

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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"With anything, lady," I answered. "You are welcome to the life or death of Michael Paulpoff."

"Listen," she whispered, turning each way to see that we were not watched. "I am in the house of enemies. My husband, who was the heir of the duke, is dead. My little son would be the heir of this estate, but the duke prefers that his own younger son should inherit, and so they have plotted to destroy my child. Thank God for placing you on this earth, Michael Paulpoff! You were sent to save my boy. And now listen. Were he to return here or were it to be known that he was alive, no matter in what part of Russia he might be, they would manage in some way to kill him. Even now I tremble lest some spy overhear our words and reveal this truth. I do not wish to have you relinquish him and will give you something now, but you must never come to me. Some day I will come to you and claim my boy. Will you swear, Michael Paulpoff, to cherish my boy and preserve this secret?"

"I gave the promise, excellency, and I have kept it. But she also said, 'In case I die, Michael Paulpoff, guard my boy as you would your own, for I think he will be like his father—strong, but no match for the wicked and designing ones. Do not permit any one ever to know this truth.'"

"I have obeyed, excellency. The boy was named Vladimir, and we soon came to love him as our own. He was, as the princess said, strong and of an easy going, simple temperament. He grew up to help me in the forge. The princess did die, and so I held my tongue, as she bade me. But Vladimir—or Prince Alexis—was talented, and he learned to paint. He discovered one day the picture of his mother and became enamored of it. He wished to paint it, and I permitted him. Then one day Neslerov came and saw it. I was frightened, for I knew he would suspect, and I knew from his manner that we would soon hear from him again.

"We were charged with conspiracy, excellency, we who had honest hearts and had never wronged any one, and

were bunched on to Siberia. We were sent to Tomsk, where no doubt Neslerov intended to kill the young man when he got an opportunity. Then one day that American named Denton came to our hut in Tivoloffsky. In some way he had learned of the picture. I do not know why he was interested in Vladimir, but he asked to see the picture and questioned me.

"Paulpoff," he said, "Vladimir is not your son."

"I shivered, for I did not know but he was a friend of the governor. But he said he was going to learn who Vladimir was, so I told him the story. He said that Vladimir could not be any worse off than at present, and he could secure the help of the government to restore the estate to him and punish Nicholas Neslerov. He took the picture, and some one came to our hut after that and whipped my wife to death. Vladimir swore vengeance, and today he has killed Jansky and Unsgethrop."

"This is a strange story of cruelty and crime," said the governor general. "But, so far as you are concerned, I congratulate you, Prince Neslerov, duke of Graslov. And this faithful old man, whose life is almost run, how can I show my appreciation of what he has done for Russia? Paulpoff, you shall name your own reward, and it is yours."

"To live with Vladimir," said the old man simply.

"And this American! Where is he?"

"Wounded; lying in the house of a priest at Tivoloffsky," answered Vladimir, or, as he should now be called, Alexis.

"Nicholas Neslerov, what have you to say?" asked the governor general.

"It is a lie," said Nicholas.

"Your own face does not indicate it. I believe this is the truth. You are a prisoner! Call the officer of the guard!"

"I am here, your excellency!"

"This lieutenant," said Olga, "whose name I do not know, assisted me in freeing the prince from the dungeons under this palace. I told him he would be a captain."

"Your name?" said the governor general.

"Ormidoff."

"Captain Ormidoff, conduct this prisoner to the same dungeon in which he had confined the prince, and see that



"I am your slave forever."

he is treated as becomes a murderer and enemy of Russia. This is enough, princess. I congratulate you."

The eyes of De Muloff were moist, and he took Olga's hands and pressed them.

They heard Neslerov cursing as he was led away. He was chained in the dungeon and, in an effort to free himself that night, burst a blood vessel and died, with no hand to help.

As the governor general turned away Olga smiled at Alexis.

"You are not quite my cousin, yet we are in a way related," she said. "I am glad that I have succeeded in giving you your own."

"I am your slave forever," he answered, stooping, with his great shoulders almost covering her, and his lips met hers—and she did not resist.

In the house of the priest at Tivoloffsky Denton was recovering from his wounds. His first feeling as he gradually came to himself was of great weakness. A cool small hand

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was placed upon his brow, and he looked up into the face of Frances Gordon.

"Do you know me, Jack?"

"Yes, I know you, Frances. What has happened?"

"You have been ill. You were shot two weeks ago in the house where the Paulpoffs lived. Do you remember?"

"Yes—they came—did they kill poor old Paulpoff?"

"No. Vladimir—the one we know as Vladimir, but now the Duke of Graslov—came and killed them instead. He killed Jansky and Unsgethrop and brought you here."

"Then it is proved already!" he said, staring.

"Yes. A princess, Olga Neslerov, cousin of his mother, having penetrated the veil of mystery, came to Tomsk to pursue her inquiries. She unmasked Nicholas Neslerov before the governor general, and he died that same night in the very cell in which Vladimir had been confined."

"I am glad," he said, with a sigh.

"I knew he was not the son of the Paulpoffs, and, since you loved him, I did not wish you to marry an unknown. That was why I tried to restore him to his rank. I did not do it, but I am glad it was done—glad for him and for you."

"Poor Jack!" she said, nestling her head close to his. "Did you think I was going to marry him?"

"Yes; I thought you loved him. That was why I wanted to bring him to his own."

"Poor, noble Jack! Do you know who I am going to marry? There was never any love between Vladimir and me. I helped him, and he appreciated it. But I am going to marry the noblest, bravest, best man on this earth."

"I hope you will be happy, Frances."

"I know I shall be, Jack. And—can you forgive me, Jack, for all those ugly things I said? And will you love me—just the same as you used to—for it's you—you, Jack, I want to marry if you want me."

"Frances!"

"That's right," said the soft voice of the old priest. "He is all right now. I say to you, Denton, that an angel hovered at your bedside, and it was not the angel of death. It was a strong, fine young woman."

"I nursed you, Jack, and papa has been here every day."

"And I'm here now," said the voice of Gordon. "Is he awake?"

"He is awake, but he hasn't said he wants to marry me," said Frances, with a laugh.

"He don't need to say it. Well, old chap, I'm glad you've pulled through, but I'm hanged if I think you would if it hadn't been for Frances."

"I am sure of it," he answered, "and I am going to spend all the rest of my life paying her for it."

She laughed—the happiest laugh of her life—and stooped and kissed him.

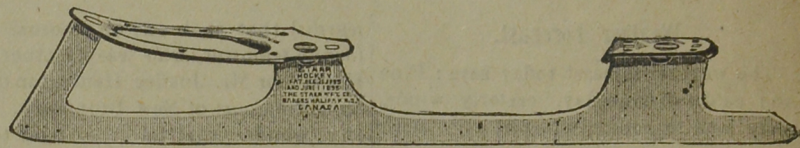
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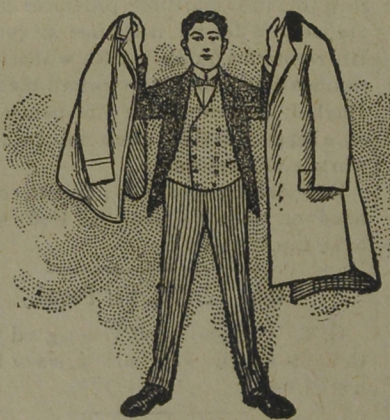
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