

# THE MYSTERY OF COUNT LANDRINOF

BY FRED WHISHAW

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## CHAPTER IV. A SLIGHT CLEW FOUND.

Father had come to this place, of that there was no doubt whatever. He had been out on the moors, that was equally certain, and he had presented himself at the station with the intention of returning to town, but had been balked of his train and—And there was an end of the trail so far.

"Please think again," I murmured. "Are you perfectly certain the count did not catch some other train later in the day or perhaps early the next morning? Did you see each train away?"

"I have not missed a single train, in or out, since Easter," said the station master.

"Could he have gone home any other way?" I asked presently. "It is too far to drive in a village cart or to ride on pony back; my father likes to travel comfortably. There's no post station about near here, is there?"

"Not nearer than Balota," said the station master, "and thence he would have to drive all the way round by Riabova, over a terrible road. The count would scarcely have done that."

My friend, as chief officer upon the railway, a new institution, and very proud of his office, cherished an obvious scorn for the old-fashioned method of traveling by post road.

"Still," I said, "if he was in a great hurry he might have chosen that way in spite of the slowness and discomfort of the journey."

"Perhaps," said the station master and relapsing into a scornful silence as a protest doubtless against the very suggestion of any person of light and leading using the post road under any circumstances, now that the railway was laid. He showed no further inclination to converse. I wired Percy at my home in St. Petersburg that I had found a slight clew and begged him to come up and help me work it as soon as possible after his arrival, after which I set myself to make inquiries among the peasants in the village, hoping that I might find one among them who had seen my father on the fatal Wednesday and perhaps even driven him to Balota, to the post station there.

I interviewed half a dozen of the villagers, each one more crassly stupid than the last. They did not know the gentlemen who hired the shooting, even by sight, they declared. They knew the



keepers. But what had they, the peasants, to do with the sportsmen? There was nothing to be got out of them, for they came to shoot, and shot and went away again, being in a hurry all the while, and therefore it was useless to cultivate their acquaintance.

Even the offer of a "nachaok," or tip, though it awakened the interest of the sleepy rascals, did not seem to stimulate their memories or even their inventive talents. The Russian monk is the finest and most accomplished liar in the world if you give him time, but you must not hurry him. He is not intellectual enough to conjure up a plausible tale at a moment's notice. However, these men declared that they had seen neither count nor any one else on the Wednesday, and each one asked for a tip on the plea that to cast back one's memory so far was a serious exertion. One man explained that a tip was due to him for his truthfulness. "You can see I'm an honest man," he said, "for if I had lied and said I drove this barin to Balota you would have believed me and given me twice as much as I now ask."

But a short while after I had returned to the lodge, dispirited and bewildered and uncertain what next to do, a little peasant man came mysteriously into the room in which I sat. He bowed and crossed himself in front of the ikon in the corner and then oilily approached my chair and with finger to lip whispered "Sh-h!" Then he glanced melodramatically over his shoulder and back again at me and whispered, "May I speak to you, barin?"

I could scarcely help laughing at the comical little creature. I remembered him perfectly as one of those I had interviewed up at the village a few hours ago. He had sworn that he had never heard of or seen any gentleman answering to my description of my father.

"Speak on by all means," I said, "but no lies, mind!"

"Lord have mercy, barin, would I lie to you?"

"It strikes me you have done so once

already, my friend," I said—"that is, if you have anything to tell me now."

"Sh-h!" he said, glancing round again. "Not so loud, barin; that was necessary, because others were present who might not hear, but all the while I said to myself, 'When it is safe, and I can see this good barin alone, I will go and tell him all the truth, and as I promised myself, so I have performed. Here I am!'"

"Very well," I said, "5 rubles if your tale sounds satisfactory, and another 5 if on inquiry it proves to have been true."

The fellow's eyes sparkled. "Glory to the highest!" he said. "Then I am sure of my money."

