

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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[CONTINUED.]

A look of wonder had spread over the face of the prince. He sat upon a rude stool while the other two began to pre-



"What is it that you say—our Vladimir talking of marrying?"

pare for shoeing the horse. The fine animal was brought inside, and he, like his noble master, seemed surprised at his surroundings.

The old woman, patient now under the rebuke of Vladimir, stood waiting.

"This is not much of a place for successful men," said Neslerov, looking around him.

"Ho!" chuckled the old man. "You have come too soon. See, nothing is being done. We are about to leave this place for a spot nearer the railway."

"Business is not good, then?"

"Oh, is it not?" said Vladimir. "When one has a powerful friend to send the ironwork to him, it is easy to get along. We shall have a fine shop and ten men employed in the work. Instead of this hovel my father and mother shall live in a fine house, and my father shall work no more. I shall make money for all."

"Ah! Then I suppose you will be getting married?"

"That is something I have not thought of. I do not know."

"Somebody else knows," chuckled the dotting Papa Paulpoff. "There is an

American girl who thinks well of our—"

"Hush!" exclaimed Vladimir impatiently. "You are speaking of some one whose name must be sacred."

His face was flushed, and Neslerov looked at it searchingly.

"You are very fortunate," said Neslerov jokingly. "I can get no one to marry me."

"You but jest. Any one would be pleased to marry one of Russia's wealthiest princes."

"But such a one!" continued the indiscreet old man. "She is beautiful, she is rich, and she sends him books."

"Good! She is educating you. She must love you," said Neslerov.

"Oh, as to love, that is different. Her acts are kind, and I feel grateful. But for marrying—it will require a fine man to make her happy."

"He will make any one happy," put in the old woman, with a glance of pride at the young giant. "Any girl, even though she might be a princess, would get no better for a husband. Look at those arms! Can they not protect?"

"They could fella a bull!" said Neslerov. "How do you pass the time here? Do you go to the nearest village or to Perm and play?"

"Not he!" said the old man, pausing long enough in his work to add his tribute to this son they loved so well. "That young man spending his time at a village! I think not, your excellency. With his books he spends his nights. He studies or he paints."

"What's that? Paints?"

"Aye, indeed yes. He is a born painter."

"And shoeing horses?"

"One gets a kopeck or two for shoeing horses. One must paint for the pleasure of it, unless one is well known. It will come in time," said Vladimir.

"See, he is not so simple as he looks," said Papa Paulpoff, nodding his head toward the big boy.

"Very far from simple, I should say," answered Neslerov.



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"Old woman!" shouted Papa Paulpoff suddenly, so suddenly that she jumped in alarm. "Go get the picture. Let the prince see the face of her who is so kind to Vladimir."

The old woman obeyed and ran out. "Her picture! You have her picture painted!" stammered Neslerov.

"Yes, I, and the good part of it is that she knows nothing of it. I shall give it to her when she comes again to see us," said Vladimir.

"But I do not understand. How could you draw a face without having it before you?" asked the prince.

"Ha! It is never from my sight. The most beautiful face! A face that one could not forget. I drew it—I painted it—two—three and four times from memory, and always alike."

At this juncture the old woman returned with a picture in a frame. Silently she handed it to Neslerov. He sat with it in his hands, gazing down hungrily upon the features he knew so well. It showed two things—first, that there was, undeveloped in the young man, a talent that would make him famous if it ever got a chance; second, that he must have the picture of the girl indelibly in his mind to paint so true a picture from memory. And, knowing Frances Gordon, Neslerov knew that this man was a most dangerous rival for her hand.

"But that is not all he has done," said the old woman exultingly.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Papa Paulpoff. "He has done nothing else worth mentioning."

Vladimir looked up in surprise and caught a swift look of warning flashed from Michael's eyes to those of his wife. The warning flash was also seen by Neslerov, and his curiosity was whetted.

"Surely this cannot be all," he said. "Such a talent must have an outlet. There must be something else. Come! I will look at all you have and buy what I want."

