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THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER I.

THE FATHER AND THE LOVER OF AN AMERICAN GIRL.

THE great Transsiberian railway had progressed as far to the eastward as the Obi, and trains carrying soldiers, convicts, sightseers, railway constructors, laborers and supplies, with some goods for trade with Manchuria, ran from Moscow.

The possibilities of this immense line of railway made the people of European Russia gasp. It opened up such a prospect of trade as they had never dreamed of. It gave them a speedy entrance into a region of their domain the crossing of which had formerly occupied months and involved much hardship.

What a change there was from the old sledges or foot trains of convicts to the swiftly moving cars that were drawn by the puffing, screaming locomotives, at once a source of delight and terror to the people whose territory they crossed!

Among those who had made this change so remarkable a success was James Gordon, an American engineer, who had charge of much of the advance work of the road.

Gordon was a typical American, ready to go anywhere to build a railway so long as the pay was sufficient to make it an object for him to take his daughter with him.

For Frances Gordon was her father's companion, secretary and comfort.

Left motherless at an early age, she had been brought up by strict aunts till she revolted. Her father had been surveying a route across New Mexico for a new road, fondly and longingly thinking of his daughter in her far away home in New York, when, lo, the young lady herself, then aged nineteen, put in an appearance mounted on a broncho and accompanied by a half breed guide, to whom she spoke in so authoritative a tone that he bowed before her slightest wish in abject obedience. Since that day Frances Gordon was to be found wherever her father was.

A year and a half after they had finished the work in Mexico they journeyed together to Russia, where Gordon was to take charge of the important part of putting through the railway that was destined to revolutionize the trade and commerce of the world.

This great railway had progressed as far as the Obi river, in the government of Tomsk, Siberia, when a meeting of managers, engineers and government officials was ordered at Moscow. Thither from the Obi journeyed James Gordon and Frances.

Thither also journeyed Nicholas Neslerov, prince of the empire and governor of the province of Tomsk.

Prince Neslerov was one of the wealthiest nobles of the land, was about thirty-five years of age and had, besides his exalted position as governor of Tomsk, estates in various parts of Russia, particularly a fine one at Graslov, in the government of Perm.

It was after the convention, which had to do with certain concessions and arrangements that were necessary as the road drew near the border of Manchuria, the crossing of certain mountains, the bridging of certain streams, that Mr. Gordon was preparing to return to the Obi, where the western end of his operations was laid, the operations themselves reaching eastward to Lake Balkal, in Irkutsk.

To him one day as he sat smoking at his hotel in Moscow came Prince Neslerov.

"Good morning, your excellency," said Gordon, who had met the prince at several conferences and now knew him because of the fact that the operations had passed almost across his province. "Glad to see you. When do you return to Tomsk?"

"I shall not be long behind you, my friend," replied the prince. "It is a fact, however, that upon your answer to a certain question which I shall put to you depends many of my acts in the immediate future. M. Gordon, you are an American."

"So I believe; I have heard it hinted at," said Mr. Gordon, wondering what was coming.

"And I am a Russian of the Russians."

"That, too, I believe, is a well authenticated fact."

"I am wealthy, a governor of a province and shall soon be promoted to a

better station. Since you entered the rude territory in the southern part of my government we have met frequently; we have been friends."

"Yes," replied Gordon, rather dubiously, stroking his chin.

"When you needed protection, my power protected you."

"I believe you," said Gordon, failing to remember the time when he needed the protection of the prince.

"I merely express myself thus to recall to you my friendship," said the prince. "Now I come to the real errand that brought me here. I love your daughter."

"Eh!" exclaimed Gordon, rousing himself and stiffening perceptibly.

"I repeat, sir, that I love your daughter. I want her for my wife, my princess."

A cloud of smoke came from Gordon's lips. He was looking at a distant point, his eyes that saw no church.

"You seem surprised," said the prince. "Is it a matter of surprise that a man should love so noble and beautiful a young woman as your daughter?"

"No," said Gordon slowly, "and if it were I would be used to it by this time. You are not the first."

A slight pallor appeared on the cheeks of Neslerov.

"You do not mean that she—your daughter Frances—is already promised?"

"No," answered Gordon. "I don't know that she is, but I do know that you are not the first who has asked for her. Even now you may be too late."

"Impossible! I have seen no one of my—of her own—station near her."

"We in America," said Gordon, "look upon this question of station or rank with different eyes than you do. If a man suited Frances, all the rank, titles and wealth in the world would make no difference."

"She is different from girls in Europe," said the prince, biting his lip.

Gordon let out a joyous gasp.

"I should say she was!" he said.

