“But how can I help you, M'sieur Dumanet?”

“In this way. According to my calculations, Milord Valletort and his son will be here in the early morning. They will trust you, miladi's maid. Tell them how mademoiselle was nearly forced into this marriage. Have no fear. They will act discreetly. The important thing is that the marriage shall not take place, no matter what happens in the future.”

Here was fresh bewilderment. From all that Julie had observed in the past the valet was an active plotter in Prince Melnikoff's interests. What had occurred within the hour to cause him to play the part of a traitor? But she kept guard on her tongue.

“That is simple enough,” she said. “It is but the truth.”

“Have you not been in Russia long enough to see that the truth is most unusual?” he asked, with a finely cynical air.

“I do not see how my mistress is benefited, whatever story be told to her relatives. She cannot stand the hardships of this dreadful country. She is not prepared for traveling. Even now she may be ex-

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posed to the icy winds, and in danger from wolves. It is she for whom I am concerned."

"She is not made of soft wax, Julie. What others can endure she, too, can survive. Have no fear. Look to me for advice as events develop. Soon you will see miladi again, and you will gaze on her with the confidence that arises from well-filled pockets. We shall take a hotel, you and I. We must call it the Palais Russe."

The scheming valet, despite his anxiety to win Julie's confidence, did not tell her the vital secret he had learned by chance. It was, indeed, literally true that he had witnessed the scene in the chapel. The man's nature revealed itself in his treatment of Armstrong when he lured him to the deserted flat in Soho. Under a mask of cowardice and fawning he could conceal a fixed purpose requiring no common nerve for its successful accomplishment. Therefore, the agitation of the eikon evoked no superstitious awe in his crafty soul. He at once perceived a clever trick, and awaited its outcome with all his senses on the alert.

Instead of running to the door amidst the panic-stricken mob of retainers and soldiers, he crept from the back of the chapel nearer to the principals at the altar, feeling sure that something would be said or done which would explain the antics of the image. Hence, he saw Ivan Stephanovitch jump from the gallery and bear Prince Boris to the ground, and he heard Armstrong's words to Ermytrude.

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But these things were of small import compared with what followed. The gigantic Russian knelt over the fallen prince, raised him, and peered into his face.

"Boris," he said, "it is I—Ivan."

"Curse you!" was the response. "Why do you constantly thrust yourself in my path?"

"I shall do so to the end, Boris. You *must* obey. You hold my place on those terms, and on none other."

"I have given in to you in all else save this. I shall never marry Natushka."

"You must!"

"I refuse, if the words be my last!"

"You are helpless! It is predestined. Were it not, why should *I* be a hunted outlaw and *you* the Prince of Bannofka? I spare you now, hoping you may yet come to your senses. Next time——" and, with the unspoken threat in his fiery eyes, the big man sprang into the vestry and disappeared, leaving the prince to struggle to his feet, shouting loudly for his guards to follow the fugitive.

Here was a discovery of no small value to an astute rogue. Dumanet did not flatter himself that he had fathomed the full significance of Stephanovitch's words. He knew the big Russian, and had had some dealings with him as the trusted emissary of his master. That there was other than a tribal relationship between them, constituting at once a bond and a fend, he had never guessed, but now he was on the

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track of a state secret. At any rate, it was clear that the prince's marriage with Lady Ermyntrude, far from consolidating his, the valet's fortunes, would rather bring about a crisis, and apparently involve the Melnikoff dynasty in disaster. Hence his change of front.

Julie received quick corroboration of the accuracy of his statement. Prince Melnikoff, foiled in the pursuit of the raiders through the underground passage, returned to the palace in a towering rage. When his frightened domestics thronged around to congratulate him on his escape he only bellowed threats at them.

"I am surrounded by hounds who lick my hands when I feed them and bite me when my back is turned," he roared.

Seizing a knout from a Cossack, he laid the lash indiscriminately about the shoulders of a number of harmless servants, who were really delighted to find that their master still lived. They ran off like hares. A few women fell, and one fainted. With the sight of the helpless creature lying on the floor the prince's ebullition of rage vanished.

"Carry that woman away," he cried. "Give her some wine, and tell her to ask the steward for fifty roubles to-morrow."

Then he turned to some of the Cossack officers who had accompanied him during the fruitless search of the castle vaults.

"St. Stanislaus is burnt out of his den now," he

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said, with bitter irony. "Sound 'Boot and Saddle.' His Holiness can affright you no longer—let us see now if a gang of peasants can outwit the Cossacks of the Volga."

His taunt was none the less biting because not wholly unmerited. Soon a horde of horsemen was scouring the country to find traces of the fugitives. But it was night, and the measures taken by Ermyntrude's helpers were well calculated to mislead. Nevertheless, ere day broke, a squadron of Cossacks had reached the village of charcoal-burners near the entrance to the mine.

To help the hapless rustics in giving information, the soldiers tied halters round the necks of two elders, stood the men on horses, and passed the ropes over the lower boughs of a tall tree. Then a couple of Cossacks raised their knouts, and a swishing cut would have sent the horses flying from underneath the doomed men. These unfortunates knew nothing. They would have lied to save their lives, but their wits would not even run to a plausible untruth.

Seeing this, the Cossack officer in command ordered them to be released and kicked back into their hovels. He would have hanged them without scruple had there been any prospect of gaining a clew from the rest of the palsied villagers.

Meanwhile, the smooth-tongued Jacques Dumanet, thinking that a man in a passion often blurts out that which he would conceal in calmer moments, did

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a very daring thing. He said to his master, when chance served,—

“It is probable your Highness is not aware of the extent of the infamous plot. The English lady was carried off by the young officer, Armstrong, whom your Highness met in England!”

“Peace, idiot!” cried Prince Boris. This night of surprises had tried him sorely, and he did not want his fevered thoughts to be disturbed by the valet’s chatter.

“It is the truth, Excellency,” persisted the man. “I was in the chapel. I saw him. I heard him speak to her. She went of her own accord. It is untrue, as you have been told, that she was carried off shrieking for help.”

“Ha! Sayst thou,” cried the Prince, his attention held by this earnestness. “How came you there, to hear and see so much?”

“As your Highness’s faithful servant I was naturally anxious to be present at your marriage. I was not fooled by that stupid ‘miracle.’ When your Excellency was thrown down by the man who leaped from the gallery I ran to your assistance, and heard the Englishman’s words to mademoiselle.”

“Tell me all that took place.”

The coolness in Melnikoff’s manner and his air of alert interest suddenly gave the valet a chill in the neighborhood of his spine.

“That is all, your Excellency. I was borne away

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by the rush of men who overpowered the Prior and his acolytes."

"What became of the man who knocked me down?"

"I do not know, your Excellency. The throng at the door was so desperate that I had to fight hard to keep my feet."

Prince Boris remained silent. He seemed to be thinking deeply.

"I trust that your Highness believes I have only ventured to speak in the humble desire to further your interests," went on the Frenchman, nervously. "It is one thing to have to deal with a set of stupid peasants, but another to face this Englishman, on whose presence in the chapel to-night I will stake my life."

"You have done so, perhaps," was the enigmatical answer. "I believe you are right. Keep this knowledge absolutely to yourself. I will reward you for your fidelity. Go now."

Outside the door, the valet's face became livid. The strain had become intolerable when the unpleasant fact dawned on him that had Prince Melnikoff even suspected him of overhearing Ivan Stephano-vitch's vague revelation he would have been hanged as speedily as the prince's retainers could carry out the order. Monsieur Dumanet shivered. Yet it *was* an escape, and he had rendered his master good service, so he soothed his injured nerves with a gulp of brandy.

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“Just one more step forward,” he said to himself, “and I lay hands on a key that will unlock more than one treasure-chest. But, *ma foi!* the opening must not be conducted here. In Holy Russia they hang you first and inquire afterwards.”

CHAPTER XIX

TWO WOMEN

THE scene of the meeting between Lady Ermyntrude Grandison and the black-eyed, raven-haired Natushka—whose betrothal in infancy had provided such an entanglement for Prince Boris Melnikoff—would have inspired the brush of Rembrandt.

A spacious, gloomy rock-chamber was feebly lighted by a fire of pine logs. The substitution of an open hearth for the stove almost universally used throughout Russia was in itself a rare innovation, revealing a racial custom widely differing from those of the inhabitants of the plains, or "black earth." The atmosphere of the cavern was singularly free from smoke, and the flickering light of the glowing logs danced on rough-hewn walls, barbaric arms and vessels, and, above all, on the figure of a woman who was in perfect tone with her surroundings.

The youthful Circassian, who was seated listlessly in a big, carved chair, rose with quick animation when the Russian guide announced,—

"The English lady, and her friend, Excellency."

It was quite evident that she awaited other visitors. They had taken her by surprise, but this

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princess of the steppe had a dignity and self-possession that put her instantly at ease.

"You are welcome," she said, softly. "If you will pardon me for a moment I will procure a light. Doubtless you are tired and hungry. We have wine and meat—or would you like some tea?"

Armstrong explained that his companion spoke no Russian, so he would translate. Natushka smiled pleasantly.

"I am sorry," she said in English. "I forgot that you were strangers. I think I can make myself understood."

"No one could be more pleased than I to hear you say that," broke in Ermytrude, eagerly. "This is a weird place. I seem to have lived in a dream for many hours. To hear my own language spoken by another woman is a positive joy."

"Ah, mademoiselle, you should never have come to Russia. You were happy in England, I have been told. Why, then, did you come to this land of anguish?"

The English girl was spared the embarrassment of answering this very pertinent question by the intervention of the Russian who had accompanied them. He hustled forward with a table and lit a lamp. Then, when Ermytrude's fascinated gaze fell on the face and form revealed by the light, she was so bewildered that she could not say a word.

The skin of the beautiful nomad was whiter even than her own, but its pallor, and the dark luminous

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eyes which shone like black diamonds beneath arched and deeply-penciled eyebrows, gave Natushka a spiritual aspect wholly at variance with the superbly modeled bust displayed by a tight-fitting bodice of saffron-hued Indian silk.

A cloak of black sable was thrown loosely over her shoulders, and her dress was of a dark-colored, thickly-woven mohair. The slippers in which Armstrong had seen her in London were replaced by a far more elegant pair of high Russian boots of soft leather.

Suddenly coming to her senses, Ermytrude threw aside her heavy furs, and advanced with outstretched hand. The trim elegance of her English tailor-made costume heightened the contrast between the two women. Such opposites might meet in a stage extravaganza, but surely there was a fantasy in the chain of events that brought them together in the honeycombed recesses of a Russian mountain.

Natushka, although graceful and courteous, had no veneer of conventionality. She had not been taught to smile when angry, to simulate delight when bitterly disappointed. She took Ermytrude's hand, it is true, but gave her a searching glance, as if she would learn the secret of the spell cast by this fair English girl on Boris Melnikoff.

Then, with a certain severe politeness, she asked again if they would not take some food, and, learning that Ermytrude preferred tea, bade the Russian bring a samovar.

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Turning to Armstrong she said,—

“Where is Ivan Stephanovitch?”

“I do not know,” he replied.

“But he went with you to Bannofka.”

“Yes. He was separated from us. I inquired what had become of him, but none of the others knew anything of his whereabouts.”

“Are you speaking truly? Was there a fight? Has he been wounded?”

Very much astonished at the quiet menace which had crept into the girl's voice, Frank answered,—

“I assure you that when last I saw him he was quite uninjured and in safety. We all reached the vaults without difficulty.”

“It is strange he sent no message.”

“Your brother is not a man who takes others into his confidence.”

“Brother! Why do you call Ivan my brother? You, I have been told, know Russia well enough to comprehend that when a man speaks of his sister he does not always mean a member of his family.”

Armstrong suddenly remembered that Prince Melnikoff had told him the relationship was an imaginary one. The girl's suspicions concerning Ivan's absence, joined to the distant firing he had heard from the gallery, determined him now to make immediate inquiry from the men without.

“I have perhaps been somewhat remiss in this matter,” he said, with a bow. “Permit me to ascertain what your friends think. I shall return

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soon," he went on, looking at Ermyntrude. "You will be quite comfortable here. Probably I may bring you news of Lord Valletort and your brother."

Ermyntrude looked at him wistfully. She said nothing, but he knew that she disliked being parted from him, even for a few minutes. Her eyes followed him until the door closed. Then she turned to Natushka.

"We have anxieties in common," she said, but the other was busy with the tea-urn now brought in by the Russian attendant. Ermyntrude found her hostess rather difficult, but she sipped her tea, and began again.

"I have had a very dreadful time during the past ten days," she essayed.

"Ten days!" came the unlooked-for retort. "Your sufferings are brief. I have known unhappiness for ten years—since my father died."

Recalling her brother's story of events in London, Ermyntrude thought that Natushka must have been provided with a number of accommodating male friends while in that city. Nevertheless, she tried to fall in with the Circassian's mood. At the same time she resolved to clear away the doubts which, naturally enough, she attributed to one who must look on her as a rival.

"It is sometimes hard to grasp the cause of the misery which creeps into life," she said. "My own lot was an enviable one, yet I was tempted to come here and indulge in foolish dreams, which have done

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no little harm in many ways, and may possibly have added to *your* troubles."

