

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued

"Who is this?" cried Unsgethoph as Vladimir entered.

The blazing eyes of the avenger took in the whole scene. A small lantern stood on the floor.

"I am your master!" cried the blacksmith, and the words were as if roared by a lion.

With a leap he landed between the two. Jansky's pistol and Unsgethoph's knife were drawn. Vladimir's right hand closed on Unsgethoph's neck. His left shot toward Jansky, and the superintendent of police was powerless in that terrible grasp.

"Now pray to heaven," cried Vladimir, "for this hour is to be your last! In this house you killed that poor old woman who had loved me. Here you have come to kill the American and Papa Paulpoff. Die like the dogs of murder that you are! For your crimes take this! And this!"

With his muscles of iron he brought their heads together with a crash.

"And this!" repeated Vladimir, swinging them apart and then together again.

Flinging Jansky from him with a curse, he stooped quickly, seized Unsgethoph by the legs and swung him in the air. He brought his head against the rude wooden wall, and the blood



He brought their heads together with a crash.

sputtered from his mouth. Jansky, with chattering teeth, tried to get his pistol aimed at the giant's head, but Vladimir caught him round the waist and sent him, as an Indian throws a spear, into the corner of the room, where he lay motionless with a broken neck.

"Come, Papa Paulpoff," ordered Vladimir. "You are not injured. You are needed at Tomsk at once. But first I must get this poor fellow to a priest."

He picked up the bleeding and unconscious Denton and set off with him to a nearby cottage. The priest admitted him, knowing his voice.

"What is your burden?" cried the priest. "What terrible thing has been done in Tivolofsky tonight?"

"Nothing much," said Vladimir calmly. "I have killed two wolves."

CHAPTER XVII.

"I AM GOING TO MARRY YOU!"

It was noon in Tomsk, and the Princess Olga had not yet slept. She sat at her window, which faced toward the great plaza, and watched and listened. Suddenly there came to her ears the faint sound of a bugle. It came from the direction of the new railway station. The princess smiled. Then came a knock at her door.

"Open it, Therese."

Therese was pale and trembling. The events of the past two nights had shaken her nerves till she was on the verge of collapse. But she obeyed, and the same lieutenant who had assisted during the night came in.

"I fear for your life!" he said. "Neslerov has recovered and is cursing like a madman. He called for me and ordered me to fetch you to him."

"It will not be a difficult task," said the princess. "I will go."

"But he will kill you. He is speaking words that no sane man could ever speak. He says if he is to be destroyed he will destroy you first."

"Does he know that Vladimir is gone?"

"He suspects it. He has not been to see."

Olga looked from her window. Three men were riding abreast, coming toward the palace, and after them a detachment of the soldiers always at the station.

"Some one comes!" said the officer.

"Yes. Do you know who that is?"

"I do not," replied the officer. "It must be one of the generals."

"You will see," said Olga. "Come! We will go to Neslerov!"

The governor glared at her in mad fury.

"You drugged that wine! You put me to sleep!" he shouted.

"I drugged the liquor, for I had work to do," she answered.

"What have you done? Let us be frank. You came here as an enemy and as a spy."

"I came to right a wrong; to avenge the crime of Graslov."

"What do you know?"

"I know the truth."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Restore that which is lost and undo what was done by wickedness."

An evil look came into his face, and he stepped toward the door. The lieutenant blocked it.

"Out of the way, dog!" cried Neslerov.

"I protect her highness."

"You! You protect against my orders?"

"There is a higher than you. I obey the czar."

Neslerov started back, so powerful in effect is the name of the czar.

"The czar?"

At the very door of the palace a bugle blew its blast.

"Make way! Admit his excellency the governor general," came a voice. Neslerov went white and leaped at Olga.

"You sent for him, and this means my death! We die together!"

"In the name of the czar!" cried Olga, and the sword of the lieutenant touched the breast of Neslerov.

"What means this?"

The voice came from a tall and soldierly man wearing a brilliant uniform, who blocked the doorway with his burly form.

"De Muloff! Governor general!" gasped Neslerov.

"Sit down," said the governor general sternly. "You sent for me in haste, princess. I came as soon as possible. Fortunately there was a train."