Then the little rascal spun a most circumstantial tale of how one day, a very short while since—

"Last week?" I interposed.

"Yes, last week, certainly, last week," he said, he had been driving his cart from the fields near the village, when three men in the road called to him to stop. One seemed ill, and the other two supported him. They asked whether he could drive them to Balota, to the post station, and he replied that for a certain sum he would do so, but the sum he mentioned was a large one, because his horse was tired.

"Drive us there in an hour," they said, "and you shall have double that!" Then, glad at heart—for money is scarce in these parts—he drove them quickly to Balota. At the post station they carried the sick man in. Then one came out and gave him the money, four times as much as he had asked, and said that this much was paid him because there were reasons why he should not breathe a word to living man or woman about having driven this party of three to Balota. On the other hand, they would be sure to know if his tongue should wag, and, by all that was sure and terrible, death would be his reward—a sudden and violent death—when he least expected it! My little informant at this point looked so pale and so obviously alarmed at his own temerity in telling me the story that I could not help being impressed by it. Either he spoke the truth or he was a most consummate actor as well as liar.

"Look here, my man," I said, wishing to test him further. "You are very rash. Supposing that I should prove to be the friend of these persons who employed you, sent by them purposely to try the good faith of the man they had trusted by offering a bribe as though from the other side. Why, you would be as good as a dead man and"—

The wretched fellow was on his knees in a moment; tears rushed to his eyes; he groaned and wailed and moaned, crossing himself vehemently and uttering inarticulate words—probably prayers—as unmistakable a picture of abject terror as the eye could see. Real or assumed, his fear took me in at once, and I believed his tale.

"Don't be afraid, you poor fool," I said. "I am no spy. It is my interest to learn the truth of these matters, and I believe your story. Are you satisfied? I shall tell no one who informed me or indeed that I know of all this that you have told me. I am not aware of your name, and you need not reveal it; you are safe, so far as I am concerned, and

you were justified in reporting the facts to me, though somewhat rash."

I gave the fellow 10 rubles, which greatly comforted him, and he departed with many blessings upon my head and entreaties that I should protect him in case of emergency.

Here was a real clew indeed unless, of course, the little rascal had invented the whole story, which, though improbable under the circumstances, was quite possible, he being a Russian peasant and as such a champion perverter of the truth.

However, I could drive over tomorrow to Balota and verify his story there—indeed Percy and I might from this point take up a hot scent, if destiny were only kind.

CHAPTER V.  
FOLLOWING THE TRAIL.

Percy arrived just 24 hours after me—good old Percy! He had not tarried one unnecessary minute in London, knowing that I needed him. I told him all I had seen and done, and he was kind and encouraging.

"Well done, old man!" he said. "You haven't let the grass grow under

your feet. It may be a good clew, and it may not. These chaps are such frightful liars, but we'll test it at Balota. It doesn't seem quite a likely story, does it? Why should two fellows have pounced upon your father and carried him off to the post station? You see, you yourself put a lot of the tale into the fellow's head by inquiring whether any one had driven the count to Balota, and he could easily invent the rest. It seems to me that they would have robbed him, more likely, and left him."

"Heaven only knows!" I said sagely. "Let's get ready at once and drive over to the post road. We may hit the trail. I fancy it rather myself for want of a better clew."

So we drove at once to Balota and asked to see the postmaster. A surly peasant came out and said his horses were all out. If we wanted to travel, we must pay double prices.

I explained that we should do so presently with pleasure on condition that he first answered a few questions. The man looked suspicious, but he bade me enter the house and sit down.

"Now," I said, "had you a traveler or two or three travelers journeying together from Erinofka last week?"

"Stop a minute," he said. "Have you been speaking to that fool of fools Ivan Arbuzof?"

I could honestly reply that I did not know whom he referred to by that name.

"Why do you inquire about three men from Erinofka, then?" he said.