"Why do you say that?" demanded the other, quickly.

"Forgive me if I am wrong, but I have been told that you are the promised wife of Prince Melnikoff."

"That is true."

"Well, were it not for his infatuation with regard to me, and my own folly in thinking that our marriage was a possible thing, many present difficulties would not have existed, and certainly all the mad events of the past few days would not have happened."

"You do not love him, then?"

"No! Oh, no!"

"Do you love this Englishman who has risked his life to save you?"

Ermyntrude started, and nearly dropped her teacup. She was a little frightened by Natushka's imperious manner, and this unexpected question came as an unforeseen sword-thrust.

"No," she said, striving to speak calmly. "We are—only friends. He is my brother's friend—really."

"But there is some man for whom you have thrown over Prince Boris?"

"No, indeed. You forget that I was about to marry his highness only a few hours ago, thinking that thereby I would save my father and brother

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from death—or, if not quite that, from imprisonment.”

“I forget nothing. You and your actions have filled the minds of my people with bitterness for many months. If you wished to become Princess Melnikoff, why did you not marry him in London?”

Natushka's *hauteur* had the good effect of stirring Ermytrude to self-defense.

“I have never really wished anything of the sort,” she said, emphatically.

“But he is rich, and noble, and a man of very fine appearance. You say you love none other. Why have you not accepted him, and thus helped him to defy his enemies? Once wed to you he had little to fear. He could despise the threats of those who vowed vengeance on him.”

“I declined because I came to hate Russia and everything connected with it. Had this night's ceremony proceeded to a conclusion it would have been a marriage in name only. It was forced on me. I agreed under compulsion.”

Natushka stooped over the table, her voice dropped to a whisper, and her eyes peered into Ermytrude's with a fierce intensity.

“Yet the prince is devoted to you,” she urged. “He is a gallant lover. Now that your father and brother are safe, will you marry him if I help you?”

Ermytrude's sky was indeed falling.

“You!” she gasped. “It has been dinned into

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my ears that *you* were the chief obstacle to his marriage—his second marriage, to be exact.”

“Oh, they have told you that. What can one do when Ivan Stephanovitch is but too faithful to his trust! Forgive me if I have seemed harsh to you. I am in despair. I will die rather than become Boris Melnikoff’s wife. He knew that. I have told him so.”

The Circassian wrung her hands, and looked at Ermytrude with a tearless agony in her expressive face that showed she was baring her very soul. Ermytrude, though astounded by this unlooked-for development, was beginning dimly to see some of the hidden currents of the turbulent stream of life in Bannofka. With her woman’s intuition she divined part, at least, of the sorrow which racked the emotional creature who spoke so impulsively.

“Surely you ought to be free to wed the man of your choice,” she said, with ready sympathy. “If you dislike Prince Melnikoff, and he is so blind to your attractions as to prefer a bit of a girl like me, who will have none of him, I fail to see why you should be miserable, nor yet why you should desire to make me miserable also by getting me married to him.”

Ermytrude, in her downright English way, had apparently divested the problem of its fanciful trappings, and stated plain facts in plain words. The other, upon whose soul lay the weight of unutterable broodings, could only clasp her hands across the

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gold circlet which bound her wonderful hair and say, brokenly,—

“I knew Ivan would not fail. He never fails in aught he undertakes. May the Madonna of Kazan help me! I am to be pitied.”

Perhaps Ermytrude's kindly words would have unlocked her lips, and this wild heart might have found solace in telling her grief to another, but a knock at the door announced Armstrong. He was followed by a huge, fur-wrapped figure, and Natushka instantly sprang to her feet with a wild cry of delight.

“Ivan! You are safe! Thank Heaven!”

She spoke in Russian, but there was no misunderstanding her attitude and gestures. She loved this burly, uncouth fellow, and he was plotting desperately to make her a princess against her will! He alone was blind and deaf. Ermytrude now knew the truth, and Armstrong, though not aware of the girl's passionate outbreak during the past few minutes, guessed it. And with the knowledge came a sense of a new and grave peril. If Natushka had hoped secretly and earnestly that the prince would marry another, and thus relieve her from the fulfillment of a hateful compact, she might regard Ermytrude as the source of her own troubles. But Ivan was bothered by none of these doubts. He laughed hoarsely as he threw open his furs.

“Why so serious, little dove?” he cried. “I told thee there was no danger. I would have come hither

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with these two had I not wished to ascertain whether all was going well with our friends at Dukhof."

"What has taken place there?"

"A mishap, lily-face. The monks received timely warning, and some troops were close at hand. Everything has gone wrong. The English milords are now well on their way to Bannofka. Worst of all, they will believe that Boris Melnikoff saved them from the bad and wicked revolutionaries. Is it not a fine muddle?"

The girl's eyes sparkled, but she controlled her tongue. The news meant more to her than to Ivan.

"Prince Melnikoff will thus have the assistance of the Englishmen in recovering the girl he is so anxious to wed," she said, hurriedly.

"It may be so. We must stop that at all costs."

Armstrong, who knew what they were saying, felt with despair that there was only one course open to him.

"If Lord Valletort and his son are now at Bannofka," he put in, sternly, "there is no reason why Lady Ermytrude should not return to them. In their hands she will be safe."

"Quite so," said the imperturbable giant. "But she is more safe here. No, no, little father! She leaves us not until Melnikoff is married to our fair Natushka. Even now a messenger is on the way to tell her father and the prince that the rôles are reversed. *She* is now the hostage for compliance with *our* demands."

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Armstrong, maddened by the cool truculence of this statement, and dreading Ermytrude's reproaches when the Russian's threat became known to her, strode nearer and said, with cold deliberation,—

“Unless you promise to send this lady to Ban-nofka at day-break nothing can save you from instant death. I do not wish to alarm her needlessly. She does not understand what we are saying. But my finger is on the trigger of a revolver, and in another instant a bullet will be in your brain. Promise, you traitor!”

Natushka sprang in front of Ivan, who, to do him justice, did not flinch.

“The shot will be the signal for your death and the death of the woman you would befriend,” she cried, shrilly. “You would both be thrown head-long over the precipice without. Do not condemn so readily those who have striven to aid you. Leave matters to Ivan—and to me.”

She threw a deep meaning into the concluding words, and it seemed best for the moment to rest content with her implied offer of help. Armstrong, quivering with excitement, strove to tell Ermytrude a part, at least, of the truth. He could not bring himself to reveal the full extent of the big Russian's daring scheme. For himself, he saw nothing but disaster; it was almost a relief to smother his forebodings by thinking only of the interests of the girl committed to his care.

CHAPTER XX

THE WITCH-DOCTOR

ERMYNTRUDE was far more perplexed by the obvious disagreement between those whom she looked on as allies than by the guarded revelation Armstrong was compelled to make. The devious runnels of a woman's thought are seldom clear to the mere male, and wonder mingled with the rue in the heart of the man who loved her when he heard her calm acceptance of the new position of affairs.

"It simply means that my turn has come for a little hardship," she said. "Jimmie and my father have borne their share, all on my account. Why should I be spared?"

"But you do not really grasp the purpose that underlies this latest move," he forced himself to say. "These peasants are desperate fanatics. They already regard you as responsible, to some extent, for the disasters which have befallen them. There has been a great deal more fighting than you have heard of. Prince Melnikoff, rendered furious by the coercion they are using in the matter of his marriage, may go to extremes."

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"My only regret is that I have succeeded in dragging you also into peril," she faltered.

He smiled at that. Ah, if he dared to tell her the bitter-sweet truth!

"I count my presence here as my chief reward," he said.

"Then why do you fear a worse fate for me than that from which, by God's providence, you have saved me?"

Then, for an instant, something sang in his ears, some ecstatic note like the tremulous melody of a nightingale, heard, but not seen, in the still moonlight. Yet, through the wild joy of it, throbbed the consciousness that he must be loyal to the dictates of his order. Every consideration urged that she should be restored to her father's protection, and the knowledge brought him to earth again.

It was impossible to tell her the doubts that tortured him, with Natushka's keen ears on the alert, and her suspicious eyes watching them intently. The very vagueness and uncertainty of the immediate future were unnerving, so he put a blind faith in the good fortune which had aided him thus far, and decided that there was nothing to be gained by an open rupture with Ivan Stephanovitch.

"As we are compelled to accept your hospitality—or share your prison," he said, addressing the Russian, "I trust you will make proper arrangements for this young lady's comfort. She is al-

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ready worn with mental and physical strain. Where is she to sleep?"

"Let her share my apartment," broke in Natushka.

"Yes, certainly. That is the only thing to do," agreed Ivan. "Come, nobility—a rest will do *us* no harm."

Though Ermyntrude was more unwilling than ever to be left alone with Natushka, there was no help for it. Fervently assuring her that he would not be far away, nor hesitate to summon her if need be, Armstrong quitted her with the hand-clasp of mere comradeship in adversity. Yet he went out treading on air. He felt, and believed that Ermyntrude knew it, that had he taken her in his arms and kissed her it would have been a more genuine method of conveying his real sentiments. She too, betrayed herself. She whispered "Good-night" with a timidity that thrilled him to the core.

Poor Natushka noted the manner of their leaving, but looked in vain into the large and curiously pathetic eyes of the great Ivan for a hint of such intangible love-making. She sighed. When the men had gone she did not endeavor to reopen the conversation interrupted by Ivan's arrival. With stately politeness she pressed her guest to occupy the only couch in the room, gave her a plentiful supply of rugs, and replenished the fire. Then she, too, stretched her graceful limbs on a pile of furs, and Ermyntrude's last drowsy impression, after mur-

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muring a prayer for herself and those she held dear, was that the Circassian was already asleep.

The hour was now long past midnight. When Stephanovitch and Armstrong re-entered the exterior gallery the three hills were not so clearly visible as when the Englishman was conducted to Natushka's presence. He wondered dimly why this was so, and asked what the change in the weather portended.

"There is a thaw in the air," said Ivan.

"And that will affect us seriously?"

"In what way?"

"I cannot believe that you intend to detain a helpless Englishwoman and her equally helpless friend in this place a moment longer than is necessary. Lady Ermytrude Grandison will never marry Prince Melnikoff now. After all that she has learnt to-night such a thing is impossible."

"Women are not to be trusted. Their heads turn like weather-vanes before the wind."

"She will not be turned in that direction, no matter how the wind blows," persisted Frank. "Consider your position, Ivan Stephanovitch. This prince of yours may hold out against your demands for months. You surely cannot contemplate keeping the English lady here indefinitely."

"Things will happen soon, nobility," was the stolid reply, for the giant could be a morose peasant as well as a fiery-souled reformer.

They were about to enter the sleeping-place

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tenanted by the men when Armstrong noticed that the gallery extended a good deal farther than the doorway.

"Has this retreat been in existence long?" he asked, abandoning other topics as hopeless.

"Many generations."

"Then, it must be known to Prince Melnikoff, or, at least, to some among his supporters."

"They have never been here."

"That may be; but in the present excited state of the country, and aided by thousands of soldiers, they can run you to earth, no matter what the difficulties."

"This quarrel is between Boris and his kinsmen—soldiers cannot settle it," was the sharp answer.

"They settled the attack on the Dukhof Monastery, it seems," persisted Armstrong. "I heard the firing when I came here to-night."

"The soldiers are but the people. They are ignorant and misguided. One has to teach them. Do you think they kill their fellow-men for love of their rulers? Are these men within filled with dreams of the emancipation of Russia? Not they. For the most part they are drawn to our cause either by hatred of the taxgatherer or fear of the police. Some cannot pay the rent; others are thieves and murderers. A few men with brains are willing to sacrifice themselves to an idea. Out of such materials are revolutions made. The seed must rot before the tree grows."

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This unexpected outburst gave Frank new courage. A man with such aspirations could not well be a sanguinary monster.

"We, in England, sympathize with you," he said. "It is a poor reward to betray the faith two of us have placed in you."

The Russian looked at him in silence for a moment.

"You see those hills?" he said, suddenly, pointing to the ghostly trio in the middle distance.

"Yes."

"They are the sign of my house. 'Tents' my people called them when first they crossed the Volga. On the center one, Stenka Razin sat in his ivory chair, and directed the plunder of passing vessels. His descendant lounges in a palace, or drives in smart carriages through the capitals of Europe. He moves his throne—that is all. Where Stenka robbed a few, Melnikoff robs many. Stenka slaughtered individuals, Melnikoff and his like are strangling a nation. What is your fate, or mine, or this angel-faced girl's, to the miseries of millions, the slavery of children yet unborn?"

"That is true, in a sense, but I have always believed, in my thoughts concerning this local struggle, that your efforts were directed rather towards forcing Prince Melnikoff to marry the charming Natushka than towards political reform."

"The one includes the other. If we destroy one governor we have another in his stead. Our only chance lies in bringing him to our side. When Boris

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Melnikoff marries Natushka he is forced back into the fold of his own people. He is not a bad fellow. He would sooner do good than ill."

"I believe that, but you are going the wrong way to work, my friend. We have an English proverb which says, 'One man can bring a horse to the water, but twenty cannot make him drink.' Let the prince conquer his passing craze for Lord Valletort's daughter, and you may gain him more readily to your side."

