THE MYSTERY OF COUNT LANDRINOF.

BY FRED WHISHAW.

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CHAPTER XXXII.

THE COUNT'S RELEASE DEMANDED.

The chief of police entered the room at this moment. He glanced keenly at Percy.

"Who is this?" he asked.

It was Borofsky who told him the news; as for me, I could not have spoken. There was a horrid kind of paralysis—the spell of horror—upon my tongue. I could have yelled aloud, but to speak quietly and sanely would have been impossible to me.

"What!" exclaimed the chief, when Borofsky had explained, in a sentence or two, the position of affairs. "The informer? He whom our friend here has desired to screen; who laid information of the railway affair?"

"The same," said Borofsky. "Man proposes, excellence, but it is God who disposes in the end!"

"Ha!" said the chief, "it looks like business. Moreover, my young friend, matters seem to work in your favor. Come, you shall show me this student. When we return, there may be news from Bootief!"

I am sure the reader will excuse if I beg to be allowed to pass lightly over the sight we found awaiting us at the little lodging hired for the use of our ill fated informer.

It was a plain, barely furnished bedroom, with a tiny kitchen attached. Upon the bed lay the student, dead, as Percy had reported, and obviously murdered, perhaps while asleep. The knife I saw at once, to my horror, was a Circassian silver handled dagger belonging to my father. Andre might at least have used a knife of his own, I re-

...revolver in their faces.

...ly enough, it never for... curred to me that the... be other than Andre, ...s the society to which ...e victim belonged must ...many desperadoes quite ...an act.

...rected one of the two ...had brought with him ...d man's pockets. These ...much, but among the ...covered were my two ...rubles each.

...he chief. "Then it is ...ount—real or impostor ...that this unfortunate ...upon him?" he added, ...e to Borofsky and then ...o, this murder assumes ...hich"—

...dly the scoundrel knew ...r he compelled me by ...al violence to disclose ...e information I held,"

...his?"

...ght."

...not lose much time, ...he know where to find ...g the poor wretch to ...st night. He must have ...the knife?"

...ther's," I said. "He ...my father's study to ...rk for him."

...y we shall have him ...er he be your father or ...the chief. "He will not ...be my father!" I ex-... you mean, excellence, ...satisfied this scoundrel ...ssert him to be—Andre, ...not my father?"

...proved, excepting that ...lead with your father's ...heart!" said the chief. ...p to no conclusions in ...ugh I think matters tend ...r point of view."

...udged me. "Don't be ...whispered; "the officials ...a pretense of believing ...nfallible. He does not real-... our father could possibly have ...such a deed as this. He would not ...such a fool."

"Heaven forbid! I would not have ...ven a blundering policeman believe it!" I said.

Meanwhile our friend, the chief, bade us prepare to follow him back to the chancellery of the department. It might be that news had come, by this time, from Bootief. Much would depend upon this news, he said, for if it should turn out that the student's story about the mining of the railway were true, then it would be fair to assume that his testimony to the identity of Andre was true also, and perhaps the whole story of the substitution of my innocent father for the guilty party on the fateful day of the arrest.

On our return to the chancellery exciting news awaited us. Though we had been away scarcely an hour, a reply had already come from Bootief that instantly on receipt of the message from headquarters a squad of mounted gendarmes had been sent down the line two miles, to the point indicated.

This was easily effected, because the gendarmes and soldiers were already massed in all towns along the route to be taken by the czar, in readiness to line the railway 24 hours before the imperial train should pass along it. This precaution was constantly taken at the time of these events, in consequence of the activity of the enemies of order, who nevertheless contrived occasionally to make their preparations in spite of the thin cordon of protectors stretched for hundreds of miles through the country.

The squad of gendarmes had, in this case, ridden straight to the spot described by our informant and detailed in the telegram from headquarters. Here they had surprised a woodman taking his midday meal within his hut. On their inviting this individual to show them where the entrance to the excavations which he had assisted to make was to be found he had fired a revolver in their faces, wounding two men before being himself overpowered. They had then removed his bed—a mere straw mattress on the floor of the hut—and discovered a neat tunnel starting thence and running underneath the line, 15 or 20 yards away; a beautifully constructed thing and eminently adapted for carrying out the purpose for which it was made—namely, to blow up the permanent way and with it any train that might happen to be passing along the rails at the moment of the explosion.

The chief crossed himself as he read the telegram and muttered something which sounded like a line out of the litany.

"Your little rascal spoke the truth," he said. "Upon my word, he deserved to enjoy the fruits of virtue. It will be interesting now to catch this other."