"Well, it may be one man or two or three," I explained. "It is only one that I care to know about. This gentleman drove over, as I believe, intending to take post horses for St. Petersburg. We wish to know the date, and are prepared to pay for information."

The fellow reflected a short while. He glanced furtively at me once or twice from under his black, bushy eyebrows. I did not like the look of the man.

"It is against rules to give such information," he said, "or at least against my practice. You may be spies upon the track of some unfortunate who is innocent of offense."

"We are no spies," I said, "and this is a 10 ruble note."

"I will look in my book," he growled.

"Give me the money!"

The fellow brought a greasy, filthy account book and turned over page after page. "Here is an entry of three barins from Erinofka," he said presently.

My heart beat with excitement.

"Yes, that will be it!" I exclaimed.

"Go on."

"Who engaged a three horse carriage to Riabova," he continued.

"Good!" I cried, jumping up. Percy was equally excited, though he only understood half that was said. "You have earned your money, my man. Get us a carriage and horses to the same place quickly, and you shall be paid treble fare."

The savage looking rascal beamed and departed without loss of a moment. He was not sorry, I thought afterward, to discontinue the conversation.

It appeared that he had horses in the stable, after all, for he certainly never left the yard, and yet, five minutes later, there stood a "troika," or three horsed vehicle, ready for us. We jumped in.

"To Riabova quickly!" I cried to the driver, who was busy listening to his chief's instructions. Rather complicated ones, it appeared, for the fellow wore an expression as of one who is being taught a difficult lesson.

The postmaster whispered his last word, and we were off.

"I hope they're not hatching any deviltry between them," said Percy.

"I don't like that postmaster Johnny at all. Do you?"

"I was bound to admit that I did not."

"But we can take care of ourselves, I expect," I added, and in this proposition Percy laughingly concurred.

"We must try and get in a talk with the fellow at Riabova before this little rascal on the box has an opportunity to square him or warn him," he continued.

"Ten to one the postmaster at Balota has sent him down instructions to lie as freely as his tongue will turn the red-hot falsehoods out. We must certainly have the first look in."

But at Riabova things did not turn out precisely as we had intended, for our little driver contrived, in spite of our intentions, to deliver his message, whatever it may have been, before we could obtain a word with the postmaster. This he did by throwing his reins to the monk who met us at the yard gate and running quickly within the house, leaving us wondering where the chief man was to be found.

Percy thought the matter very suspicious.

"These fellows are playing some deep game with us," he said. "I don't like it."

But I was less inclined to suspect evil—that is, anything more evil than designs against our money bags.

"It's absurd to suppose that all these chaps are in the secret of father's disappearance," I said. "They have a game on, but it is only to obtain three or four times their due for the horses, and so on. The other fellow merely sent a message to this fellow that we were two young greenhorns who could be fleeced at lib."

"Maybe!" said Percy.

This postmaster was a very different looking personage. He was suave and oily, and he came out to speak to us, a bending thing of bows and wretched smiles. He had no more original lie to tell us, however, than that his horses were all out.

"That doesn't matter, my friend," I said, "for maybe we shall not require any," at which his countenance fell. This looked as though my theory were correct—namely, that the plot, if plot there were, was a monetary one.

"The fact is," I continued, "I wish to ask a few questions rather than to travel. I shall pay you well if you answer satisfactorily. Firstly, do you remember three gentlemen traveling from

here to town a short while since; one was a sick person and required assistance in getting into the carriage?"

The man smiled obsequiously and said he remembered such a party perfectly.

"Did they travel to St. Petersburg from here?" I asked.

The man assented.

"This seems all right, Percy," I whispered.

"Ask him if he remembers the house they drove to in St. Petersburg," suggested Percy.

I did so. The fellow put on an air of deep thought. Then he shook his head.

"I don't know," he said.

"I don't like horrors," I said, "but do go on; what was the poor fellow like? Did you go and see him?"