"Different! Why, she is a real, whole, healthy woman. She doesn't smoke

cigarettes, gamble at cards and race after titles and wealth. Not my girl, prince. Frances has a healthy mind and is as noble as she is good looking. But she has a mind of her own, if it is healthy, and—well, she is my boss, I can tell you!"

"You charm me. I am more in love than ever."

"Won't do a bit of good, I tell you. If I thought you were the finest man on earth, my wishes would not prevail upon Frances to marry you. She will make her own choice, when it is made, and it will stand."

"You lead me to believe this choice has already been made."

"No, I did not mean that, prince. It might be so, for all I know to the contrary. Frances might love a man and not yet be ready to tell me, although there is nothing secretive about her. We have each other's confidence."

"Still it could not be possible that she would be in love and you not know it."

"It might, and I will tell you why. She has refused to marry the man I chose for her, the finest young man, in my estimation, on earth."

jection to your knowing who it is. It is Denton, the bridge builder. Jack Denton was the son of one of my oldest friends. Old Denton was at one time worth a lot of money, but lost it through the rascality of a man he trusted. Jack was a sort of genius and asked me what profession to take up. I told him bridge engineering. He is one of the best at the business now and is only twenty-five. He is out near the Obi. The big iron bridge we are to put across the Obi will be his work."

"It is a fascinating profession. And your daughter refused him?"

"Yes, and it was a great disappointment to me. Jack and she have been friends since they first went to school. He loves her, and his love is the kind that a father likes to see his girl get. But she won't have him for some reason. Said they could never be romantic lovers or some such argument. Couldn't love him because she had known him all her life. Thought it was easier to love a stranger, I suppose, who could bamboozle her."

"And so it was broken off?"

"There was nothing to break off. They were never engaged. She simply refused him. They are friendly when they meet—coolly so. What could I do? She had to have her own way."

"A prosaic friendship such as that is not dangerous," said the prince. "Have I your permission to enter the list?"

"My permission is worthless. You can ask Frances if you like, but it won't do a bit of good. You are too rich, and Frances has peculiar notions."

"There is some one in whom your daughter is much interested, and perhaps you have not heard. It is my duty to inform you, although I myself do not attach much importance to the thing. There is a blacksmith—"

"Oh, the blacksmith of Perm!" exclaimed Gordon, with a slight coldness in his voice, as though he did not relish having the story told him by the prince. "I am fully aware of all that."

"Does Frances—does your daughter love that man?"

"Godness, no! She is interested, she likes him and is trying to help him."

"Through pity, I suppose, and pity soon leads to love."

"Well," said Gordon, laughing. "If it does in this case neither you nor I can prevent it. I am sure, however, the girl is fancy free, and, as for him, he is too simple and sensible to look upon their friendship as more than ordinary. They met in this way: When the road was crossing into Tobolsk, I wanted some peculiar ironwork done, and she went with me. The stature and strength and the handsome face of the young ironworker pleased her, and she talked with him. She saw that he was a magnificent specimen of a man and fitted by nature to adorn a higher station. She is trying to assist him in improving himself."

"You take this very coolly," said the prince. "But, being Russian, perhaps our customs are so different that this free intercourse between a girl like your daughter and a mere ironworker seems more to me than to you. Then you assure me there is nothing more than mere friendship between these two."

"No, I do not assure you of anything of the kind. I do not know, I think, though, if there was Frances would tell me. If there is, she will have her way; if there is not, the same."

"But if this blacksmith asked her to marry him would you consent?"

"I'd have to."

"Do you consider such a thing probable?"

"Prince, I know as little about it as you do. There was only one man—Jack Denton—that I wanted for a son-in-law, and she won't have him. Now, I know little about her plans, if she has any. She might fall in love with you, in which case I could not prevent her marrying you. If she does not fall in love with you, I could not compel her to marry you if I would."

"I am pleased at your candor," replied the prince. "I shall soon have an opportunity to speak to her myself. I trust that this conversation will not interrupt our friendship."

"Nonsense! I appreciate the honor you have done my girl. But unless she loves you your case is hopeless."

The prince bowed and took his departure, and Gordon, laughing, turned into the hotel.

"I'll have to tell her," he said. Then with a sudden resolve: "No, I won't either. I need the friendship of the prince, and if she knows he wants to marry her who can tell what trouble it may cause?"

As Neslerov was leaving the hotel he met Frances returning from a drive.

"I am pleased to see you, Prince Neslerov," she said, offering her hand.

"And I am always glad to meet you, Mlle. Gordon," he replied. "Did you enjoy your drive?"