"Don't wait to catch him, excellence, before handing us—what we have surely deserved at your hands—Count Landrinof's release."

The chief reflected. "It is most unusual," he said, "to do anything of the kind. How can we let the one go before we have the other to put in his place?"

I stamped my foot. What did I care for the high mightiness of this official?

"I will go to the czar himself!" I raged. "I will tell him that the same police who blundered in July to the ruin of my innocent father have now blundered again, allowing a party of miscreants to undermine the railway over which he will presently travel. I will tell the whole story. The czar shall see who is right and who is wrong, if the police cannot or will not!"

"Come," said the chief, "there is no need of raised voices and angry words. I will telegraph to the penal settlement in which the count, if he it be, is now living. Tell me something by which he may be recognized, and if such distinguishing mark is to be found upon him he shall be set free on the instant. Think now. Has he a mole, a scar—anything. I only desire to do the right. If we have blundered, as you say, we shall rectify our mistake. But we must not blunder again!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CAPTURE OF ANDRE.

There was no difficulty in obliging the chief on this point. My father had once broken his right leg below the knee and carried an unmistakable memento of the experience in the shape of a huge scar on his shin. I mentioned this fact to the chief, who forthwith declared that this should be amply sufficient for identification, and that he would have my father's whereabouts ascertained and a telegram sent without delay to the governor of his prison.

I fancy, but I will not absolutely assert it to be the case, that my threat to take care the czar should hear of the blunders of his police force quickened at any rate the desire of his excellence to see justice done. Perhaps I am wrong, but I cannot help feeling that the chief's tenure of his high office would not long have survived the discovery by the czar of so well advanced a plot to assassinate him. As a matter of fact the secret of this conspiracy never leaked out, and it is practically certain that the czar never heard of it.

So we three young men returned home that afternoon well enough pleased with our day's work.

What had we accomplished? I sat in my own private study, adjoining my bedroom, before retiring for the night and counted up my gains. I was in a fair way to get father restored to freedom. There could be but one result to the chief's telegram. He must be identified at once and allowed to go free. That was the first and best point of all. Then we were rid of Andre. It was exceedingly unlikely that he would ever favor us with his presence again—nay, it was probable that the police would put it out of the question by laying hands upon him before he could escape very far. If they did so, they would not let him go again, poor wretch! This time his departure for the east would be final.

My thoughts dwelt on the fate of the student. Poor little creature that he was, victim of a very cruel destiny, he had had a hard life of it from start to finish. It was to be hoped such as he would be mercifully judged, for indeed he had never a chance! Who could blame him? Not I for one. On the contrary, I felt grateful enough toward him, for how in the world should we ever have attained the end, which now loomed well in view, but for his good offices? He had been very aggravating in the manner of giving his information, he had been foxy and avaricious, and, of course, from the point of view of good or bad faith toward his friends, his conduct had been treacherous and atrocious. Nevertheless I felt softly toward the poor fellow by reason of the services he had rendered me, services which—as a matter of fact—had cost him his life.

Was he stabbed while sleeping? I wondered. God grant that he suffered none of the terrible anguish of suddenly awaking to see his murderer, like an avenging fury, standing over his bed, perhaps bidding him prepare for instant death, a traitor's violent death, while horror paralyzed his limbs and his tongue so that he could neither move nor cry out.

Did I dream, or was that the figure of a man standing in the doorway which led into the bedroom?

For a moment I imagined that it must be Percy or Borofsky or perhaps my own man Petka, who had been preparing my room for the night; then he suddenly stepped out into the light, seeing, I suppose, that I peered at him, and I perceived, with a gasp of horror that it was Andre.

The odious creature laughed aloud.

"Ah," he said, "my charming and most elegant nephew! I have long intended to pay you a call in your own apartments, since you seemed determined to keep aloof from me in my own!"

I was too frightened—there is no other word—I was too terrified to speak. Horror and surprise kept my tongue tied to my palate. I could not have spoken, if my life depended on it, during that first minute or two.

"You are surprised to see me, I perceive," he continued. "I am aware that I am uninvited. Probably you believed me to be out of town—nicht wahr?"

I made no reply.

"I should have left before now, no doubt," he went on, "but unfortunately I forgot to draw a check upon my bankers before leaving home. You don't happen to have a checkbook in your writing table there, do you?"

He pointed with his right hand toward my roller desk, and I now observed that he held a revolver in it.

My thoughts had begun to work now. I racked my brain madly for ideas. I did not know what course to take.

"You infernal murderer!" I now muttered from between my dried up lips. "You shall never have a farthing from me!"

