

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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(CONTINUED)

"Then we must act with extreme caution, for if she knows this much she will ruin me. For a short time we must act as if we did not know the American had escaped. But you and Unseth must find him—find him—before he gets out of Tomsk. Then, with him again in our grasp, I will deal with Olga. Fool, to put her strength against mine, and in Tomsk!"

"What about Vladimir?" asked Jansky.

"Leave him alone. Let him starve! He can do no harm."

Jansky went quickly to work. Unseth, upon whom he depended most, had gone to another place in the discharge of his duty. Jansky made several fruitless journeys during the day, but no trace of the American could he find.

Olga, when, late in the day, she joined the governor, noticed the studied calm and the steady glitter of his eye. She knew he had discovered the escape of Denton, but the resolute girl did not fear him. She merely nerved herself to finish the work she had set herself to do. She had frequent errands that took her near the office of the superintendent of police, and she kept her ears alert to catch the slightest whisper.

It was evening when she went for the seventh time, and loud voices came from the superintendent's office. So ex-



Winding and turning among the passages, they crept stealthily.

cited were the speakers that they did not realize that their voices reached into the hall.

"I tell you it is so!" said the voice of Unseth, who had returned and who seemed to be angry. "How was I to know that a man could escape from the dungeons? I heard it—that the American had passed through Dorky on his way to Tivoloffsky. I supposed Neslerov had changed his plans."

"Is he going to Tivoloffsky? Old Paulpoff is still there!" said the governor.

"But explain this thing," said Unseth. "How could a man who was chained to the wall in that dungeon get out?"

"By the help of a traitor, and I will know that traitor and slay him!" said Neslerov. "Some one drugged some wine, and Jansky, like a fool, drank it. Also Itzig, who guards the door. During the time they were asleep the American was set free. The other, Paulpoff, is still there. Your work is to capture that American and bring him here."

"If he knows, he may have told some one," suggested Unseth.

"This is no time to talk! Whether he has told or not, he must be brought back! If I am to be destroyed, I will destroy my enemies first! Go! Bring him back to die!"

Olga quickly disappeared up the stairs.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAMA PAULPOFF AVENGED.

IT was midnight in Tomsk, and the palace of the governor was still. Jansky and Unseth had ridden away to overtake Denton at Tivoloffsky. Itzig was at his post in the guardhouse and the new lieutenant of the palace guard paced his measures through the deserted corridors.

But Neslerov was not asleep. Feverish and impatient, he sat in his room, awaiting the return of his police with the American, whose liberty was a

menace to the life of Neslerov. He drank deeply from time to time from a bottle that stood on his table. If he spoke, he did it with a loud voice, but no one was near. His thoughts were spoken thus, as with a man half mad with fear.

"Heavens!" he said as he drank again. "If he reaches Perm, and the truth is known, I shall—what will become of me?"

He started as a light footstep sounded on the hard floor, and his haggard face grew paler as Princess Olga entered.

"Why are you awake?" he asked harshly. He was too excited to think of phrases.

"I could not sleep, and I knew you were not in bed," she answered. "I came to talk."

He stared at her. In his eyes she was as beautiful even as Frances Gordon, but his danger made him think her a tigress seeking to devour him. Yet he dared not show it.

"Why are you alone?" asked Olga. "You usually have Jansky, the superintendent of police, with you?"

"Jansky is away. A noted prisoner has escaped and the superintendent has gone to retake him."

"I heard a commotion. I supposed it was something of that kind. Was it a Russian?"

"Yes—a nihilist."

"I hope they will capture him."

"They will! They must!" said Neslerov fiercely.

Olga's eyes were veiled—they did not betray her thoughts.

"There is much concerning this system that is new to me, and it will take long for me to learn it all. I am already weary with the little I have done."

"Better leave it alone. It is a business for men, not princesses," said Neslerov.

"The study has made me wakeful. Bring me some wine."

He opened a bottle.

"It has puzzled me why you do not marry," he said, trying to hide his fear of her as he poured out a glass of wine.