"The railroad has saved me and the Duke of Graslov," said Olga.

Neslerov darted a look of hatred toward her.

"Bring Therese, my attendant," said Olga to the lieutenant.

There was another commotion at the entrance, and three soldiers and an officer came in with two prisoners.

"To the governor!" cried the officer.

"There was murder at Tivolofsky!"

The governor general turned calmly to see who had come. The two prisoners were Vladimir and Papa Paulpoff.

"Bring them in here," ordered Olga.

"Let them be brought before the governor general."

"This man murdered the superintendent of police and Unsgethoph," said the officer in charge.

"True," said Vladimir, "I did."

Neslerov was the picture of despair and baffled rage and hate. His glance was venomous, but his very helplessness made him haggard. Therese, white lipped and shivering, came in. Neslerov looked from one to the other. He knew that something was coming—the end of his career. The governor general waited, looking chiefly at Olga, for from her he expected the first bomb.

"Look at that man, Therese!" commanded Olga.

It was a dramatic scene as the girl stood with perfect poise and pointed her finger at Neslerov.

"I see him," faltered Therese.

"Who is he?"

"Prince Nicholas Neslerov."

"Prince Nicholas Neslerov, let me tell you what the governor general already knows," said Olga, and her voice was cold and steady. "For many years my youth prevented a clear understanding of things. I was born after the death of my unfortunate cousin and so did not fully take in the significance of the mystery of Graslov till a few years ago. But when I did learn of it I resolved to sift it to the bottom and make certain that the one who caused her death should be punished. For years my efforts were unavailing. I pursued every line of investigation that occurred to me, and in them all I had the sanction and assistance of the czar. At last, during a sojourn at Graslov in another name, I met this woman whom you have heard me call Therese. Do you know who she is? She is Mme. Dendoff, widow of that Dendoff who was the slave of your wicked father and yourself."

Neslerov was too crestfallen already to show further effect of her words. He made no answer.

"For twenty years this woman has lived with the truth locked in her bosom because she feared her husband. The governor general is here and will hear this case at once, and from that moment when he hears the truth you are in his hands. Therese, who is that man?"

She pointed at Vladimir as she spoke.

"That—is—the Duke of Graslov!" said the woman firmly.

"Tell your story."

"It was twenty years ago, your excellency," said Therese, speaking directly to the governor general, "that the little Prince Alexis was lost. He was missing from the palace at Graslov one evening, and the poor princess was beside herself with grief and anxiety. A search was made, and my husband, who was in the service of the duke, returned from the Kama and reported that the child had been seen wandering on its banks, and he brought back a portion of its garments, which he said he found close to the water. It was believed that the child was drowned, and the princess grieved for her dead boy. The poor princess did not survive the shock long, and when she died

there was trouble between the two branches of the Neslerovs. Her family claimed that the duke had misused her and caused her death. It was never settled, and the two families have since been enemies.

"It was not less than two years after when, one night, while he was intoxicated, my husband said something that aroused my suspicion—that he knew what had become of the young prince. I taxed him with it, and he was mad enough to confide in me. He had been poor, but since the loss of the young prince he had not worked, but had plenty of money. This also caused me to suspect. He told me, in his drunken fashion, that the Duke of Graslov did not wish the son of the princess to inherit the title or estate. As the father of the boy had died he was the heir, but the duke preferred his younger son, Nicholas.

"The two, the duke and Prince Nicholas, paid my husband to take the child and drown it. He was a wicked man, my husband, and he agreed. He did take the child to the Kama and was about to take from it the telltale clothes when it cried lustily, and a powerful man sprang from the bushes and took the child. There was a fight in which my husband was badly whipped. But he did not dare report to the duke that he had failed, and so he carried out the plans and reported the finding of the clothing at the river. This was the clothing he had taken off preparing to throw the child in the river. To me this revelation was a great shock, but my husband threatened my life if I ever breathed a word of it to a single person. I knew he would keep his threat, and so I dared say nothing, for the house of Graslov was rich and powerful, and I feared to speak even to the police.