"Oh, oh!" he said. "For shame! What, grudge your own uncle a thousand or two from your affluence? Beware, undutiful nephew, lest I take an uncle's privilege and chastise you!"

"You dare not shoot that thing off!" I said. "The noise would alarm the household, and you would be caught at once."

"Pooh, there are other ways less noisy, if need be; moreover, there are also other checkbooks in the house. There is the dear countess, your mother's."

"You shall not go near my mother," I said, "even though you stabbed me as you stabbed the student."

"You fool!" he said. "Come; write me the check and let me go. I have a journey to make tonight, and I will not be delayed. Do not make me desperate. I would as soon kill you as not, you hellhound! It was you that caught the student and wormed my secrets out of him. You would have been a dead man by this but that I must have the money. I was an infernal fool not to stick a knife into you as you sat dozing in that armchair. Your mother can pay the money as easily as you. Come, now, shall she pay it or you? I will have the cash, mind you!"

My mind was working quickly and well now.

Then there was a rough and tumble on the floor.

"Stop!" I said. "You have the whip hand of me, for I am unarmed. We will make a bargain of it. You shall write me a declaration that you are Andre Landrinof or Kornilof or any one you please, and that my father, Count Vladimir, was arrested in your place. You shall give me such a document, and I will sign a check for—what, 1,000 rubles?"

I never really intended to bargain with this infernal assassin. My intention was to spring upon him as he wrote.

"Twenty thousand is the sum," said he, "and there is no bargain. I sign nothing. I will have the money without conditions of any kind. Come; time passes. Do not make me desperate... can force the countess to pay... member that."

"Not while I live," I ... shall not leave this room, though you may carry an arsenal of arms."

"Pooh!" he said. "You defy me? You are one that talks much, I take it, and acts little. I say I shall go from this room to the apartment of the countess. Sit where you are or you are a dead man. I mean what I say. This is not a dummy revolver. All the chambers are charged. I will shoot the whole infernal household and escape, curse you! Sit still now!"

He edged toward the door. I sprang to my feet, starting to rush toward him. He raised the pistol and fired. At the same moment I tripped over something that lay between him and me and fell.

The shot passed, I suppose, over my head.

At the same moment a very surprising thing happened. From out of my bedroom, which seemed to be a kind of enchanted chamber tonight, rushed a party of men, gendarmes. How they came there I could not and did not attempt to imagine. Andre flashed his pistol at them and again and a third time. Then there was a rough and tumble on the floor, and many flowers of speech, both from Andre and the others.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

SEARCHING FOR THE COUNT.

It was a simple enough matter in reality. These good fellows had tracked Andre back to our house. He had entered by my bedroom window from the yard, using a ladder, under cover of the darkness. They had done the same, climbing in noiselessly in the nick of time. One of them was wounded in the arm, the only successful shot of the four.

As for Andre, he raved and blasphemed, struggling like a maniac. I was obliged to assist the police in securing him, and in the scuffle he aimed several vicious kicks and blows at me, together with much vile language. I carry the marks of one of his "hacks" to this day. However, he was caught, and I may say in this place, for we have now finished, personally, with the consummate scoundrel, that this time the police did not blunder, but sent him away to places from which there is no return. I believe he is now at Sakhalin or thereabout.

Early the following morning I received a message from the chancellery of the gradonachalnik, which is the official title of the chief of police. The messenger requested that I would convey myself as quickly as possible to the head office.

I went, this time without much anxiety of heart, for I knew well enough that even without the fulfillment of his farcical condition of identification by scar, the chief would now no longer withhold his consent to father's release, for, Andre caught and the student's tale verified, no sane man, gradonachalnik or commoner, could any longer pretend to disbelieve in the blunder which had been committed.

I was not therefore prepared for another check; yet, so closely had fate woven the net around my poor father's liberty, I was destined to experience a new disappointment.

The chief received me very civilly and began by congratulating me upon Andre's capture and thanking me for my share in effecting it. I had had a narrow escape, he said; the delinquent had fired point blank at me—was it not so?

"Certainly, excellence," I said, "and kicked me very violently on the shins besides. Not quite the line of conduct one would expect a father to pursue toward an obedient and dutiful son."

The chief grinned slightly.

"I concede the point," he said. "There has been a mistake, though, owing to the circumstances, a pardonable one. You shall have your father back, unless destiny should have been too strong for us—an event I should deeply deplore."

"What do you mean, excellence?" I said, my heart sinking to my boots, "have you news—bad news?"

