

FRIENDS WITH A NIHILIST

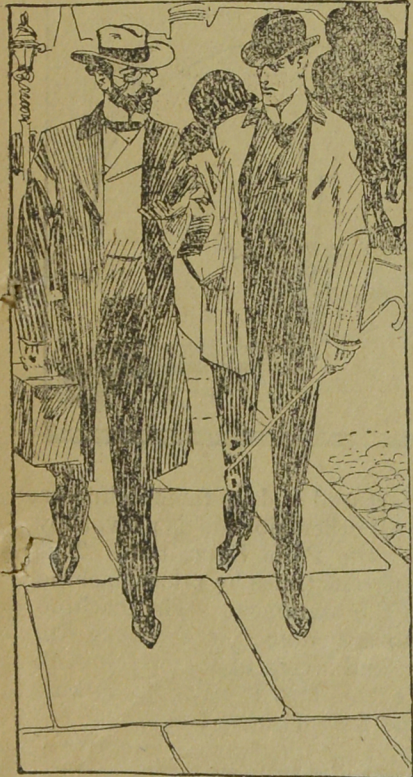
By PETTIGREW EDGAR

I had been doing Poland in a leisurely way—a young Englishman who had plenty of money and could go where he pleased—when I fell into trouble at Sandowin, on the Austrian border. It is no use to tell an Englishman or an American that he must keep his mouth shut while traveling in the dominions of the czar. He sets out intending to do so, but something is sure to happen sooner or later to arouse his sympathies or indignation, and he finds himself expressing an opinion that gets him into hot water.

Now and then as I journeyed I had heard of cases where citizens had been imprisoned or sent off to Siberia without trial, and had witnessed many incidents of autocratic power, but had come out of them unscathed. It was while I was mixing with the rather strange crowd at the hotel in Sandowin that I learned, almost by accident, of the case of a returned exile. He was a man named Ostrov, who had formerly been quite a prominent citizen of the town and had considerable wealth. It was in my own room that he told the story of his experience to three of us. He had been arrested at a minute's notice and started off for Siberia without a legal trial. His property had been confiscated, his family oppressed and driven out, and it was only when he was ready to set out on the long journey that he was told he had been sentenced to penal servitude for fifteen years for having said that taxes were too high. He had served his time and returned to find all his family dead or scattered beyond recall. He was an old man now, broken in health and having but a short time to live, and when he told us of his treatment our indignation was intense. I pitied him, and I know I used strong language and also made him a cash present.

You will scarcely credit me when I say that Ostrov rewarded me by going straight to the police and reporting all that I had said. It is possible that it was required of him, but I think he did it in a truckling way in order to curry favor. Before noon next day I received an official visit and was warned to get out of the country. I had sense enough to realize what that meant and to go. In the eyes of the Russian authorities I had become a "suspect," and had I been a Poleander I would have meant a dungeon for me. I headed for Cracow, just within the Austrian border, and as soon as I had crossed the border the matter was settled. While Austria is almost as autocratic as Russia, in one way you are not debarred from expressing a free opinion about other countries. I therefore took satisfaction in telling my story and abusing Russia.

It was this story that brought about my acquaintance with a Poland nihilist named Grodno. I knew at once, of course, that he was a Poleander, but it was a fortnight before I learned that he was an exile and a nihilist. He was forty years old, well educated and of good address, and his story was that of a hundred other exiles. At the age of twenty-eight, while a professor in one of the colleges at Warsaw and while thoroughly loyal to the czar in every thought, he had expressed a political opinion that caused his down-



HE LED THE WAY INTO THE POLICE BUILDING.

fall. He was arrested, confined in a dungeon for seven months and then without the farce of a trial was banished from the country.

Grodno arrived in Cracow to hunt up some old friends, but as soon as the police officials learned that he was an exile they arrested and insulted him and ordered him to move on. He made his way to England, learned the language thoroughly and in time became

a leading nihilist. For about ten years he had spent all his time scheming and planning against the Russian government, and all the efforts of the czar's officials to locate or identify him had been futile. Grodno did not tell me as plainly as I have told you what he was, being too prudent for that, but he left me to infer it. As to his business in Cracow I did not inquire, and he did not volunteer the information.

All the towns along the Polish border are under the espionage of Russian spies, and I thought Grodno was taking

great risks to show himself as openly as he did. He moved about in perfect unconcern for ten days, being most of the time in my company, and we had no adventure. Then he asked me one morning to accompany him to the police station, where he was going to seek certain information. I noticed that he had a package under his arm, but gave it no particular attention. As we walked along the street he was as chatty as usual, and he led the way into the police building without the slightest hesitation. It was a two story building of stone and brick. There was a prison in the basement and offices were on the first and second floors. We entered the main room, presided over by a captain of police on one side and an information bureau on the other. There were a number of people making inquiries, and Grodno and I sat down on one of the benches to wait. He stepped to a window, asked a question I did not catch, and then passed out, and I followed. I noticed that he was pale and flurried, and when I joked him about it he said that he had seen a visitor in the room whom he thought he recognized. He had another errand, he said, and asked me to wait at the hotel for him. He left me on a street corner with a wave of his hand, and that was the last I ever saw of him.

Two hours had passed, and I was still waiting in the office of the hotel, when the town was suddenly shaken as with an earthquake, and five minutes later it was known everywhere that the police station had been blown up. I rushed to the scene with thousands of others, and the sight was one never to be forgotten. The fine, large building was nothing but a smoking pile. It had collapsed, the walls blocking up the street, and the roof was lying on the floor of the first story. In the cells of the basement were twenty-eight prisoners, all of whom escaped harm. On the two floors were thirty police officials, including the chief, and not one of them escaped death. It was a day and a night before the debris was removed and the bodies were recovered and another day before an investigation was begun. During this interval I heard nothing whatever from Grodno. After a day had gone by I made up my mind that he was among the killed. It came to me that he was not carrying the package when he left the building, and I figured that he had returned for it and had been made a victim with the others. I got a look at every body taken out, but his was not among them.

It was only when a public investigation had begun and the newspapers were talking about nihilists and explosives that I suddenly caught my breath. In less than an hour I was speeding out of Cracow by train, and it was not until I was beyond the limits of Austria that I dared try to think it out. Grodno had come to Cracow to do exactly as he had done. He owed the police a grudge, and he left that package to blow up the building. Whether it was exploded by clockwork or by some one seeking to open it could not be told, but it certainly caused the disaster, and he had made good his escape before it happened. I learned that the investigation threw no light on the matter except that some explosive had been used, and it was not even laid to nihilists. I could have told a story; but, innocent as I was of any complicity, it would have resulted in my death on the gallows.

One Definition of It.
"What do you consider domesticity in man?"
"It is the trait of wanting to stay home when his wife wants him to go out with her."
"And what is domesticity in woman?"
"That is the trait of being willing to stay home when her husband wants to go out without her."

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D.—Very. I gave him a copy of "Robinson Crusoe" the other day, and he got lots of fun out of it.
H.—I didn't know he could read.
D.—He can't read, but he tears the pages out and makes boats of them. Oh, yes; he's fond of books!

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