The big man lifted the heavy *portière* of the gallery. He even laughed softly.

"The easiest way to cure him would be for you to marry the lady yourself, nobility."

So the huge Ivan could use his eyes where other folk were concerned, if not in his own behalf!

Armstrong was silenced; the retort shook him like a blow. Inside the smoke-laden and intolerably stuffy sleeping apartment, he heard Ivan obtaining news of the affray at the monastery. A few weary stragglers from the routed assailants had just arrived.

He lay down and endeavored to sleep, but in vain. His troubled brain, no less than the sheer physical repulsion of the nauseating surroundings, kept him wide awake. At last he could stand the vile atmosphere no longer. Gathering his discarded furs, he went into the passage leading to the gallery, preferring the chill shelter of the rocky walls to the effluvia of the horde of men now crowded into the

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room. Luckily, the change in the weather would save him from being frozen to death if his tired eyes closed.

Ivan was asleep already, and none of the others paid heed to him. There was no call for vigilance. Neither friend nor foe could escape from the old robber's retreat without guidance through the mines; by the other way, a bird alone could win its freedom.

Searching for a corner where he would not be in a draught, Frank deposited his rugs on the floor, and donned his fur coat in order to be as comfortable as the circumstances permitted. He had arranged his primitive bed, and was about to lie down, when he thought he heard a light step in the outer gallery.

He looked through a little opening in the felt curtain that blocked the passage, and saw someone, whom he took to be Natushka, hurrying into the section he had not yet visited. That weirdly picturesque young woman was as great an enigma as any he had encountered in this land of mysteries, and knowledge of her movements might be useful, so he watched her, and did not scruple to follow her as noiselessly as possible. As a subterfuge, if one became necessary, he lit a cigar.

Listening at another doorway, he could distinguish two voices, one full and sonorous, though pleading and persuasive; the other shrill and querulous, the staccato tones of age.

"I am so unhappy, mother," he caught from Na-

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tushka. "I know not which way to turn. You are wise and far-seeing. You have advised me in the past. Why withhold your counsel now?"

"I am busy. Here are men wounded by those owls of monks. I must prepare herbs and potions. What have I to do with your love-sick fancies?"

"But Ivan refuses even to look at me. *My* plotting comes to naught, and *his* prospers. In Petersburg, in London, here even, I have striven hard to defeat his mad notion that I must wed Prince Melnikoff. I thought I had succeeded when the Englishwoman came to Bannofka, but this foolish Ivan snaps her from his arms at the very altar."

There was a pause, apparently of indecision on the part of Natushka's companion.

"Where is the girl now?"

"Sleeping in my room."

"Will she wake if I see her face? Will she scream and faint?—for, look you, Natushka, Ivan loves me not, and would kill me with that big fist of his if he imagined I was crossing his path."

"She is weary—but what would you do, Maria Petrovna?"

"There is a sign that I look for. Thou hast it, Natushka. Nay, shake not thy pretty head. It is there. It marked as smooth a brow as thine sixty years ago, yet I married no Melnikoff. I will tell thee when I have looked."

"Come quickly, then."

Armstrong, though completely at a loss how to

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act, nevertheless imagined that the pair meant no actual ill to Ermytrude. He drew back into the shadow, and the two women entered the gallery. The older one, a very aged crone by her gait, instantly detected the fumes of tobacco.

“Are you alone?” she whispered.

“Yes. Come! None will stir for hours yet.”

In the gloom Frank believed that Natushka's confidante was a Znakharka, or witch-doctor, a relic of a far-distant past yet found in Russia. Thinking that he might learn something of value if they did not discover his presence, yet fearing lest harm should befall the girl he loved, he crept silently after them.

CHAPTER XXI

BY PROXY

IF Ermyntrude, sunk in dreamless sleep, could have opened her eyes in full possession of her faculties, the evil face of the witch-doctor, bent close to her own and seen in the dim light of the room, must have given her a memorable fright. Happily, she was spared that awakening. Whatever trick the Znakharka intended to practice on the credulity of the young Circassian, she made no pretense of scrutinizing the unconscious girl closely.

Armstrong, careless now whether or not he was observed, peered through the doorway; the secrecy of the two women helped him, as they did not close the heavy door, but contented themselves with pushing aside the outer curtain of felt. He saw the wizened dame stoop close to Ermyntrude, and, feeling sure that she would not do the girl any harm, restrained an impulse to dash forward and intervene.

So quickly did the crone rise from the floor that he barely had time to withdraw his head. The hag faced Natushka and croaked,—

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"It is not there. She will never marry a Melnikoff."

"Had it not been for Ivan's interference she would have been the bride of one by this time," snapped the other, by no means pleased that Ermyntrude's pretty features were devoid of the magic sign which the witch-doctor professed to find in her own oval face.

"I have said it," came the emphatic answer. "I am never wrong. Nor do I claim a knowledge which renders all things clear. *You* may wed one of the race. *She* will not."

"But Ivan! What of him? How can I get him to see that I, who am the person most concerned, would give all else for his love?"

"I fear Ivan, and care not to meddle with him. I have power over many; him I cannot touch. But I have seen a man wed more readily, Natushka, when the girl was cold and indifferent than when she sighed out her heart for him."

"What am I to do? If Boris Melnikoff stood here now, the marriage words would be spoken over us were we both tied with ropes in front of the priest."

"Nay, girl, thou art fitted to be a more willing mate."

"Yet I am powerless, and you cannot help me."

"Say not so. I have occupation to-night. The hours grow late. I must think. There are things which are dark in my understanding. Let me deal

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with Ivan. If I soothe the wounds of his men he will listen to me."

Armstrong could not hear all that passed, but from isolated words he caught the general drift of their talk, and when he saw that they were about to come out again he retreated hastily.

This time he did not endeavor to hide himself. He regained the main passage leading to the interior workings before they reached the gallery, but he stood so that they could see him, smoking carelessly, and leaning against the rock. The witch-doctor started and crossed herself, for, with all her spells and divinations, she was a devout member of the orthodox creed.

"Holy Nicholas!" she cried, "who is this?"

"An Englishman," whispered Natushka.

"What! One of that accursed race in the abode of Stenka!"

"Hush, mother! He speaks our language."

Armstrong did not wish to have the old harridan as an enemy. He produced a piece of gold.

"Are you Maria Petrovna?" he said.

"Yes; what if I be?"

"The poor wounded fellows within need your help. They tried to serve me. Let me show you that I reward all such."

Here was a generous patron. The Znakharka changed her opinions with the thoroughness and speed of Captain Dalgetty, whose sword flashed last for those who paid him latest.

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"I am old," she whined, "and my eyes are apt to deceive me in the dark, else I would be sworn you have the line of good luck across your forehead."

She hastened off, but Natushka remained.

"Why are you not sleeping?" she demanded.

"The groans of the injured disturbed me, and I cannot breathe the air on which you Russians seem to thrive. Moreover, it is fortunate that I have met you, Natushka. Will you not persuade Ivan Stephanovitch to send the English girl to Bannofka? If he wants a hostage, let him keep me until she and her relatives are out of the country."

"Alas!" she murmured, "he will not listen to me. And if I could assist you it would be to my own loss. There is none so miserably placed as I. Sometimes, look you, I could dash myself down there into the valley! I will do that, I think, rather than endure so much."

Armstrong was touched by the Circassian's outburst. He sighed. Here was a mad game of cross-purposes, with men and women as counters. Rich and poor, noble and lowly-born, they were tossed about like helpless wreckage in an angry sea. Prince Melnikoff, bound to a dying and maimed woman, whom once he loved with all the ardor of hot youth; Natushka, affianced to him in childhood, and loathing his very name, though ready to bestow her charms on a loutish visionary; Ermyntrode, the spoiled child of fortune, casting a prince from her

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because of a shattered ideal, and blissfully flirting with a man who knew that their marriage was a social impossibility—what a medley it all was!

There was a touch of comedy in it, too. By this time, the gouty Earl of Valletort and his son would be wondering what lunacy had possessed him, Frank Armstrong, to be in alliance with a crowd of turbulent peasants incited to revolution by men whose aims were diametrically opposed, for Ivan Stephanovitch and his tribe wanted to consolidate Prince Melnikoff's rule, while the nihilist section hated him.

Armstrong, of course, could not guess that the faith of his English friends had been rudely shaken by the discovery made in the Dukhof Monastery during the fight, nor that the tottering edifice of their belief in Melnikoff was utterly shattered by the tearful Julie's revelations. Indeed, events were in train that very hour which would have a sensational and wholly unexpected sequel, but Armstrong could not suspect that the stars in their courses were fighting for him.

When Natushka hurried away in a storm of tears, he realized that there was no further likelihood of Ermyntrede being disturbed again that night, so he tried to obtain a much-needed rest. Worn by much travel and incessant vigilance, he did fall asleep ultimately.

He was aroused by Ivan Stephanovitch.

"Wake up, nobility," said the big man. "I have

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been asking what had become of thee. Here is one who would fain converse with thee."

Stiff with cold and fatigue, Armstrong struggled to his feet. He was surprised to find broad daylight streaming in. The sky was very much overcast, but the threatened snow had not fallen. His first sentiment thought was of Ermyntrude; his second reverted to Ivan's words, and he turned to look at the person who sought him.

It was Sassulitch, the father of Prince Melnikoff's deserted wife, the man who had persuaded him to leave Moscow and come to the assistance of his friends at Bannofka. Sassulitch was a well-educated man. Had his career been free from the blighting shadow cast by the Melnikoffs, he would probably have ranked as one of Russia's merchant princes.

A patriot and a thinker, he had intervened in Ermyntrude's behalf at great personal risk, and Armstrong felt that such a man could not be a party to the high-handed measures contemplated by Ivan. But his greeting dispelled the hope evoked by his presence.

"I am sorry to meet you here, Captain Armstrong," he said, with an air of deep dejection. "All my plans have miscarried. I intended, as you know, to bring Lady Ermyntrude and you to meet her relatives, and to aid you all in reaching Moscow, whence the prince would have been unable to prevent your departure for England. The failure of the attack

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on the monastery, which is inexplicable as yet, interposed a serious obstacle to the fulfillment of one part of my scheme. But the worst news is that the police are in possession of my house at Saratoff; my friends received a warning which barely enabled them to snatch my daughter from a further period of imprisonment, and destroy some of my papers."

"Lady Ermytrude Grandison should not be made a pawn in Russian politics," protested Armstrong. "Place her with me in a sleigh and show me the right road, and I will drive her to Bannofka; once she is in her father's care it is absurd to suppose that Prince Melnikoff would dare further coercion."

Sassulitch shook his head.

"You are wrong. There is nothing Melnikoff will not dare. I took it on myself to write to the Countess of Valletort in terms that frightened her into action. She consulted the Foreign Office, and the Russian Embassy became alarmed. What is the outcome? She has received forged telegrams from her husband and daughter, indignantly denying my statements, and St. Petersburg has instructed the prince to quell the insurrection at all costs. If the affair becomes known to the world at large, the Government fears that an outbreak in this province will be interpreted as a protest against their policy in the Far East. Any scandal must be suppressed, no matter what the means."

Armstrong still failed to see why Ermytrude should be brought into the grim triangular duel now

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being fought between Crown, governor, and people in a remote district of the Volga.

"It is nonsense to tell me that the Earl of Valletort and his son will remain quietly complacent at Bannofka, and allow Lady Ermyntude to serve the ambitions of Prince Melnikoff and the designs of a Russian Minister," he cried, hotly.

"No," was the despairing reply. "I did not say that. They will rage, and fume, and fret—but what can they do? In a few days, perhaps a few hours, the prince will have the lady in his power again. Then nothing on earth can prevent a forced marriage, and he trusts to his rank and wealth to stop any exposure. He will take care that his conduct is irrefragable otherwise, and it is common knowledge that the marriage was arranged."

"Ivan tells me that this place is impregnable," protested Armstrong, driven by despair to adopt the alternative which his common-sense rejected.

Sassulitch turned to his huge companion with a mournful smile. Ivan, not knowing what they said, looked from one to the other like some great human mastiff, seeking to learn by expression that which he could not learn by speech.

"He, poor fellow, believes that others are faithful as himself," came the despondent answer, still in English. "If we employ traitors, we must endure them. We have our friends in the chancelleries, in the army, in the police, on the very steps of the throne. You would perhaps think me mad if I said

BY PROXY

that even Prince Melnikoff is not utterly hostile. You cannot grasp the secret influences at work in a nation ever expanding yet ever on the verge of breaking into fragments. But adherents of our cause in the enemy's camp imply the existence of spies in our own. If you were in my place, Captain Armstrong, how long would you remain an active opponent of the reigning house were your daughter recognized as Princess Melnikoff and her son legitimized as heir?"

"Good Heavens! Has Melnikoff a son?"

The Russian's eyes kindled with sudden fire.

"His wife and son are here at this moment. He thinks the child is dead. Yes, dead to him, indeed, but living to avenge his mother's cruel fate. I tell you this to prove to you that I, at least, am untainted by Melnikoff's gold. Iyan, too, is incorruptible, but he works for a different end. If he knew all he would work against me. Believe me, my misfortunes are greater than yours, or those of your friends, no matter how unendurable they may seem to you."