"Why should I?" she asked. "I have not yet found among the nobles of Russia the man I would marry."

"What sort of man must he be to please you, cousin?"

He was sparring for time. Any hour might bring Jansky back with Denton. Then he could play his part in safety. But with Denton at liberty he dared not act.

"Oh," said Olga, "to please me a man must be honorable, strong and wise. He must not be bound by custom, nor yet must he scorn it. There are ways—in the world we live in there are ways—of being great without being eccentric and without following the lead of others. A man whom I love must be patient and must not use his strength against the weak."

A sarcastic smile crossed his lips.

"You must look outside of Russia," he said.

"Perhaps," she answered. "But you have not pledged me. Must I drink alone?"

His eyes snapped with the remembrance that Jansky and Itzig had been drugged. But she was so handsome, so smiling, that no sign of evil intent was in her face.

"From your hand," he answered, with a show of gallantry.

She poured him a glass of wine, and they drank. For a moment he waited, as if half expecting to fall asleep. But the wine had no ill effect, and they chatted on. But Neslerov grew more impatient as the night wore on. Why did this girl persist in staying up and talking to him? What was in her mind? Was there another plot? He paced to and fro in the room as he spoke. When his back was turned, she made a quick movement and dropped something—not into the wine bottle, but into the bottle of liquor from which Neslerov drank.

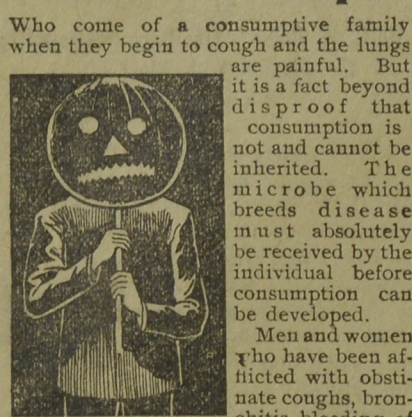
"I think I will retire," said the princess. "It is late, and perhaps I can sleep now."

"I hope you will find rest," he said.

She went out. Neslerov watched her with a dark, saturnine face. What did she mean? He poured out a liberal dose of liquor. The wine was too weak for him. He needed something to steady his shaken nerves. He drank it. In five minutes he was staring blankly at himself in a glass.

"What is this—this feeling?" he

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muttered. "That she devil! I am poisoned! What trick is this? Help! Guard! Lieutenant of the guard!"

The young officer heard, and ran to him.

"Your excellency called," he said.

"Yes—quick—I am poisoned—I am drowsy—bring Princess Olga—quick!"

The lieutenant, wild with apprehension, rushed to Olga's room.

"His excellency the governor wants you!" he panted. "He is poisoned."

"He is not poisoned," answered Olga calmly. "He is merely going to sleep. I want you to stay away from him, and I want you to keep quiet."

The officer stared.

"What do you mean? He is ill! The governor called me and sent for you."

"I am going to him, but you must not."

"But I must. It is my duty!"

"Whom do you obey?"

"Neslerov, governor of Tomsk."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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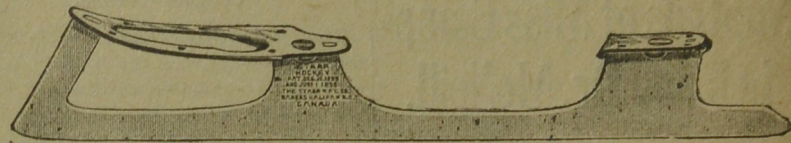
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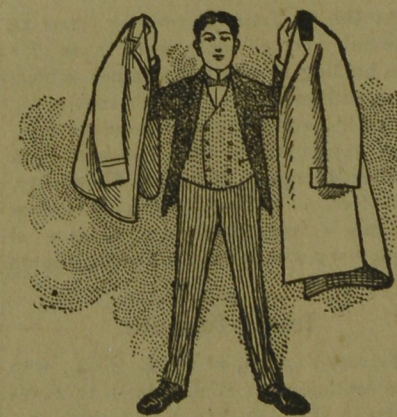
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