"Thus I lived year after year with the shadow of my husband's crime upon my heart, until I thought I would go mad. Moved by an impulse I could not control, I determined to learn if the child was alive. I found it in the house of the blacksmith Paulpoff at Perm. Having learned that the little Alexis was well and happy I felt easier, but resolved that when my opportunity came I would reveal the truth. The old duke died and Nicholas became his heir and finally became governor of Tomsk. A short time ago my husband died, and I was free to tell. There came to Graslov one day a beautiful girl, giving a name that was not familiar, but she was the picture of that lovely princess who had died, and I watched her. I knew she was searching for the truth, and I told her what I knew. We went to St. Petersburg, where she told the czar, and he gave her authority under his seal. We went back to Perm, but the Paulpoffs were on their way to Siberia. The princess resolved to follow, and this meeting is the result."

"How did you know the boy in Paulpoff's house was the young prince?" asked the governor general.

"I saw his mother's picture which had been around his neck. I recognized his face, his voice, his manner, and Paulpoff told me how he came into his possession."

"This is strange," said the governor general, turning to the old man sternly. "How was it that you kept the young prince and did not disclose the fact that he was alive?"

"It was the prayer of his poor mother," said Papa Paulpoff. "I, too, have my story. On that day I was wandering by the river and had been fishing. I heard the cry of a child. I ran toward the sound and saw the man taking off its clothing. He cursed it and struck it and said that its voice would soon be stilled. I knew he meant to murder the child, and so I attacked him. I was a powerful man then, though not nearly so powerful as Vladimir—as the prince—is now. We fought, and I severely whipped him. I then took the child home with me and resolved to restore him to his parents, for I supposed he had been taken for revenge by enemies. When I saw the beautiful face of the princess, I knew it must be the boy's mother, and so I began to think who among the nobles who lived near the Kama had such a woman. I had heard of the beauty of the Princess Neslerov, and so I went to find her, leaving the child at the forge. I saw her at Graslov and asked to be alone with her. She ordered her women away. I showed her the portrait.

"My picture!" she cried—"the picture that was on little Alexis! Oh, what have you to tell me?"

"I told her what had happened, how I had taken the boy and that he was safe and well in my house. She began to weep tears of mingled joy and sorrow."

"Who are you? What is your name?" she asked.

"Michael Paulpoff, princess," I told her.

"Oh, Michael Paulpoff," she cried, and it seemed that her heart would break—"can I trust you?"

"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 died, 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 bundled off 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 Tivolofsky. 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 Unsgethoph."

"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 Tivolofsky," 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 Tivolofsky Denton was recovering from his wounds. His first feeling as he gradually came to himself was of great weakness. A cool small hand 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 Unsgethoph 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.

THE END.

The Work of Life Savers.

There is one class of public servants about whose work we hear comparatively little and who, as a rule, do not get the full measure of credit for their heroic services. These are the life savers stationed at various points of peril along our ocean and lake coasts. In the annual report just made to the treasury department an unusually good showing is made. Notwithstanding that the number of disasters within the scope of the service was greater than ever before, with the exceptions of 1901 and 1898, the property loss was comparatively light, and few persons lost their lives.

The number of vessels totally lost was fifty-one. Fifty-four vessels of more than 1,000 tons, thirty-three of them being steamers, met with accidents or disasters. To documented vessels the number of accidents was 385 and to undocumented craft 361. On the former class there were 3,128 persons, of whom nineteen were lost, and the latter carried 796 persons, six of whom perished.

The total value of property involved in these accidents was \$14,393,010. Of this amount only \$2,267,799 was lost. Thus it is seen that the life saving service aided in the saving of more than \$12,000,000 in property and that out of 4,224 persons whose lives were endangered only twenty-five perished.

When it is considered that the net cost of the service for the year was only \$1,654,392, it must be conceded that this department of public work represents a particularly good investment of the people's money. These brave men, who risk their lives to save the lives and property of others, deserve well of their country.

An Illinois farmer agreed to pay a marriage broker \$100 if he got a satisfactory wife through the agency. The lady was not strictly to the farmer's liking, and after the wedding he refused to pay the \$100. The broker sued and got a judgment for \$50. If the farmer is dissatisfied, he ought to be willing to let the broker earn the other \$50 by getting a divorce for him.

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