Armstrong threw out his hands with the frantic gesture of one who finds himself in a quicksand, and sinks deeper with each effort.

"Can you suggest nothing?" he cried. "Every word I hear, each fresh tangle in this skein of death and mystery, renders the outlook more desperate and threatening."

"Ah! You see that. Then we have removed at

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least one obstacle. No, Ivan," he suddenly went on, in Russian, for the giant broke in with an impatient ejaculation, "leave this to me. Yet, if you wish it, I shall continue in a language you understand."

He hesitated a little while. Whatever it was he had to say, he found it difficult, but he was at no loss for words when he took up the thread of his thoughts once more.

"From what I have told you," he said, slowly, warning Armstrong by a covert glance that what had gone before should neither be repeated nor alluded to, "you will see that there is one solution of the problem which would clear the air as between Prince Melnikoff and your friends."

"And what is that?"

"If this very desirable young lady were married to one of her own race the difficulty would vanish, so far as she is concerned."

Armstrong gazed at the other in blank amazement. He did not pretend to misunderstand him. The idea had been tentatively expressed by Ivan the previous night.

"The thing is impossible," he gasped. "Do you seriously propose that the daughter of an English earl should marry a penniless officer under such conditions as obtain here and now?"

"I do. Owing to her own actions, I and others have been compelled to take a great interest in her. We have watched her, and you. Neither in Ban-nofka nor Persia have you escaped our notice."

BY PROXY

"Was it you who bribed my servant to copy my correspondence?"

"No; Prince Melnikoff did that. He always regarded you as a possible rival. We, through our own channels, used his sources of information."

"How can a man of your intelligence put forward such a preposterous suggestion?"

"Do not be too emphatic. My friend Ivan is a masterful person, not unlike Prince Boris in some ways. There is a Lutheran minister here whose jurisdiction cannot be gainsaid."

Armstrong laughed, almost hysterically.

"There is a girl here, too," he cried, "whose consent is necessary, even if I were despicable-minded enough to take advantage of her plight and urge her to agree."

"I foresaw your objection," was the cool retort, "so I took care to see the lady first. She awaits you at breakfast, Captain Armstrong. I trust you will enjoy the meal. Nay, I have ended. The rest is in the hands of Providence. God speed you!"

He thrust aside the felt curtain which Ivan had closed during their excited talk, and pointed along the gallery, where Ermytrude was standing, apparently absorbed in the marvelous landscape spread before her eyes.

Quite dazed by Sassulitch's concluding words, Armstrong would have gone in silence, but the burly Ivan slapped him on the back.

"Courage, nobility!" he cried. "'Tis a fine girl,

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more fitted for a nest in your garden of England than for these white deserts."

Ermyntrude heard the voice, and turned.

"Oh, there you are!" she cried, smiling and unconcerned. "*Do* come and look at this glorious view. I wish the clouds would vanish. In sunshine it must be superb!"

CHAPTER XXII

THE STRANGE ADVENTURE OF JACQUES DUMANET

THE love of intrigue is like unto the craving of a drunkard—it is never sated. Prince Melnikoff's valet might reasonably be supposed to have enough irons in the fire without meddling in his master's affairs on his own account; but the return of the Earl of Valletort and Lord Carlingham to the palace gave him an irresistible opening.

"Julie, my little cabbage," he said to the French maid. "I hear there was a storm in the smoking-room last night."

"Milor' Carlingham seemed to be very *triste* when he spoke to me just now," she replied.

"Ah, tell me what he said."

"Give me your news first. I heard nothing of last night's affair. I was in bed."

"I cannot tell you much. They did not invite *me*—hein? I am only guessing things, but I am pretty sure that Milor' Valletort charged his Excellency with humbugging him, and keeping him and Milor' Carlingham in prison to suit his own purposes."

The girl opened her eyes, as if the mere notion

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of such an absurdity had caused her intense amazement.

“Can such a marvel be possible?” she cried.

“It was a dodge, Julie, a Russian trick, just like the grimaces of the sacred eikon. And it very nearly succeeded, look you, had not one little bit of playing at bogey upset the other. They are only big children, these Russians.”

“But it was sure to be found out?”

“Not it. That image has remained undiscovered for a great many years. Not one man in twenty—not one woman in a hundred—believes even yet that a miracle didn’t happen. If miladi were now Princess Melnikoff the English milords would have been ‘rescued’ without a hitch, and everybody feel satisfied. I, of course, knew the truth all the time.”

“How clever you are!” said she, admiringly.

He caught her round the waist, but she slipped away from him.

“None of that, please,” she cried. “I must be serious until I see my mistress again.”

“Oh, well,” he growled, “life is always serious here. I shall be glad to get away. Affairs are marching too fast for my liking. Did Milor’ Carlingham tell you how he came to find out he was locked up in the monastery, and not in some refuge of the peasants as he imagined?”

“Yes. He made no secret of it. He was informed by a man named Sassulitch, from

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Saratoff—Why, m'sieur, what on earth is the matter?"

For Dumanet had suddenly turned a greenish hue, and his eyes stared at her dreadfully, as though he had seen in her pretty face the grim visage of death.

"Yes, yes," he stuttered, sinking into a chair, and making a violent effort to regain his self-control. "Sassulitch! I have heard of him. Don't gaze at me so suspiciously. I have an attack of ague. It passes quickly. Sassulitch, you said! Where did Milor' Carlingham meet *him*?"

Julie, sharp-witted and clever at fence, having told his lordship all that she knew, had been prompted by him to extract knowledge from the valet. In the new light vouchsafed by the maid's story he had reason to suspect that the valet was deeply implicated in the long-forgotten tragedy at Ascot. He recalled the man's behavior at the time, his unscrupulous dealing with Armstrong, the announcement by "J. D." that Vera Sassulitch had been "removed," and his obvious connection with the Russian secret police, or the nihilists, or with both. Ermytrude's version of Sassulitch's revelations enabled him to give Julie the means of testing the spy with a name that must be fraught with terror to him, and he had fallen headlong into the trap.

"I never said milor' met him," retorted Julie. "I

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said milor' was 'informed.' It might have been by letter or messenger."

The valet's pinched features slowly regained their customary sallowness.

"Sassulitch is a dangerous man," he said, thickly. "Nothing that comes from him should be trusted. If he told the truth this time it was with a hidden purpose. I happen to know he is more feared by the revolutionaries than Prince Melnikoff himself."

Julie smirked.

"You must be a brave little man to dwell so contentedly in the midst of all these plots," she cried. "Nom de Dieu! I should be terrified. I never imagined there would be such goings-on in a place where there was so much gayety."

Dumanet eyed her queerly. He was quite conscious that his behavior of a moment ago was anything but heroic. The girl realized that she had gone a little too far.

"And I did not credit you with such deep feelings," she added, apparently thinking aloud.

"In what way?" he demanded, silently cursing the weak nerves which almost caused his teeth to chatter.

"You cannot deceive a woman's eyes, m'sieur. You were upset just now when you heard that this dreadful Sassulitch had been in communication with milor'. You feared for his safety—for mine, perhaps?"

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Here was an excellent excuse, which he had not thought of. He seized it instantly.

“You don’t think a man of my intelligence would wish to marry a stupid woman, do you, Julie? Let me tell you that the sooner you and I are away from Bannofka the better it will be.”

“In that case, how shall we make the fortunes you spoke of the other day?”

He tapped his head.

“I carry here the knowledge that will enrich us.”

“Very valuable, no doubt, but Milor’ Valletort is prepared to do a good deal for the man who helps him to recover his daughter.”

“Ah! You have some proposal to make?”

“Yes. You see the English gentlemen and I are powerless here, because we cannot speak Russian. You will be a good ally, and your reward will be in thousands if you succeed.”

“What do they want?”

“They think that once they meet Lady Ermyntrude again all difficulties will vanish. His Excellency dare not injure them in any way. They are sure miladi will not marry him, so any excuse for her detention by the peasants will disappear. In a word, they want someone to guide them to the place where miladi is, and it is certain that many in the palace are well aware of it.”

Dumanet was doubtful. He had good cause for dubiety, had he probed the situation to its depths. He was in a position of a man lost in a mist on a

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mountain-top, and faced by two paths, one leading to safety, the other to unknown dangers. Moreover, he was still quaking with the fright Julie had given him.

"It will be difficult," he muttered. "Even if I hit on the right man, how is it possible for your master and his son to get away from the palace unobserved?"

"That can be arranged. Give them a rendezvous, a sleigh, and a trustworthy guide. They will be there."

"And the figure?"

"Two thousand pounds."

Fifty thousand francs! With such a capital at command, astute Monsieur Dumanet could extract a competence from the Melnikoff dynasty.

He set about the affair instantly. But the mere name of Vladimir Sassulitch had shaken him badly, and, in his eagerness to accomplish Julie's commission, he did not perceive until too late that there was a very suspicious alacrity on the part of certain persons to assist him.

The explanation was simple. Prince Boris, after taking thought, saw that it would be an act of wildest folly to adopt any further underhanded measures to gain his ends. He did not despair, even yet, of winning Ermyntrode. The only course now open was to secure her release, send her and her friends safely out of the country, restore order in the province, crush with iron hand the faction headed by

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Ivan Stephanovitch, and trust in his prestige and his luck to gain Ermyntrude's hand when Olga Sassulitch was dead, an event which his agents in Saratoff assured him could not be long deferred.

He reasoned that neither Lord Valletort nor any member of his family would harbor feelings of implacable resentment against him. After all, their adventures were spiced with the flavor of romance, and his own actions might meet with tolerant criticism. The disturbing factor was the presence of Frank Armstrong. But, as a British officer, the young man would be in a grave predicament when asked to account for his co-operation with Russian peasants in revolt against the authorities. At any rate, the sooner Lady Ermyntrude Grandison and he were separated the better it would be for all parties.

In a land where guile and craft are more highly esteemed than honesty and straightforward dealing, the mere prospect of settling a serious dispute caused men to ask how they would benefit personally by the new conditions. Though the prince consulted none but his most trusted officers, the tale quickly grew that an amicable agreement was imminent, and when the valet began his belated efforts to get into communication with the rebels, those who would have helped him a few hours earlier determined to act virtuously, and enhance their own interests by denouncing him to the higher powers. Nevertheless,

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they secured installments in advance of the bribes he offered.

Prince Boris smiled sourly when he heard of this minor scheming, so trivial when compared with his own far-reaching projects.

"Let him go on," he said. "I have suspected him. It is well to make certain."

So, in due course, Julie was told that, if matters went well, the journey could be made after night fell. Dumanet was petrified when he was summoned to the courtyard at noon, where he found Lord Valletort and his son, wrapped in furs, seated in a sleigh, and attended by a small escort.

He, too, without a syllable of explanation, was bundled into wraps provided for him, told to enter another sleigh with a guard of Cossacks, and the party drove off at a cracking pace.

Ivan Stephanovitch spoke truly when he said that a messenger had gone to Bannofka with an ultimatum to the prince. This man, eyeing the unhappy valet askance, sat beside the driver of the leading sleigh, and took the direct road to the quarry of the copper mine. He did not scruple to reveal its locality. It was known to the whole district, having been worked for hundreds of years; whereas the secret of the inner ways was sufficiently guarded to save the rebels from attack. Not all the troops in Russia could take the place, if it were adequately defended, unless they besieged it for years.

There was a long delay at the entrance to the

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mine, and Lord Carlingham, wondering whether Dumanet was compromised by his efforts to carry out Julie's suggestion, tried to get into conversation with him.

He was civilly prevented by the officer in command.

"The charge against this man is that he murdered Vera Sassulitch in England, Excellency," said the Cossack. "His Highness has only recently received information to that effect. Certain witnesses are believed to be here, and it is advisable to confront him with them before other steps are taken."

Lord Carlingham, though astonished by this downright statement, which chimed in with his own vague suspicions, did not tell his father what the officer had communicated in broken French. As for the earl, he was far too excited at the prospect of seeing Ermytrude again to pay heed to aught else. His daughter had never been so dear to him as during these days of vigil.

But they each found a long and weary wait in the open quarry irksome to the last degree. The expected thaw had set in at midday, and already the surface of the snow-covered earth was greasy. If the sky did not clear after a heavy fall of snow, the temperature would rise still higher, and the eternal stillness of Russia would silently change its aspect from white to brown, for the whole land would be covered with deep mud.

At last their intermediary reappeared. He re-

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quested the Englishmen, the Cossack officer, and such others as they wished to accompany them, to walk into the mine unarmed. There was some demur at this, but the man was firm, and the point was settled by the officer, and two Cossacks guarding the trembling valet, being permitted to retain their swords.

Within the first great cavern they were met by Ivan Stephanovitch and a number of peasants, also unarmed, but there was no sign of Ermytrude and Armstrong.

“I have a letter to deliver to you,” said the Cossack officer, having ascertained Ivan’s identity. “You had better read it before you converse with the Englishmen. I will act as interpreter.”

The first words that met the big Russian’s eyes were,—

“I have reason to believe that my servant, known as Jacques Dumanet, but whose real name is Livanski, a Pole, is the murderer of Vera Sassulitch. He is a traitor both to you and to me. Deal with him, if guilty. I only suspect him.”