"Yes, but I did not go far. I visited several bazaars where books are sold. I have quite a number of purchases."

to adorn a higher station than the one to which he was born. I send him books, and he studies. You could help him, prince. With your power, your influence, you could do much for him. I refer to Vladimir Paulpoff, the blacksmith of Perm."

"You are very kind to my poor countryman," said the prince, with a smile. "To please you I will make it my business to see this blacksmith, and if there is any way in which I may be of use in assisting him along the lines you suggest I shall be pleased to do so."

She thanked him and passed on into the hotel.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACKSMITH AND THE PICTURE.

ON a road leading from the city of Perm toward the forest on the south there stood a rude cluster of buildings, all of them old and in a poor state of repair. This collection of huts was the home and forge of the Paulpoffs, ironworkers.

Here worked old Michael Paulpoff and his son Vladimir, and it had been to this uninviting place that Frances Gordon had come to make the chance acquaintance of the young giant.

The huts and the surroundings were rapidly growing even less inviting, for nothing was being done now to keep anything in repair.

A collection of household goods, over which old Mamma Paulpoff watched carefully, gave evidence that the family were about to remove themselves and their belongings to another place.

But still the old man and the young one were at work. The blows that Vladimir struck were tremendous. The iron under his hammer bent and flattened as the sparks shot like fireworks to the far corners of the place. There was a gay laugh on his handsome face—a face that was almost childlike in its simplicity and guilelessness.

"Oh, that will be a happy day, Papa Paulpoff!" the young man said gleefully, plugging his tongue into the white fire and withdrawing a bar of iron.

"What will?" asked the old man, looking sidewise at his son, but continuing his work.

"The day I can take you and the little mother to a better home."

"We have been happy here," replied old Papa Paulpoff, looking round at the dingy interior.

"Yes, we have been happy—we shall always be happy, for we are simple and require little. But with greater comfort and more money greater happiness ought to come. It is fine to feel yourself growing to be somebody in the world—to feel yourself expand, broaden. It is study that does it, and work. I think the knowledge gives me more pleasure than the wealth. But we also need the wealth."

The old man sighed.

"Yes, that is good, that knowledge. But you will grow away from us. You will perhaps marry that American girl, and she would not like our simple ways."

The hammer in Vladimir's hand came down with redoubled force.

"What is that you say—our Vladimir talking of marrying?" asked the tremulous voice of Mrs. Paulpoff. "I came to say that the meal is ready, and I find—what do I find?"

"Oh, Papa Paulpoff is dreaming one of his dreams," said Vladimir, with a gay laugh.

"But is it not so, old woman?" asked Papa Paulpoff. "Is it not quite possible that our Vladimir may marry that handsome American girl?"

"I have seen it so," answered the old woman. "It seems that no young woman would take this interest if she did not love!"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Vladimir. "We are friends. She is good. I admire. Why, I could almost worship her, but I am a peasant. She is—"

There came the sound of cursing out side and the fall of a horse's hoofs. A shout took the old man to the door.

"Curses upon this beast!" came an angry voice as a man about thirty-five, clad in a neat riding suit, entered the room striking his high boots with his whip. "I have just been thrown. In some mysterious manner my horse, who never stumbles, caught his foot in something, tore loose his shoe and hurled me to the ground. The horse is uninjured, but he has lost the shoe. I heard the sound of a smithy and came to you for assistance. I must reach Graslov tonight, and the delay is serious."

"It is long since we were mere horse-shoers," said the old man. "The railroad!"

"But surely you can make a shoe and put it on. I must go forward, and I do not wish to lame this valuable horse."

"Certainly, we will shoe the horse," put in Vladimir, whose kind heart could never refuse any request that was reasonable and proper. "I will attend to it at once."

"But the meal is waiting," said the old woman.

will shoe the horse and permit the prince to proceed."

"How did you know that I was a prince?" asked the stranger, looking about him with a keen eye that was full of inquiry.

"The horse is of the herd at Graslov, the seat of the Neslerovs," was the answer. "I know the herd and think I have shod this very horse before."

"Good! That is better than putting him into the hands of a stranger," said the rider. "Is your name Paulpoff?"

"It is. I am Vladimir Paulpoff. The little father here is Michael."

"Ah, I have heard of you. You have guessed correctly. I am a prince. My steward, who has charge of my estate while I am away in Siberia, has told me of the giant who is growing rich working for the railroad. It is said that you can bend an iron bar with your hands."

Vladimir in response picked up an iron bar about four feet long and an inch thick and bent it double with no apparent effort.

"Good God!" exclaimed the prince. "Are you that powerful?"

"We acquire muscle in this work," Vladimir answered, "and I was born powerful."

