

"SOULS ON FIRE"

A Story of Russian Intrigue, Love and Adventure

CHAPTER XIX.
Two Women

By LOUIS TRACY

Author of "The Wings of the Morning,"

"The Pillar of Light," Etc.

(Copyright, 1904, by Edward J. Clode. All rights reserved.)

THE meeting between the fair young English-woman, Lady Ermytrude Grandison, and the black-eyed, raven-haired beauty Natushka, whose betrothal in infancy had proved such an entanglement for Prince Boris Melnikoff, would have inspired an artist of the Rembrandt school.

The large gloomy rock-chamber in which Ermytrude and Armstrong found themselves was feebly lighted by pine logs glowing in a rough hearth. The substitution of this means of obtaining warmth for the stove almost universally used throughout Russia in itself was an innovation bespeaking the habits of a race far removed from the inhabitants of the plains or "black earth" portion of the country. The atmosphere of the apartment was singularly free from smoke, so those who contrived this elevated fastness in the depths of a wild land evidently had possessed more than elementary notions of ventilation.

The youthful Circassian, who was seated listlessly in a huge curved chair, somewhat resembling the ornamental furniture of the later Saxon period in England, rose with alert animation when the Russian guide announced: "The English lady and her friend, excellence."

It was evident that she was awaiting some other visitor. They had taken her by surprise; but rank, notwithstanding Burns' dictum, often is more than the guinea's stamp, and this princess of the steppe had a dignity and self-possession that were all her own.

"You are welcome," she said softly. "If you will pardon me for a moment I will procure a light. Doubtless you are tired and hungry. We have wine and meat, or would you like some tea?"

Frank explained that his companion spoke no Russian, so he would translate. To his great surprise the girl answered in good English:

"I am sorry. I forgot that you were strangers. I think I can make myself understood in English."

"No one could be more pleased than I to hear you say that," broke in Ermytrude eagerly. "This is a very weird place. I seem to have lived in a dream for many hours. To hear my own language from another woman is a reassurance in itself."

"Ah, mademoiselle, you never should have come to Russia! You were happy in England, I have been told. Why, then, did you come to this land of anguish?"

Nothing more extraordinary or fascinating ever before had met Ermytrude's eyes than when the radiance of two lamps lit up the face and form of the Circassian, and revealed the rough-hewn walls of rock with their barbaric adornment of antique arms and trophies of the chase.

The skin of the handsome nomad was whiter even than the English girl's; but its pallor, and the dark, luminous orbs which shone like black diamonds beneath arched and deeply penciled eyebrows, gave Natushka an almost spiritual appearance, which, however, was lost when the beholder noted the superbly modeled bust displayed by a tight-fitting bodice of saffron-hued Indian silk.

In deference to the climate, she wore a fur robe thrown loosely over her shoulders, while her dress was of a dark, thickly woven mohair, and the slippers in which Armstrong had seen her in London gave place to a far more elegant pair of high Russian boots of soft leather.

When Ermytrude, glad of the relief, divested herself of her heavy sables, and advanced toward

The synopsis of preceding chapters will be found at the end of this instalment on page 15.



Nothing More Fascinating Ever Had Met Ermytrude's Eyes Than When the Lamps Lit Up the Face and Form of the Circassian

her hostess in the trim elegance of an English tailor-made costume, the contrast between the two was heightened. If clothes, according to the Sage of Chelsea, make men and women, they also constitute nationality. Here were Belgravia and the Caucasus meeting on equal terms.

Natushka, although graceful and courteous, had no veneration of conventionality. She had not been taught to smile when ill at ease, to simulate delight when bitterly disappointed. She gave Ermytrude a searching glance, as if she would learn the secret of the spell exercised by her rival on the Russian Prince.

Then, with a certain severe politeness, she repeated her query about refreshment, and learning that Ermytrude would like some tea, bade the Russian bring a samovar.

Turning to Armstrong she said: "Where is Ivan Stephanovitch?"

"I do not know," he replied.

"But he went with you to Bannofka?"

"Yes. He became separated from us. I inquired what had become of him; but none of the others knew anything of his whereabouts."

"Are you speaking truly? Was there a fight? Has he been wounded?"

Much astonished at the quiet menace in the girl's voice, Frank answered: "I assure you that when

last I saw him he was quite uninjured and in safety. We all reached the vaults without difficulty."

"It is strange he sent no message." "Your brother is not a man who takes others into his confidence."

"Brother! Why do you call Ivan my brother? You, I have been told, know Russia well enough to comprehend that when a man speaks of his sister he does not always mean a member of his family."

Armstrong suddenly remembered that Prince Melnikoff had told him that the relationship was an imaginary one. The girl's suspicions concerning the absence of Ivan, joined to the distant firing he heard from the gallery, determined him to make some definite inquiry from the men without.

"We perhaps have been remiss," he said with a bow. "Permit me to ascertain the views of our companions. I shall return soon," he went on, looking at Ermytrude. "You will be quite comfortable here. Probably I can bring you news of Lord Valletort and your brother."

Ermytrude smiled at him trustfully. "We have anxieties in common," she said, addressing Natushka; but the other was busy with the tea-urn that had been brought in by the Russian attendant.

When left alone with her uncommon hostess, Ermytrude sipped her tea and began again, by way of conversation: "I have had a series of very trying experiences during the last ten days."

"Ten days!" was the unlooked-for retort. "Your sufferings are brief. I have known unhappiness for ten years—since my father died."

"It sometimes is hard to grasp the cause of the misery which creeps into life," Ermytrude said. "My own lot was an en-

vious one, yet I was tempted to come here and indulge in foolish dreams, which have done no little harm in many directions and possibly may add to your troubles."

"Why do you say that?" demanded the Circassian quickly.

"Forgive me if I am wrong; but I have been told that you were the promised wife of Prince Melnikoff."

"That is true."

"Well, were it not for his infatuation with regard to me, and my own folly in thinking that our marriage was a possible thing, many present difficulties never would have existed, and certainly all the events of the past few days would not have happened."

"You do not love him, then?"

"No. At last I know my own heart."

"Do you love this Englishman who has risked his life to save you?"

Ermytrude blushed; but she was a little frightened by the imperious manner of her questioner. "No," she said. "We are only friends. He is my brother's friend, really."

"But there is some man for whose sake you have thrown over Prince Boris?"

"No, indeed! You forget that I was about to marry his highness only a few hours ago, thinking that thereby I should rescue my father and brother from a dangerous condition."

"I forget nothing. You and your surroundings have filled the minds of my people with bitterness for many months. If you wish to become Princess Melnikoff, why did you not marry in London?"

"I never have really wished anything of the sort."

"But he is rich and noble, and a man of very fine appearance. You say you love none other. Why have you not accepted him and helped him to defy his enemies? Once wed to you, he had little