"I did, as it happens. A small fellow with a bald head, rather little eyes and a longish beard."

It was our mysterious informant to the life.

Then his tale had been true, and the unfortunate fellow had actually met his doom for breaking faith with his terrible employers. How did the rascals know that he had broken faith? Was it our fault? God forbid! I had tried my best to shelter him. It was his own fault. He ran the risk with his eyes open. Probably the poor wretch did not really believe the threats of those fearful people whom he had driven to Balota.

And these were the very persons into whose hands father must have fallen. If it were indeed so, then God help him!

We decided to tell mother nothing of this last development, for it would only frighten and shock her and could do no good.

But we persuaded her to allow us to engage the services of a private detective, one who should be entirely unconnected with the police. If we could find a suitable person, we explained, he could go to Erinofka and take up the trail where we had lost it. We were known there now and would be taken in at every turn by those, or their agents, whose interest it was to keep the truth from us. A professional detective would be far more likely to manage successfully this delicate matter of clew hunting than we should. Somewhat regretfully, my mother agreed to allow us to employ such a man, and by dint of many inquiries we hit upon a young fellow, by name Borofsky, who suited us very well.

Borofsky was not very much older than I. He may have been 22, at most, while my age was just 19 and Percy's about the same; not a very aged trio to undertake and conduct so delicate an inquiry as this of ours.

He dined with us on the evening of his engagement, and we talked over the entire subject. Borofsky thought well of the work we had done at Erinofka. We had hit upon the right track, no doubt, he said. But probably the rascals who had drugged and carried father off had long since placed him in safety, and even if we could follow the trail as far as St. Petersburg we should lose it there.

"But what do you suppose they wanted with the count, Mr. Borofsky?" asked Percy. "Money, by way of ransom, or what?"

"Heaven knows!" said Borofsky. "That is one of the things we must find out."

Then our friend startled us by saying: "By the way, the priestaf of the police department of this district mentioned your father to me today. I was at the office on another matter of business which does not concern this affair. What do you think the priestaf said?"

"I am sorry you spoke to the police about my father," I replied somewhat warmly. "It is the very thing we are trying to avoid."

"I did not, believe me. It was the priestaf who mentioned him, apropos of nothing particular, and, mind you, though I am no great lover of the police, I am ready to admit that their system is marvelous, and they generally know where to lay their hands upon any given person. I was not speaking of your father, nor had I mentioned him. But the priestaf said, 'You are to undertake business for Count Landrinof, Borofsky, I conclude, since you have been for two days in communication with the young count.' (They watch us, you see, these fellows.) 'It is odd that the old bird should have gone to prosecute his inquiries in London, whatever they may be, while the young one leaves London in order to work out something here.'"

"Is the count in London, then?" I asked innocently. "I did not know it!"

And the priestaf said, 'Certainly!' and that your father had left St. Petersburg a week or ten days ago. Of course we know this is not the case, but it is odd that the priestaf should have said it."

I said nothing. I was too astonished. Could Percy after all have seen the old lad, then? I had persuaded him long since that he had been the victim of an illusion, a chance likeness, and that wherever my poor father should prove to be he could not be in London. But this was surprising, an utterly unexpected and bewildering confirmation of Percy's story.

Percy himself was equally surprised and startled, and Borofsky was not slow to observe our excitement.

"Well, what?" he said, smiling.

"You don't attach any importance to what the priestaf told me, do you? I think you need not, for these brigands, or whoever the mysterious rascals should prove to be, would scarcely take their victim so far afield. They would

be safe by yards over the frontier. Why should they go so far?"

I consulted with Percy. Ought we not to tell Borofsky that Percy believed he had seen my father in London?

"It would be a pity to set him upon a false scent if it should have been a case of mistaken identity, as of course it may have been!" said Percy.

"And as I quite believe, even now, that it was," I said, "but I think Borofsky should know. It would not hurt, and it might possibly lead to some development."