The giant lowered the paper.

“Have you been told what is written here?” he asked the valet.

“No, m’sieu’,” came the whisper.

“Speak in Russian, Livanski. Vladimir Sassulitch awaits you within.”

The wretched man fell like one dead. Two of the insurgents picked him up, and carried him away without any protest from the escort, who evidently

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were obeying orders. The earl did not know what was happening, but Lord Carlingham interfered.

“That man is under our protection for the hour,” he cried, vehemently. “Whatever his crimes, he should be fairly tried.”

His words were unheeded. Ivan was calmly reading the letter again. He growled something, and the Cossack officer became visibly agitated. He turned a scared face to the Englishmen.

“We are too late,” he cried, in French. “The lady is married already.”

“What new madness is this?” shouted Lord Carlingham. The earl, who understood French well enough to follow what was being said, caught his son’s shoulder with trembling hands.

“It sounds like the truth,” replied the officer, who was himself startled out of his Muscovite phlegm. “This man tells me that the ceremony has taken place. Her ladyship is married to the Englishman who carried her off from the chapel of St. Stanislaus. *Sapristi!* There’s a rascal for you!”

CHAPTER XXIII

A BETROTHAL AND A RESPITE

WHEN Frank Armstrong joined Ermyntrude on the balcony he was even more disconcerted by her attitude than by Vladimir Sassulitch's blunt words. He expected to find her in a mood of bitter anger blended with amazed indignation. As a matter of fact, she had been weeping, and there were yet tears in her pretty blue eyes when she pretended to be interested in the scenery.

Now, Ermyntrude had not wept when Prince Boris led her to the chapel of St. Stanislaus. Then her youthful ladyship contemplated the ordeal of matrimony with the stoical indifference of one who believes that the end justifies the means. To-day she wept. Clearly there was a marked distinction in her mind between forced marriage with Prince Melnikoff, in the one case, and with Captain Frank Armstrong, in the other.

The sight of her distress, which did not escape him, was more than the prospective bridegroom could bear, yet he was at his wits' end to devise a means of meeting the extraordinary difficulties which faced him. On the one hand it was impos-

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sible to contract such a marriage with the girl he loved, either with or without her consent; on the other, any act of theirs that served to infuriate men whose passions were already aroused to fever heat, and whose lives were in jeopardy, meant exposing Ermyntrude to immeasurable danger.

And he knew certain peculiarities of the Russian temperament which were hidden from her. The Muscovite, strange blend of East and West, can range in thought from Mohammedan contempt of woman to American excess of worship. Ivan Stephanovitch could bargain for the nuptials of Natushka as if she were a slave destined by a critical purchaser for some seraglio in Stamboul, while Prince Boris would brave any peril, adopt any means, to gain Ermyntrude as his wife. Yet both men were Cossacks, differentiated somewhat by education, but alike capable of cold brutality and frenzied love.

Theorizing on Russian characteristics, however, would not help in the present dilemma. One glance at Armstrong's face told Ermyntrude that he shared her agitation. She blushed rosy red, hurried into her own apartment, and when he followed her, began to cry again.

He could only say brokenly,—

“Sassulitch—has told me—the—the proposal he dared to put before you. Ermyntrude, you must not yield to despair. Surely there is a way out—oh, what shall I say?”

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She did not help him. She sat in Natushka's quaintly carved chair, looking forlornly picturesque in the midst of semi-barbaric surroundings, with her face hidden in her hands, and sobbing as if her heart were broken. He bent over her, tenderly caressing her hair as he might have comforted a sorrowing child.

"Ermyntrude," he said, summoning all his strength to keep his voice under control. "I shall do everything that man can do to save you. Please try to control yourself. Perhaps we may be able to temporize with these ruffians. Melnikoff may yield to their demands, and thus extricate you from an unhappy predicament. Your father is wealthy, and, if no other course presents itself, I shall not hesitate in his name to bribe some of Ivan's followers to smuggle you out of this wretched place."

But the girl wept more than ever, nor would she raise her head, even when she spoke.

"I am destined to bring misery on all who come in contact with me," she wailed. "My folly has, indeed, been punished. Oh! how you must despise me in your heart, yet how kind you are! That is the worst of it. If only you—would say—n-n-nasty things to me!"

The fluttering words which escaped her were not precisely those which Armstrong had expected to hear, and he forthwith lost such shreds of self-possession as remained. Despise Ermyntrude! Listen

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to her tearful self-abasement! He might endure much, but some things were insufferable.

He sank to his knees by her side, and placed his arm around her, deluding himself into the belief that a declaration of hopeless love might steel her into fortitude. It was a poor excuse, but it served.

"Ermyntrude, my dear one," he said, and his voice sounded in his ears as if he were speaking in a hypnotic trance, "nothing on earth but the sight of your grief would have unlocked my lips. If I say that I have loved you, almost from the first hour we met, it should prove to you, at least, that I would give my life to save you."

She started convulsively, and still kept her face hidden. He bit his lip in valiant resolve not to spare himself. When she realized his plight, surely she would pity him.

"I know too well," he went on, "that you can never be the wife of a poor devil like me. If, in other days, I weakly permitted myself the delight of seeing and speaking to you, I had, at least, the requisite strength of mind to leave you with my little secret hidden in my heart."

Somehow, Ermyntrude's head was now resting on his shoulder. In his excitement, he did not perceive that he was hugging her in a lover-like way that she did not seem to resent at all.

"I tell you this now," he persisted, fiercely, "so that you may understand——"

"I only understand," she whispered, "that it is

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much nicer to hear it from you than from Monsieur Sassulitch."

Her face was raised at last. Her beautiful eyes, tear-laden, it is true, were smiling into his with a divine confidence. A blush, such as was never evoked by the eager pleading of a prince, incarnadined her face and neck. Under such conditions, when the heart gallops, a man will dare all, yet Armstrong never afterwards knew how he plucked up courage to murmur, after one great throb of wonder and delight,—

"Ermyntrude! do you mean that you care—that you love me—that you will marry me?"

"Had you asked me sooner," she cooed, "I might have known it sooner."

Thus it chanced that Natushka, whose personal troubles did not cause her to forget the claims of hospitality, entering the room on some housewifely errand, saw them locked in each other's embrace, saw them exchange their first kiss.

She withdrew hastily.

"Your mission prospers," she said, bitterly, to Sassulitch. "Within are two who will not flinch when the minister is called."

Sassulitch, who had seen enough of life not to be surprised by anything where a woman was concerned, assured the big Ivan that one portion of their scheme had proved successful.

"Hurry up with the batushka (parson), and get them wed," was the gruff answer, and, when the

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Russian astonished Ermytrude's father and brother with the announcement of her marriage, he spoke in all good faith, being certain that the ceremony had taken place two hours earlier.

He was mistaken. When their first transports yielded to the exigencies of the hour, Frank told Ermytrude that even such a devoted pair of lovers must eat if they would live; moreover, Natushka, eyeing them wistfully, made noise enough to disturb twenty love-making couples when she came with the coffee.

Romance does not thrive on hunger. Although the two could not look enough at each other, although each glance gave them thrills, they ate with zest the rough food provided. Then they strove to talk seriously, though when Natushka quitted them again, there were interludes. Ultimately, Frank called Sassulitch, and explained that a marriage between Lady Ermytrude Grandison and himself, under the proposed conditions, was quite out of the question.

The future must be considered as well as the present. His *fiancée's* position in society demanded due observance of the conventions, and although they had determined to wed, the ceremony must be conducted in their own Church and under the laws of their own country.

Nevertheless, they were anxious to help the cause of the friends who dared so much to serve them. He suggested, as a compromise, that they should be

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betrothed in the presence of witnesses; and the Russian fell in with this proposal. The Lutheran minister was brought, and, in his presence, with Vladimir Sassulitch as a witness, they solemnly agreed to marry, subject to the proviso that Ermyntitude's parents gave their consent. Frank was stubborn on that point. He refused to have it said of him that he took advantage of his future bride's difficulties to bind her by an unqualified pledge. Sassulitch made no demur; he meant to assure Ivan that a valid marriage ceremony had been performed. His one anxiety was to get these troublesome English people out of the country. Then he would adjust accounts with Prince Melnikoff in his own way.

The Lutheran minister, who owed his liberty to Sassulitch's protection, for Russia gives short shrift to Nonconformity, promised readily to observe secrecy, and Armstrong himself, learning the stress laid by Sassulitch on the point, undertook not to draw too fine a distinction between matrimony and betrothal in any subsequent conversation with Ivan.

The morning sped in a sort of breathless yet happy suspense for the two persons most affected by its extraordinary developments, but another surprise was in store for them. They were walking in the gallery, gazing sometimes down the stark precipice, or at the distant snow-crowned heights, but more often, perhaps, into each other's eyes, when suddenly the screen of the main passage was flung apart, and a voice cried, in crude French,—

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"This way, messieurs."

They turned at the words, and Ermyntrude saw her father. With a shrill cry of joy she ran to him, and all his doubts and fears yielded to her affectionate embrace. He folded her in his arms and kissed her repeatedly. Whatever adventures she had undergone, assuredly his beloved daughter was not unhappy—he could not find it in his heart to let his first words be those of reproach.

Lord Carlingham, however, received Armstrong's greeting with a stony glare.

"What is this yarn we hear of your marriage with Ermie?" he asked.

Frank only laughed. He was too overjoyed to feel resentment at his friend's attitude.

"You are rather ahead of the fair," he said. "Your sister and I are not married yet."

Then Carlingham held out his hand.

"Forgive me, Frank, old chap," he said. "I knew you would never act dishonorably, yet that big beggar seemed to be so cocksure of himself that he staggered both of us."

Armstrong led them to the room which was given over to Ermyntrude's use. There, while the girl sat with her arm round her father's neck, he gave his wondering friends a narrative of events from the day he reached Moscow.

Meanwhile, a very different scene was being enacted in the big chamber which formed the living-room of the outlaws. The unfortunate valet, no

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longer a dapper little Frenchman, but an avowed Polish traitor, was led before those who were both his accusers and his judges.

By the side of Vladimir Sassulitch stood a woman whose thin form had yet a graceful carriage, and in whose dull-white face, bearing the tokens of consumption, could still be seen traces of the beauty which had caused her and her dead sister to be known as "The Lilies of the Volga."

A sturdy boy, aged about eight years, clasped her hand, and no one who noted their rough garments and dejected mien would have believed that this forsaken pair were the wife and son of that splendid and important personage, Prince Boris Melnikoff.

Attracted by the news of Dumanet's presence, all the Russian denizens of the rock assembled, with them being the aged witch-doctor, Maria Petrovna. A spasm of anguish came into her withered features when she heard the man's true name.

"Livanski," she murmured to those near; "is he the son of one Dmitry Livanski, who was a leather-worker in the Jews' quarter at Warsaw?"

"Aye, mother," said a man. "Knowst thou aught of him? He has been a curse to our cause ever since his honest father died."

She answered not. She looked at Olga Sassulitch, and she saw no pity in that livid face, for the woman had risen from her death-bed to glut her eyes on her sister's murderer ere he died. She looked

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at the scowling visages of the men, and found therein but one desire—to see this man executed.

Even now the trembling wretch was pleading that he had killed Vera Sassulitch by mischance.

“Why, then, represent her as a traitor to our brethren in England?” demanded Ivan. “And, if your plea held good, what of Donstoi, shot in the ditch of Peter and Paul fort; what of Tonkovitch, chained for life to a barrow in Saghalien; what of Nicholas Sobieski, hanged at Warsaw for endeavoring to remove a tyrant?”

“This scorpion has stung us bitterly,” cried Sassulitch, his eyes ablaze. “He spared not in his lust for gold. Let him contaminate the air no longer.”

Livanski, who was a fatalist in his way, began to curse them, and the Znakharka, fearing lest he should be thrown from the precipice at once, intervened shrilly.

“Slay him not now!” she shrieked. “Bind him, and cast him into my room. I shall raise such fiends to escort his soul when he is flung from the rock at midnight that he shall see the doom awaiting him ere he enters upon it.”

Such an appeal, to a superstitious race crammed with stories of saints and devils, was fairly certain of success. Grumbling at the delay, Ivan yielded to the clamor for this enhanced vengeance. So the Znakharka had her way, and, when alone with her victim, she whispered,—

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“Thou art a vile thing, John Livanski, yet for thy mother's sake I will save thee. Thou art my daughter's son, oh, miserable one! and her spirit would haunt me if I let thee die!”

CHAPTER XXIV

AN OLD SCORE

NOT without much protest and considerable misgiving did the Cossack officer who acted as chief of the escort supplied for the Earl of Valletort and his son consent to return to Bannofka without them. Finding them as insistent to remain as Ivan Stephanovitch was to receive them, he did finally take his departure, bringing to the prince letters from Lord Valletort and the rebel leader.

There are times in a man's life, if the man be of the stuff of which rulers are made, when anger is so overwhelming that it remains outwardly calm. Prince Melnikoff, when he found how he had been overreached, was a first-rate example of an angry ruler.