"But not that," replied Vladimir. "I could not sell that."

"But another of the same face?"

"No, I could not sell that face."

"Then let me see something else—something as good as this—and I will buy it."

"There is another woman's face"—began Mamma Paulpoff.

"Yes, and as beautiful a face as this, but a Russian," added Vladimir. "It was a picture. Papa Paulpoff had it. I found it one day and painted one from it."

"Show it to me," said Neslerov.

His eyes were fixed on the face of Vladimir with something like fear in them now. He glanced from one to another of the group.

Papa Paulpoff showed evidences of nervousness, but Vladimir was eager to satisfy the prince. He sent the old woman for the other portrait.

She brought it and placed it in the hands of the prince. At the first glance his face went white to the very lips. His hands shook. His frame trembled.

"Good heavens!" was breathed under his mustache. The words were not heard, but the manner of the man did not escape Papa Paulpoff.

"Who is this—it is a beautiful woman—but her name?" asked Neslerov, and his voice had turned suddenly hoarse in spite of the effort to control himself.

"I found a small picture one day after a party of nobles passed by," answered Papa Paulpoff.

A swift glance of suspicion shot from the eyes of Neslerov to the face of Papa Paulpoff. But the old man's face was perfectly impassive.

"I will buy this. Name your price," said the prince. "And I will buy the other, the one you found."

"Alas, it is lost!" exclaimed Papa Paulpoff. "It was in a small house we had years ago, and it burned down."

"And the picture destroyed?"

"Alas, yes. It was so pretty, a noble woman, perhaps even a princess," said Papa Paulpoff. "I wept like a child when it was lost."

Tears came into his eyes now at the remembrance of it.

"I will buy this. How much do you ask for it?" he asked of Vladimir.

"On second thoughts, it is not for sale," Vladimir answered.

"I do not wonder," he said. "It is a beautiful face. We do not have them in this part of Russia. In St. Petersburg, perhaps."

He shot a glance at Papa Paulpoff as he spoke, but the old man was bending down putting the hot shoe on the horse's hoof.

The job finished, there remained nothing but to pay the Paulpoffs and depart. The prince did this, bade them a pleasant farewell, mounted his steed and rode away.

"Explain the mystery!" cried Vladimir. "You have not lost the picture! You commanded me never to lose it! Why the lie about the fire?"

"The picture," replied Papa Paulpoff, turning white under his thick beard, "is that of a noble lady who was a friend of my family and whom we as children worshiped as a saint. I do

not want to lose it. That prince seemed to know who she was, and I did not want him to get the picture, so I lied. Old woman, what about that dinner?"

"It awaits," said Mamma Paulpoff.

"Then come. I am famished. If one speaks to me to disturb me eating, I will use my foot."

Once at the table, Papa Paulpoff attacked the meal with the rude manners of the uneducated Russian, and the old woman sat with downcast eyes eating her own meal.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

The Swordfish.

A swordfish has been known to perforate the bottom of a ship and leave its sword to stop up the hole.

Deafness.

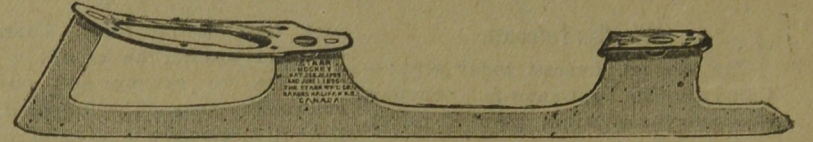
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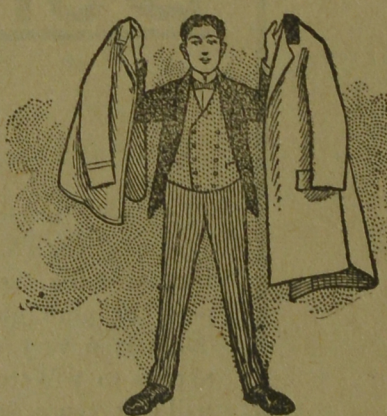
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