We told Borofsky, and I don't know when I have seen any one quite so surprised.

"Why on earth didn't you tell me this?" he said. "It is most important corroboration of the priestaf's words."

I explained that we had believed Percy to be the victim of an optical delusion.

"Well," he said, "without the priestaf's confirmation of it, I, too, should have said Mr.—this gentleman—had made a mistake; also without this gentleman's corroboration I should and did say that the priestaf had for once been too clever or not clever enough. But, taking both stories together, I find that each assertion stands stronger upon its legs by reason of the support it derives from the other. In a word, if I must give my opinion, I should now be inclined to declare that this gentleman did see the count in London, though why his abductors should have taken him there is what at present is quite beyond me to explain. Let us sleep on the matter and take counsel in the morning."

And, it being midnight by this time, we departed to our rooms. As for me, I went to bed with a sense that the mystery was by no means put forward this new development, but rather back and complicated.

(To be Continued)

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To permit personal attendance at this meeting, there will be issued to each holder of one or more shares of the capital stock of the Illinois Central Railroad Company, as registered on the books of the company, a ticket enabling him, or her, to travel free over the company's lines from the station on the Illinois Central Railroad nearest to his or her registered address to Chicago and return, such ticket to be good for the journey to Chicago only during the four days immediately preceding, and the day of the meeting, and for the return journey from Chicago only on the day of the meeting, and the four days immediately following, when properly countersigned and stamped during business hours—that is to say, between 9:00 a. m. and 5:00 p. m.—in the office of the Assistant Secretary, Mr. W. G. Bruen, in Chicago. Such ticket may be obtained by any registered holder of stock on application, in writing, to the president of the company in Chicago. Each application must state the full name and address of the stockholder exactly as given in his or her certificate of stock, together with the number and date of such certificate. No more than one person will be carried free in respect to any one holding of stock as registered on the books of the company.

For the purpose of this meeting the Stock Transfer Books will be closed at 3 o'clock p. m. on Thursday, December 20, 1900, and remain closed until the morning of Monday, January 7, 1901.

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CHAPTER VI.  
DETECTIVE IN THE CASE.

After this failure, which had promised at one moment to be a grand success, Percy and I felt so humbled that we actually consulted with mother as to whether the police should be invited to take over the matter, or at least asked to assist us in our further inquiries.

My dear mother was, however, very much adverse to such a step. She had always felt horror of the Russian detective force, that "terrible third section," the unannounced, secret, mysterious, spying creatures who swarm, or swarmed at that time, in the capital city of the czar. "For the love of heaven," she entreated us, with tears in her eyes, "let us keep our sorrow out of their knowledge. I would not have those hateful people to know of our grief or to bandy about your dear father's name as a stalking horse for their arrestings and spyings. We will leave them out as long as we can."

Mother was convinced that Percy and I had, as I have said, struck the trail of

the mystery at Erinofka, and this opinion received a kind of terrible confirmation a few days later when, walking in the Nefsky with Percy, I met Hulbert, the Englishman, who, with father and another, rented the shooting of that splendid moor.

Hulbert was decorously sympathetic about our family trouble, for of course he knew of it, though we carefully preserved it from becoming a matter of general knowledge and tittle tattle. Then he told me that he had just been to Erinofka, and that an extraordinary and horrible murder had been committed in the village. No stranger had been seen about the place, it was said, yet one of the villagers had been stabbed dead in his hut—heaven only knew why or by whom, for he hadn't an enemy in the world.

My heart almost stopped beating when I heard this. I glanced at Percy and caught his eye. His face had suddenly gone quite pale; so, he said afterward, had mine.

"What is it?" said Hulbert. "Are you one who can't bear to hear of bloodshed? I'm sorry I told you."

"I don't like horrors," I said, "but do go on; what was the poor fellow like? Did you go and see him?"

"I did, as it happens. A small fellow with a bald head, rather little eyes and a longish beard."

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