Valletort's natural anxiety to meet his daughter, and Lord Carlingham's ready acceptance of any proposal which brought him to his sister, had played into the hands of the insurgents. Now, they held four hostages instead of two, and Ivan was not slow to point out the fact.

In his communication he again urged the prince to cement the fortunes of their house by carrying out the compact made by his father.

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"Once you are married to Natushka [he wrote], the warring elements will be united. Had not your father, who was also my father, been a dishonorable man, this feud would have been healed a generation ago. Now it must cease. I have cured your madness by wedding the English girl to the young officer who so fortunately appeared from Moscow. Prove yourself capable of abandoning your folly, then, and give Natushka the position which is hers by right, and should be hers by law, if there were law in Russia."

A postscript had the significant words,—

"The affair of your servant, Livanski, will be attended to."

The prince, whose devouring wrath was masked by a hardly perceptible pallor, turned to the Cosack officer.

"Know you anything of the contents of these letters?" he asked.

"No, Excellency. I feared to return without the English gentlemen. When they sided with that big peasant I was helpless, but I demanded their written statements. I trust they have borne out my words?"

"Yes. I hold you blameless. How many hours' ride is this mine distant?"

"About two and a half hours, Excellency."

"Assemble every armed man in the castle. Let forage and food for three days be brought. Send a messenger to the camp for three Maxims and a couple of field-guns. There must be no delay, you understand."

The officer grasped at least one part of the

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prince's intent. There was to be fighting, and quickly. He saluted and vanished.

Boris Melnikoff stood now at the parting of the ways. From small beginnings the domestic disturbances in his life had suddenly grown into an affair of national importance—the cloud no bigger than a hand had swollen into a tempest—and he, the governor of the province, saw his projects wrecked and his career threatened by a number of ignorant rustics led by a fanatic.

He had hesitated too long. If Ermytrude and the others—though he refused to credit the absurd statement that she was already married to Armstrong—left the country as fugitives, the resultant scandal would reach imperial circles. In Russia, more than anywhere else in the world, the eleventh commandment holds good. If you are rich and nobly born, and sufficiently far away from St. Petersburg, you can do as you like—but you must not be found out.

So it was high time he drew the sword in earnest. Old ties must be roughly broken. What steel and lead had begun the hangman should complete. It was quite well known to him that the mountain stronghold of his ancestor was deemed impregnable, yet he smiled grimly when his officers told him it was courting disaster to penetrate the recesses of the mine without guides, while artillery was useless against a precipice three hundred feet high. For a large body of troops to approach the cliff itself

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would require the labor of months. The whole valley was crammed with the thorn thickets for which the district was famous. Fifty miles away, a convict settlement needed guards only at the main gates. No prisoner could escape at any other point because of these thorny barriers.

Melnikoff listened to the end.

"You provide torches and willing men," he said, shortly. "I shall lead."

His will was law. Eager enough to crush the impudent rebels who had interfered with their winter amusements and destroyed the gayety of Bannofka, his subordinates wondered what would be the outcome of the foray. But they hurried the preparations.

At six o'clock that evening a cavalry trumpet sent its shrill mandate through the lofty excavation which opened up the mine itself from the original quarry dug in past ages by the copper-hunters. Twice again its notes pealed with strange echoes into silent depths; then a Cossack, carrying a blazing torch and a white flag, advanced to the foot of the first flight of steps and shouted, loudly,—

"Is anyone there?"

"Yes," replied the voice of Ivan, deep and reverberating from the upper darkness.

"My master bids you surrender."

"Tell your master that *his* master bids him obey."

"That is a foolish answer. Unless you, and all others in your company, descend and yield yourselves as prisoners, the place will be carried by as-

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sault. If the English prisoners are harmed in any way, either by the mischance of our attack or by your own deed, no man or woman will be spared. I am further bidden——”

“Go back, fool!” roared Ivan, savagely. “But before you go, take with you a few threats which can be carried out. Your guns planted on the hills of the Ivory Chair can do us no harm. Your prince and those who follow him will never leave this mine alive. We need not fire a shot at you. You will die of hunger and thirst.”

“It is not so, Ivan,” came the firm accents of Prince Melnikoff. “We do not come blindfolded to your burrow. Be warned in time. You cannot resist us.”

“Ha, renegade, you are there! It is you who must yield, not I. You have broken your oath. Now you desire to slay your own people. On your head lies the responsibility for the lives of your men. Withdraw your troops before it is too late, and carry out the covenant.”

“I have given you every chance, madman,” was the stern answer. “Words must give place to action at last.”

“Then be it my death or yours, Boris, and, if I fall, be sure that the Tsar will learn the truth.”

The prince hoarsely bade the flag-bearer to rejoice his comrades. The enterprise before him might well daunt the bravest, for all the advantage of a fight in these gloomy caverns lay with the defenders. Yet

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this aspect of the affair seemed to weigh least with him.

“My final warning should bring you to your senses,” he cried. “Unless you come in person, and guarantee the safety of Lady Ermytrude Grandison and her friends, I shall attack you at nine o’clock.”

“Why wait? As for the lady, her husband can safeguard her.”

“Liar!”

“It is true. Will you agree to my terms if she herself assures you that I have spoken truly?”

The prince did not deign to make any reply. Stung beyond endurance by the tone adopted by Ivan in the hearing of many of the Cossacks, and, doubtless, of his own followers, Melnikoff returned to his troops and signaled the gunners not to open fire. He did not mean to risk valuable lives with bursting shells: the artillery was a spectacular bluff, and it had failed.

The night fell rapidly, and the thaw, so long promised, began in earnest, its immediate predecessor being a shower of rain. This created some comment among the leaders of the military. Several of the ravines crossed *en route* to the mine would soon become raging torrents. Unless the weather changed, and a sharp frost came on that night, they would practically be cut off from Bannofka for several days. There was no knowing what measures of reprisal the insurgents might take. The peasants

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could get about the country like wolves, and if a strong band attacked the besiegers whilst they were endeavoring to draw Stephanovitch and his gang from their burrow, the consequences might be serious.

Their doubts were stilled when Prince Boris, about half-past eight o'clock, realizing apparently that all hope of friendly settlement must be abandoned, gave to each officer of the rank of lieutenant and upward a detailed plan of the mine!

Stenka, the old-time bandit, and a faithless scoundrel at the best, had not trusted his own associates. Among his papers were found not only a key to the intricate inner workings, but also a detailed description of a cornice, or ledge, which led along the face of the cliff, from a point about forty feet below the main gallery, to the side of the hill, and thus to safety. To reach this precarious pathway, which was visible from neither the gallery above nor the ground below, a rope was necessary, unless a bold cragsman climbed down the rock on the extreme right of the gallery. The information had been stowed away among the archives of the palace for generations; so Stenka became a traitor long after his bones were dust.

A party of twenty active young men, headed by a lieutenant, were supplied with ropes and pick-axes in addition to their arms, and instructed to follow the ledge, wait under the gallery, and seize, and tie, or kill, anyone save women who endeavored to escape

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by that way. If they heard sounds of fighting above they must scale the cliff where it was practicable, and take the rebels in the rear, being particularly careful not to injure the European occupants of the rooms abutting on the gallery. Otherwise, they were to await orders.

So Prince Boris had every reason to be confident. He had his enemies penned like rats in a trap, and the Cossacks were jubilant at the prospect of the haul they would make. The prospect of an easy victory soon communicated itself from the officers to the men. Fifty volunteers, to storm the first level, were forthcoming at once, and gathered quietly at the foot of the rock staircase.

At nine o'clock the prince motioned to a squad of torch-bearers; the flaming resin soon threw a sinister glare on the fierce-looking troops, and strange gleams shimmered on gun-barrels and naked steel.

"Poshol!" (Go on) cried the prince, sharply. With a yell, the foremost Cossacks raced up the steep tunnel; the second contingent fired a volley over their heads into the blackness. There was no reply. Neither shout nor answering crash of musketry came from the gloom.

The first gallery entered was empty. Following the general scheme of attack, the assailants paused at the mouth of the drift, where the plan showed a sharp turn from the main level. When the supports came up, the van resumed the advance. Three times this maneuver was repeated, yet, with the exception

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of the fusillades intended to clear the galleries, not a shot was needed.

Ivan and his men were only biding their time. In those dark corridors sounds carried a long distance. When they were assured that, by some means not known to them, the foe followed the intricacies of the workings with the certainty of knowledge, there were mutterings of that dread word which means so much to the oppressed in every land.

“Treason!” men said, but they flinched not.

“Courage, friends!” cried their leader. “They can never pass the next barrier. Do not fire until I give the word. They are doomed!”

So, when the Cossacks rushed into the fourth of the seven sections into which the mine was divided, the blackness in front vomited forth flame and lead. But there was no halting. Those who did not fall dead, or crawl in agony to the shelter of the rough-hewn walls, dashed forward. Soon a terrific *mêlée* was in progress. Friend and foe became locked in an inextricable mass of swaying, struggling forms. A few flaring torches merely added to the demoniac riot, and the fight resembled a combat of fiends in the infernal regions.

Failings the Russian may have, but no man can say he is a coward, and here in the depths of the mountain were let loose the passions, the rage, the devastating misery, which had held a great people on the rack for generations. Men fought as if the quarrel were a personal one. Combatants clutched

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each other and rolled over and over amidst the *débris* of the mine, tearing, and rending, and stabbing viciously. So fierce was the affray that few paid heed to Ivan's loud warning.

"Back, brothers!" he roared. "Back, I say!"

But Prince Melnikoff, who had himself accounted for half-a-dozen opponents, heard him, and shouted to those in rear,—

"Follow me, at all costs!"

By sheer strength, and with terrific sweeps of a crowbar, which he had picked up after breaking his sword, he hewed a path through the retreating rebels, and rushed after Ivan, whose huge form was barely distinguishable in the light of a fallen torch. The prince, careless now of odds, and despising personal risk, cried to his Cossacks,—

"Come on, comrades! They run!"

Ivan caught the words, and paused. He saw a number of soldiers looming through the smoke and dust. He ran on again, and Melnikoff followed. Then the big Russian, with a laugh that was like the bellow of a bull, stopped and struck a match.

His chief adversary, yet many yards in the rear, plucked out a revolver and fired at him. There was a running line of flame, a tremendous explosion, and a great section of the tunnel caved in, burying many in a chaos of broken rock, and irretrievably blocking the way against further assault.

Prince Melnikoff was uninjured. But he had not

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a corporal's guard of Cossacks to support him. The bulk of his officers and men were completely cut off by the fall, and, to all intents and purposes, he was a prisoner in the hands of the insurgents.

CHAPTER XXV

THE SETTLEMENT

BLINDED by dust, and choked by the fumes of dynamite, Prince Boris staggered on. His one sentient thought now was to crush this ruthless enemy who wrought so daringly against him, and foiled his best-laid plans with such ease.

Nevertheless, none but a madman would think of continuing the fight. He was in absolute darkness. If he and his few resolute Cossacks were to avoid suffocation they must endeavor to reach a better atmosphere. Often falling, blundering against the rude walls of rock, and shouting guidance to each other, they advanced until the air was perceptibly clearer.

They were given short respite. Ivan, heading those of his men who had retreated in time, and reinforced by many others stationed near the last staircase leading to the living-rooms, advanced with a torch to search for his chief opponent, who, he believed, had escaped the explosion.

When he caught sight of the prince, who was gasping for breath and nearly spent, he did not jeer at him as might be expected of such a man.

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"You see, Boris," he said, "you fight against fate. Now, indeed, you are beaten!"

Still dominated by the desire for revenge, Melnikoff raised the revolver he held in his left hand. Unseen in the semi-darkness, one of the insurgents was already covering him with an antiquated pistol, and the man fired to protect his leader. His aim was good, and the prince received a violent blow in the chest that flung him headlong.

Ivan, disregarding the danger of a retaliatory thrust by an infuriated Cossack, ran to the fallen prince, lifted him in his strong arms, and strode away as if a man almost as big as himself were a truss of straw.

There was that in his manner which stilled the clamor of the others. Trooping at his heels, and tacitly abandoning the struggle, the Cossacks mixed with the insurgents; together they climbed the stairs, and Stephanovitch laid his adversary on the ground near a stove.

"Bring a light," he commanded, hoarsely.

He tore open the prince's furs and tightly buttoned uniform, and a small round object rolled onto the floor. It was the bullet, and its impact had evidently been resisted by some hard substance. A moment's scrutiny showed why Boris Melnikoff had not received a serious wound. The great fire opal had been shattered into fragments in his waistcoat pocket.

But the prince was only stunned by the blow,

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which had knocked out of him such breath as was left by the explosion. Manifestly, all that he wanted now was air and a minute's rest to set him on his feet again.

The first rumor that reached the anxious gathering in Ermytrude's rock-chamber, where Olga Sassulitch was stretched, apparently lifeless, on a couch, with her little son sitting by her side, announced Prince Melnikoff's death. The news hushed their talk into sudden silence, but the dying woman, whose life ebbed and flowed with the uncanny fluctuations of the final stage of consumption, roused herself in a last flicker of indomitable will.

"Dead!" she cried. "No. God will not permit that! Death is a relief. Boris Melnikoff must live—and suffer!"