"Read this," said the chief, handing me a telegram from I forget what remote place in Siberia. "All may be well with him, but there is some doubt, as you will see."

I snatched the telegram and read these words: "Convict Kornilof never reached here; reported detained Spask; severe illness; probably died since; no later advice received."

My head swam, my legs seemed to collapse; I sank into a chair. Was this to be the end of all our labor and sufferings? My dear father dead in the very hour of our victory? Oh, it was too grimly cruel of destiny. I could not believe it. I could not!

"Come, come, there is no need to despair," said the chief. "He is, likely enough, making a long recovery. They would not send him forward till he was strong enough to travel without risk—the convict guard corps are not inhuman monsters, as the foreign newspapers are so fond of describing them. Your father is probably still too weak to travel, a most fortunate circumstance, as it happens, for you will now have but a few hundreds of miles to journey, in order to be at his side, instead of as many thousands. Come, play the man, and—if you are wise—take the first train for Spask. You will probably find your father there."

"Telegraph first, if you will," I said. "I cannot stand the suspense."

The chief kindly did as I requested. He sent a message to the little convict station at Spask, inquiring whether Kornilof was still detained there.

I went for a walk by the Neva's banks while the message went forward and until an answer should arrive. I could ...mation and talk about it all with ... deportatio... rofsky. My heart ... who fell to be alone—like the ... the othe this, that prefers ... and why, in order to suffer ... 00 rubles f... piracy? It whole length of the ... why? ..., and those who have ... will know how far that is, before I summoned courage to call again at the chancellery to hear what news had arrived at Spask.

I saw the chief in a mist and heard his voice in a dream.

"I congratulate you," he said. "I think it will all be well. Read it for yourself."

He did so. The message ran, so far as I can remember the words: "Kornilof left Spask 21st. Reported ill again Nicolaief."

He was alive, then, a week ago and able to travel. Thank heaven for that! To Nicolaief I should journey as fast as the next train could carry me. But first I must tell mother all that had happened during the last few days. I had told her nothing, waiting until I could impart to her something definite and hopeful.

Counting up now as I hastened homeward what I should have to tell her good and bad and trying to strike a balance, I found it hard to decide how she would take it, whether on the whole for good or ill. Father was practically free. His enemies were defeated all down the line. All things should be smiling, if only she could take a hopeful view of this illness.

My dear mother heard my story with closed eyes and pale face, holding my hand as I told her one by one of the steps by which we had reached success and of the perils which we had all passed through in safety. Then I broke gently to her the news which had so dimmed for me the glory of success.

Father had been very ill a[t] many weeks and was ill ag[ain] relapse which might be ve[ry] at Nicolaief. I expected my [mother to] burst into tears and bewail [the] chance that seemed to dash h[...] from us in the very hour of it[s] ment, but she did nothing of t[he] On the contrary, she embraced bade me godspeed in my journ[ey] ward.

"You have done most won[derfully] my son," she said, smiling ra[...] "I thank heaven has been on [...] throughout. It will still be s[...] will bring father home to me s[...] well. Oh, I know it, I know sure!"

Mother's pluck and confidence a world of good, and we spoke [...] and arrangements. Percy shoul[d go] with me to Nicolaief and help [...] ther, if he were still unable [to come] home at once. Mother suggested [accom]panying us herself, but this I wo[uld not] hear of. She was far too weak a[...] The suspense and trials of the [...] months had reduced her to a shad[ow of] her old self and her strength to pi[...] weakness.

Borofsky, we agreed, might n[...] paid off, "and well paid, too," [...] mother, for his services could be [meas]ured by no ordinary standard.

"Father will know what to s[ay to] him when he comes," she said, [...] how to praise you, my son, and [...] Percy—my own heart is too full t[o say] what I feel—tell him so, dear, [...] Percy and Borofsky."

This was the only moment at w[hich] mother cried a little, and assuredly did not weep now for any sorrow [...] anxiety.

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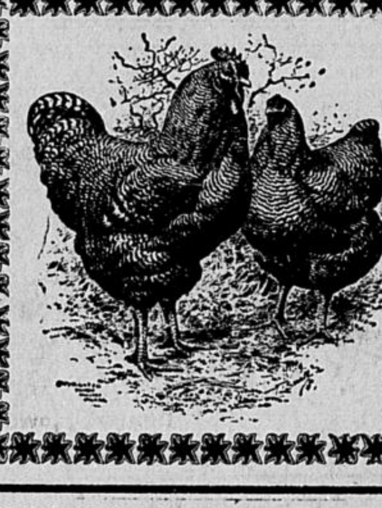

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