Her hollow voice seemed to convert the gloomy apartment into a tomb. Natushka bent over her, and whispered some words of consolation, and the contrast between the two women was that of life and death.

"Don't you think I ought to go and find out what has really happened?" said Armstrong to his friends.

Ermytrude said "No" instantly, but there was no need to urge the matter, because Sassulitch entered.

"The attack has failed," he said in English, with a curious restraint in his voice that seemed to presage a crisis. "Ivan Stephanovitch has secured

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a prisoner of importance. He is bringing Prince Melnikoff here."

A sharp cry of dismay came from Natushka, who, of course, understood his words. She, better than any other present, knew Ivan's forceful character. No consideration of policy would deter him from attaining his object. They were all in his power. Sassulitch, a more able man, was helpless in face of Ivan's ferocity and single-minded purpose, and the girl dreaded the scene which she foresaw was inevitable.

Melnikoff appeared. He was disarmed, and closely followed by Ivan and some few peasants. Nothing could rob the prince of one distinction—he would be courteous at the foot of the scaffold. Doffing his astrakhan cap with easy grace, he bowed to Ermytrude.

"Let me hasten to offer my congratulations that you are safe, and under your father's protection," he said.

"It had been better for all of us had my daughter and I never been separated," broke in the earl, vehemently.

Judged by an Englishman's straightforward code of honor, the prince had put himself beyond the pale of decent society. He had lied not once but many times, and to Lord Valletort, whose notions were eminently British and aristocratic, a lie was an unforgivable infamy.

"That was the fortune of war—as this is," said

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the prince, bowing again, and spreading his hands with a placid acceptance of fate.

"There are others here to whom your Highness's congratulations may also be extended," broke in Sassulitch. "Let me present to your Highness your wife—and your son."

The bitter politeness of his words in no wise mitigated their extraordinary effect on the prince. He placed his hands to his side, for he had been badly bruised, and was still suffering pain. He made no pretense of ignoring the older man, nor of misunderstanding him. Olga Sassulitch was lying prone on the couch. Insensibly, Armstrong and Carlingham, who chanced to be standing on that side, drew apart, and Prince Melnikoff saw the wasted figure, with one thin hand grasping the plump fingers of the boy.

He walked unsteadily to the bedside. For the first time in many years his eyes met those of his wife. He looked at her without flinching, and who can say what memories crowded in on him in that trying moment? But he was a man in whom good and evil wrought strange impulses. He stooped, and caught the disengaged hand which lay listlessly on the fur robe which covered her.

"Olga," he said, with a quiet pathos that touched some hearts there like a strain of solemn music, "I am to blame in some ways, not in all. And—I never knew—there was a child!"

"You deserted me, Boris," came the feeble words,

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for she was hovering on the very brink of the unseen. "You, or your hired assassin, murdered my sister. You have inflicted untold suffering on my people, yet I forgive you, and I pray that God may forgive you, though His justice will surely overtake you."

"Olga," he said again, "why did you not tell me?"

And he looked at the wondering boy, who, now that they spoke a language he understood, peered with childish awe from his mother to the big, handsome, well-dressed stranger.

"He was born in a prison," she said, without emotion or resentment in her low tones. "It was not a fitting birthplace for one of your line, though some of your ancestors have died there."

"I am sorry," he murmured, with bowed head, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Sorrow comes too late. I am dying, Boris. And your Tsar says I am not your wife. Maybe he has the power to do me that wrong. If you go to him, he may also tell you that you have no son. Will you believe him—or me?"

"Listen, Olga, it may give you some consolation. I solemnly swear, before all present, that I shall not repudiate our child. I shall have the decree annulled."

Ivan, awaking to the significance of this vow, shouted, with a voice of thunder: "You seem to forget, all of you, that *I* am the Prince here. Let me

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hear none of your death-bed bargains. I, too, have sworn, and I do not break my oath. If one generation of Melnikoffs can be disinherited by the Tsar, so can another."

Melnikoff turned to him with a dignity that might have silenced a less headstrong man.

"Peace, Ivan!" he said. "You have done mischief enough. Let me repair some part of the wrong you have helped me to inflict."

"What! Draw back now that you are in my power! By the bones of Christ!—not I. I have slain your men and beaten a Government to win my way. I shall not halt now because a dying woman bars the path."

"If you utter another word I shall proclaim our relationship to all the world."

Ivan faced the prince with a haughty contempt that made the peasant more than the equal of the noble.

"What do I care?" he cried, and his golden eyes flashed a challenge to all in the room to listen. "If there was law in Russia, I should be the ruler of Bannofka. Nature made me so, and I retain the power if not the place. Hear me, then. This man, my brother, is a usurper. His father, who was also my father, held the position which belonged to the father of Natushka. He, like Boris Melnikoff, married a woman of the people, and disowned me, his eldest-born, in favor of the son of a so-called princess. I vowed to Natushka's father, who saved

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my mother's life and mine, to right the injustice in the way best fitted to serve our race. I said it, and it shall be done. It is not in the power of man, or woman, or devil to prevent me from carrying out my purpose."

His tirade was interrupted by Olga Sassulitch's weak voice,—

"God—is more powerful—than you, Ivan . . . and He still—reigns—in Heaven!"

She was exhausted by the supreme effort to make this confession of faith, and, if those who heard had but realized its prophetic import, a tragic night might have passed without further bloodshed. But Ivan, stanch fanatic that he was, would not permit her to sink into the grave without denying her right to question or affect his fixed intent.

He thrust Melnikoff aside, and towered over the bed.

"I, too, can appeal to the Almighty, Olga," he said, in a transport of rage. "Would you be false to our cause with your last breath! Remember our people's sufferings! Remember your sister, and the men and women who have died to avenge her! You, poor saint, may wing your way to Paradise, but you are leaving us in the hell of Russia. . . . Ah, there must be a curse on us! . . . Olga Sassulitch has died a traitor!"

He fell to his knees, shaken to his very soul by a zealot's wrath and grief. The child, frightened by the furious scene, and understanding vaguely from

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Ivan's words that his mother was dead, began to cry, and the others were so shocked that no one noticed the entrance of the Znakharka, Maria Petrovna.

The old woman's tottering frame seemed to be endowed with phenomenal strength, and her eyes blazed with the intensity of madness. With a strange, elfin cry she flung herself venomously on Melnikoff, and struck at him with a long, thin-bladed stiletto. His back was towards her, and such was the ferocity of the blow that the dagger reached his heart through his right side.

He collapsed at her feet with a little sob—he might almost have been sighing his relief at the sudden end of a stormy life. As he sank to the floor, his face, livid in the anguish of death, became visible to the murderess. She saw it, and screamed. In an instant she became a feeble crone again, and swayed helplessly on limbs palsied with extreme old age.

"Ivan!" she gurgled. "Where is Ivan? I meant to kill Ivan!"

Ermyntrude dropped into Armstrong's arms in a merciful faint when Melnikoff was stabbed, so she was spared the horror that followed, for Ivan, startled from his unavailing appeal to the dead, leaped at the wretched hag like one possessed. It needed no second glance at the fallen man to see that life was sped, and the frenzied Ivan, above all a Russian, did not hesitate to wreak his vengeance on the unhappy creature who, with a vicious knife-thrust, had dissipated his day-dreams of a Cossack

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kingdom on the Volga. He picked her up in one hand as though she were a thing of thistle-down rather than flesh and blood, rushed through the doorway, and hurled her shrieking far out over the balcony.

Yet, even in the manner of her death, the Znakharka took her final toll of the man she hated and feared. Her body was still hurtling through the air, to be crushed into a pulp three hundred feet beneath, when an irregular sputter of musketry darted tongues of flame along the gallery, and Ivan himself fell, pierced by many bullets. He did not die instantly. His gigantic body quivered in agony for a little while and those few fleeting seconds of fast-ebbing life may have been embittered by the knowledge that the Tsar's soldiers were masters of the last stronghold of his race.

One thing, at any rate, he did know. Before the darkness fell, he knew that Natushka loved him. The distraught girl, hearing the shooting, reached him in time to pillow his shaggy head on her breast.

"Oh, my Vonia!" she sobbed. "Oh, my Vonia! They have taken thee from me, my dear one—why couldst thou not have been spared to me! Vonia! my Vonia! I wanted thee, not that hateful prince!"

And he smiled up into her face to show that he understood at last.

The sudden turmoil in the gallery drew the minds of those within the rock-chamber from the ghastly

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scene they had just witnessed. A hubbub of shooting and yells showed that the rebels had been surprised by a fresh detachment of Melnikoff's troops. Little, if any, resistance was offered. The insurgents who did not fly to the inner burrows were promptly sabered, or shot; indeed, when the death of the prince became known to his men, the lives of even the non-combatants were in the gravest danger for several minutes.

Happily, an officer of the prince's staff had followed unchallenged when Ivan and the rebels brought in their distinguished prisoner, and he was able to assure the infuriated Cossacks that their leader was killed by the woman whom they had seen flung over the cliff, while the victim of their first volley was the very man who had avenged her crime.

Having stayed the hands of the troops, he drew their leader aside, and told him the astounding fact that the little boy, crying there by the side of his dead mother, was Prince Melnikoff's son. There could be no doubt about it. The Prince himself had acknowledged the child as his successor—there were twenty people to vouch for his public declaration—so the youngster must be safeguarded at all costs until the Tsar himself had decided the rights of the affair. Moreover, now that the prince was dead, it behoved his adherents to treat the English visitors with courtesy. These were matters that must be settled at St. Petersburg—meanwhile, let there be no more slaughter.

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The Cossack lieutenant listened, and found his colleague's advice good; when both men had discussed the night's work with Sassulitch it was easy enough to arrive at a comparatively lucid and connected idea of that which had actually happened.

The double tragedy whereby the Melnikoff dynasty had been so terribly disrupted arose solely from the desire of the Znakharka to save her contemptible grandson from the doom that awaited him at the hands of the revolutionaries.

None but herself knew that Dumanet's mother, Marie Livanski, was her daughter, and she took advantage of the confusion arising from the capture of Prince Melnikoff to secure the man's escape. She had long been aware of the existence of a secret path down the face of the rock, and she now gave him directions how to use it, warning him of the fate that would befall him if ever again he came into the clutches of those whom he had betrayed.

The excitement, and the pitch-darkness of the open gallery, covered her movements. Tying a rope round the trembling wretch's shoulders, she lowered him at the spot where the precipice was practicable for a climber, and he was within a few feet of the ledge when he detected the presence of the Cossacks posted there by the prince's orders. It was far too dark, and he far too excited, to recognize the men's uniforms. His nerves, already strained to

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the utmost by the prospect of escape, even by a precarious descent of that frowning crag by night, yielded completely when he saw several armed men peering up at him, and he yelled to the beldame to haul him back. She, believing that he was giving way to cowardice, urged him vehemently to go on, and he would surely reach the path—whereupon, a Cossack lunged with a bayonet, and when Maria Petrovna, alarmed by Dumanet's despairing cries, managed to pull him to the level of the gallery again, she found a corpse dangling at the end of the rope.

The discovery overwhelmed her with rage. Already half-witted, she became a raving maniac. She believed that Ivan Stephanovitch had suspected her from the first, and had posted men beneath in order to prevent, in this dramatic way, her grandson's rescue. Filled with no other thought save that of prompt reprisal, she permitted the inert body to fall, and the dead spy requited his slayer by carrying him headlong into the abyss.

There could be no doubt that the woman hurried away at once on her dreadful errand, because a wounded peasant stated subsequently that she was searching for Ivan, and he directed her to the rock-chamber. When she entered the room she saw only one man there whose stature resembled that of the giant, and she struck without hesitation.

Meanwhile, the Cossack officer on the ledge, angered by the loss of one of his men under inex-

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plicable circumstances, thought he would be obeying the spirit if not the letter of his orders if the cliff were scaled forthwith. He acted so promptly that the first half-dozen soldiers were in the gallery when Ivan appeared with the frenzied woman in his grasp.

For the rest, it was a lamentable and heart-rending spectacle that met Ermyntrude's eyes in the gray dawn. She soon recovered from that thrice fortunate attack of faintness, and was conscious again when she had been carried to the smaller room where Armstrong had first heard the Znakharka's voice. As the night passed, and she saw nothing of Melnikoff, whom she believed to be only wounded, she insisted on being told the truth. Indeed, there was no avoiding it. Natushka was so bitter against her as the original cause of the whole dispute, that the earl and his son strongly supported Armstrong's resolve to keep the two apart. Of course, the Russian girl's belief was ridiculously unfair—but of what avail was it to argue with a distracted woman?—and there could be no knowing what folly her grief might inspire if she encountered Ermyntrude in those early hours.

Sassulitch thought to touch her heart by asking her to care for the orphaned child; but she spurned the boy with words that frightened him almost as greatly as those of the big man who knelt by his mother's side and said she was dead.

So Sassulitch brought the child to Ermyntrude,

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and took occasion to warn the men that Natushka was not to be trusted until her passion had exhausted itself.

“Will this youngster’s claims be admitted by the Government?” asked Armstrong, when he had ascertained that they must remain in their rock eyrie till daylight.

“Such a thing is quite probable,” said the Russian. “It will simplify the succession, and all that is needed is a decree legitimizing the marriage.”

“So, after all, justice has emerged out of this chaos of crime and plotting! It will be a strange ending if you prove to be the guardian of the next Prince Melnikoff.”

“I shall have paid a heavy price for the honor.”

There was silence for a moment, and Armstrong felt that the man was thinking of his two daughters, each sacrificed to the Moloch of princedom. But Sassulitch was inured to suffering; he had graduated in a hard school of philosophy.

“Ah, well,” he continued, with a sigh, “these things are controlled by a power not in man’s ken. Who could have foreseen that a crisis of this magnitude would center around the life or death of a miserable little Lithuanian spy? For we understand now why Boris Melnikoff took his apparent defeat so calmly. He knew he would beat Ivan in the end, and our harmless stratagem in trying to hurry on a marriage between you and the young English lady must have failed. Believe me, had Melnikoff lived,

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he would have married her by fair means or foul—by sheer force, if necessary. That is clear to me, as a Russian, since he disregarded every sign given in the legend——”

“Surely you don’t put any faith in that kind of nonsense?” cried the Englishman.

“No—and yes. What is one to say? On the one hand, seeing the end, we may deem it inevitable; on the other, we have the triple testimony of the chair, the opal, and the chapel. When the chair was occupied by a stranger, the opal lost, and the eikon of St. Stanislaus destroyed, then, said the story, the house of Stenka should perish.”

“But——” began Armstrong; he paused, and was racking his brains to devise words other than those he was on the point of uttering, but Sassulitch only smiled mournfully.

“Yes, there is the boy,” he said. “Evidently, you have not realized the exact bearing of those few bitter sentences exchanged by the brothers before they died. Melnikoff was not a lineal descendant of Stenka, but Ivan was, through his mother, and Natushka is, on her father’s side. It is almost, if not quite, impossible that Natushka should marry this child, and, failing that, the last chance of the old robber chieftain’s line being re-established vanishes. At any rate, the legend says ‘This is the end’—and certainly there has been a holocaust of rival claimants to-night.”

It was found that many days of strenuous labor

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would be needed to clear the drift wrecked by the explosion, so, when the light permitted, the survivors were roped together in small batches and taken to the valley by way of the ledge. The descent was difficult, although not actually perilous, but the Earl of Valletort registered a solemn vow, for the hundredth time, that he would never again approach nearer Russia than Paris, or, perhaps, Homburg, if his gout returned.

There was one absent from the party. Natushka refused to leave the body of the man she loved. She feared lest the Cossacks should dispose of his remains as they had dealt with the other corpses—except that of Prince Boris—by merely throwing them down the cliff, where they fell among the thorns, to be fought over again at night—this time by wolves.

A weary and sad-hearted *cortège* gathered in the clearing where sleighs awaited them. The thaw had rendered the forest tracks difficult, but long detours avoided the worst of the smaller ravines in which torrents were now raging, and at last Bannofka was reached.

There, to her great joy, Ermytrude found her mother. The Countess, it should not be forgotten, was an American, and some glaring discrepancies in the telegrams she had received had called into play certain shrewd faculties, lying dormant, perhaps, but by no means atrophied.

She, too, could write telegrams and, in the result,

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she was joined at Moscow by an attaché of the British Embassy at St. Petersburg.

The presence of a diplomat at this juncture was of inestimable service in straightening the tangle of affairs at Bannofka, and Ermyntrude's friend, the too candid General von Schenck, helped to arrange matters on behalf of the Russian Government. So, within a few days, the Tsar's "pardon" was graciously extended to the rebels, Armstrong's co-operation with the revolt was ignored, and five well-contented English people crossed the frontier at Wirballen.

As Russia faded into the dim perspective of the past, so did the Countess of Valletort grow more stiff and starchy in her demeanor to Armstrong. The younger folk noted these symptoms with alarm, but their significance did not penetrate the earl's denser brain until he had placed an excellent dinner on the foundation of an equally well-cooked luncheon.

Then, with a surprising air of firmness, he summoned his better half to a conclave in their private section of the sleeping-car. A little later, the Countess came to her daughter, kissed her, and said,—

"Your father and I have been discussing your engagement, dear. We think that, perhaps, you have chosen rightly, and our only thought is for your happiness."

Ermyntrude, naturally, cried with delight, since such is the way of the sex, but Carlingham won-

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dered. When the opportunity served, he drew the earl aside in the "smoker."

"How did you manage it, dad?" he inquired.

"Manage what?"

"The quelling of momma—what else? Surely, it is your star turn."

Valletort puffed his cigar complacently.

"She's mighty proud of Ermie," he said, "and, of course, I don't blame her for that; but when it comes to sacrificing our little girl to the sort of thing we have seen at Bannofka, well—I told her to chuck it, and she damn well had to."

And Ermie's brother, being a wise young man, passed no comment.

In due course, Armstrong exchanged from the Indian Army to a home regiment, and a place was found for him on somebody's staff—the War Office can arrange such matters comfortably for smart young officers who are married to 'Earls' daughters—and the most beautiful present Ermytrude received on her wedding day was a necklet of pearls sent by Monsieur Sassulitch, guardian of the young Prince Melnikoff, and administrator of the Volga estates. He wrote to wish her a long and happy married life, and, in a postscript, expressed the hope that Natushka, who was more beautiful than ever, might yet be taught by some adventurous Cossack to replace her first fierce love by a calmer and more enduring one.

On a summer's evening, long afterwards, while

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Colonel and Lady Ermyntrude Armstrong were driving to the opera, their motor-car was stopped by the traffic in Coventry Street, at the top of the Haymarket.

"Oh, look!" cried her ladyship. "I must write and tell Jimmie about this."

She pointed to a file of ragged sandwich-men; their posters announced a lecture on Russia by Prince Demidoff, scientist and political refugee, to be delivered in that well-remembered Anarchists' Club off the Tottenham Court Road. Its subject was no longer "Souls on Fire," but "Signs of the Upheaval."

"I wonder," said her husband, thoughtfully.

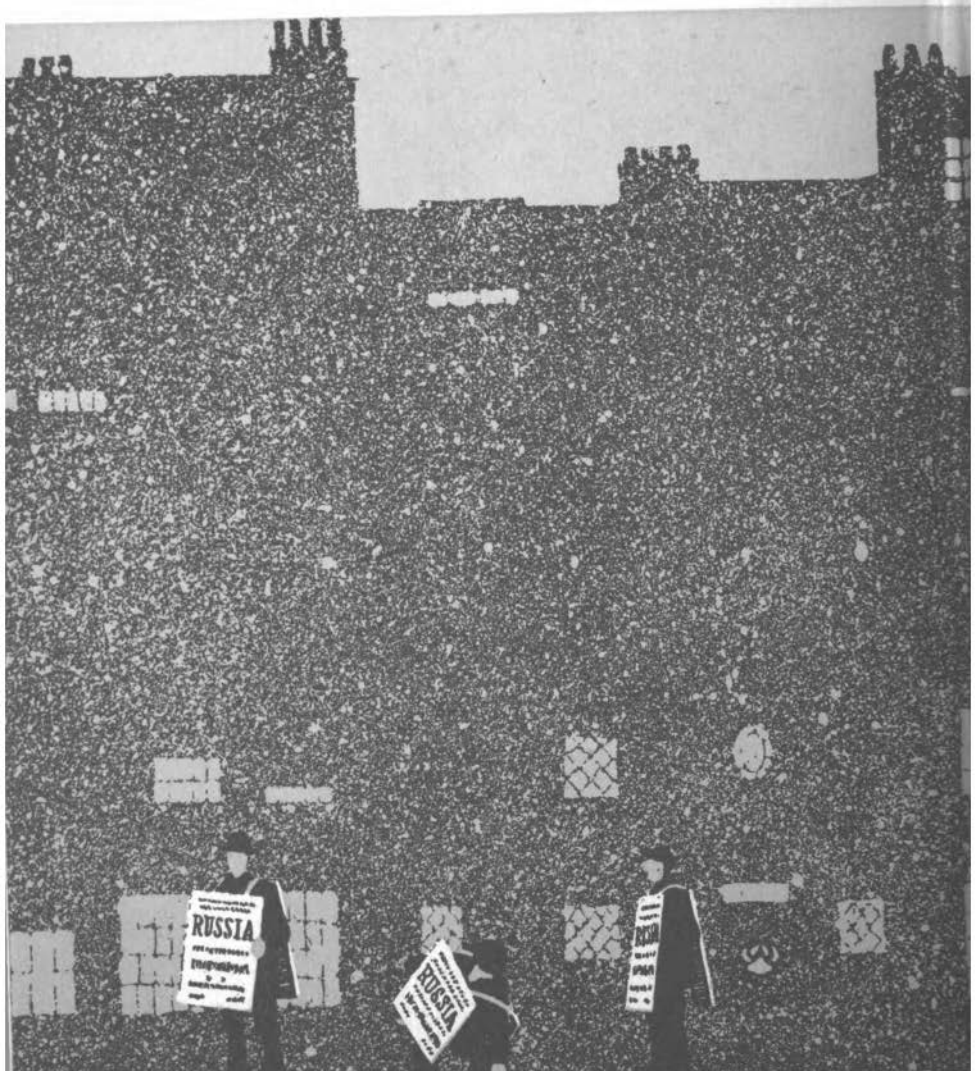
"It would be strange, Frank dear, if in days to come we should know that we helped a little in bringing about the new order," she whispered.

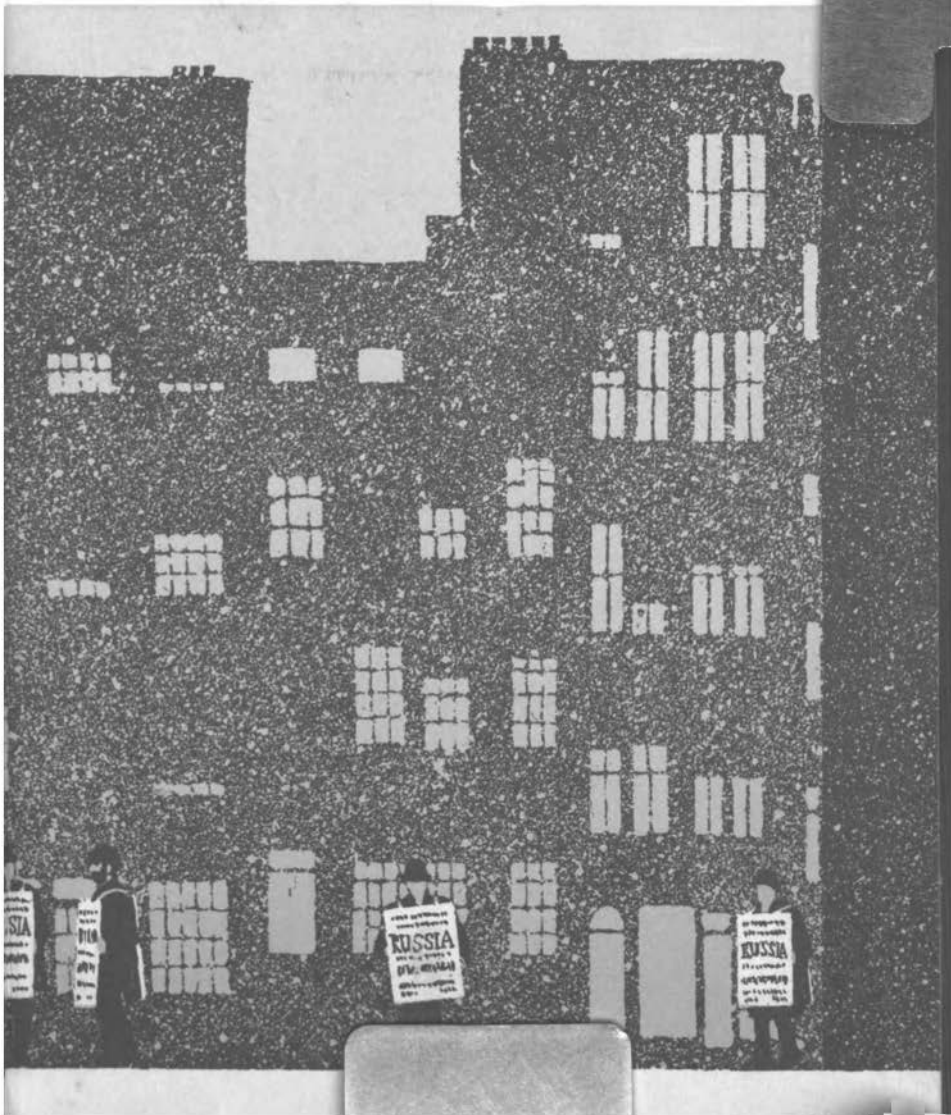
"Between us, we certainly stirred up Bannofka," he agreed. "Ah, mind you, Ermie, I have no quarrel with the Land of the Three Tents. It brought me the best of good fortune. If you had never sat in Stenka's ivory chair I would not be sitting here now by your side."

She laughed joyously.

"I prefer this limousine to the finest ivory chair ever built," she said.

THE END





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BY ROBERT FRASER