A look of wonder had spread over the face of the prince. He sat upon a rude stool while the other two began to prepare for shoeing the horse. The fine animal was brought inside, and he, like his noble master, seemed surprised at his surroundings.

The old woman, patient now under the rebuke of Vladimir, stood waiting.

"This is not much of a place for successful men," said Neslerov, looking around him.

"Ho!" chuckled the old man. "You have come too soon. See, nothing is being done. We are about to leave this place for a spot nearer the railway."

"Business is not good, then?"

"Oh, is it not?" said Vladimir. "When one has a powerful friend to send the ironwork to him, it is easy to get along. We shall have a fine shop and ten men employed in the work. Instead of this hotel my father and mother shall live in a fine house, and my father shall work no more. I shall make money for all."

"Ah! Then I suppose you will be getting married?"

"That is something I have not thought of. I do not know."

"Somebody else knows," chuckled the old man. "There is an American girl who thinks well of our—"

"Hush!" exclaimed Vladimir impatiently. "You are speaking of some one whose name must be sacred."

His face was flushed, and Neslerov looked at it searchingly.

"You are very fortunate," said Neslerov jokingly. "I can get no one to marry me."

"You but jest. Any one would be pleased to marry one of Russia's wealthiest princes."

"But such a one!" continued the indiscreet old man. "She is beautiful, she is rich, and she sends him books."

"Good! She is educating you. She must love you," said Neslerov.

"Oh, as to love, that is different. Her acts are kind, and I feel grateful. But for marrying—it will require a fine man to make her happy."

"He will make any one happy," put in the old woman, with a glance of pride at the young giant. "Any girl, even though she might be a princess, would get no better for a husband. Look at those arms! Can they not protect?"

"They could fell a bull!" said Neslerov. "How do you pass the time here? Do you go to the nearest village or to Perm and play?"

"Not he!" said the old man, pausing long enough in his work to add his tribute to the son they loved so well. "That young man spending his time at a village! I think not, your excellency. With his books he spends his nights. He studies or he paints."

"What's that? Paints?"

"Aye, indeed yes. He is a born painter."

"And shoeing horses?"

"One gets a kopeck or two for shoeing horses. One must paint for the pleasure of it, unless one is well known. It will come in time," said Vladimir.

"See, he is not so simple as he looks," said Papa Paulpoff, nodding his head toward the big boy.

"Very far from simple, I should say," answered Neslerov.

"Old woman!" shouted Papa Paulpoff suddenly, so suddenly that she jumped in alarm. "Go get the picture. Let the prince see the face of her who is so kind to Vladimir."

The old woman obeyed and ran out.

"Her picture! You have her picture painted!" stammered Neslerov.

"Yes, I, and the good part of it is that she knows nothing of it. I shall give it to her when she comes again to see us," said Vladimir.

"But I do not understand. How could you draw a face without having it before you?" asked the prince.

"Ha! It is never from my sight. The most beautiful face! A face that one could not forget. I drew it—I painted it—two—three and four times from memory, and always alike."

At this juncture the old woman returned with a picture in a frame. Silently she handed it to Neslerov. He sat with it in his hands, gazing down hungrily upon the features he knew so well. It showed two things—first, that there was, undeveloped in the young man, a talent that would make him famous if it ever got a chance; second, that he must have the picture of the girl indelibly in his mind to paint so true a picture from memory. And, knowing Frances Gordon, Neslerov knew that this man was a most dangerous rival for her hand.

"But that is not all he has done," said the old woman exultingly.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Papa Paulpoff. "He has done nothing else worth mentioning."

Vladimir looked up in surprise and caught a swift look of warning flashed from Michael's eyes to those of his wife. The warning flash was also seen by Neslerov, and his curiosity was whetted.

"Surely this cannot be all," he said. "Such a talent must have an outlet. There must be something else. Come! I will look at all you have and buy what I want."

"But not that," replied Vladimir. "I could not sell that."

"But another of the same face?"

"No, I could not sell that face."

"Then let me see something else—something as good as this—and I will buy it."

"There is another woman's face"—began Mamma Paulpoff.

"Yes, and as beautiful a face as this, but a Russian," added Vladimir. "It was a picture. Papa Paulpoff had it. I found it one day and painted one from it."

"Show it to me," said Neslerov. His eyes were fixed on the face of Vladimir with something like fear in them now. He glanced from one to another of the group.

Papa Paulpoff showed evidences of nervousness, but Vladimir was eager to satisfy the prince. He sent the old woman for the other portrait.

She brought it and placed it in the hands of the prince. At the first glance his face went white to the very lips. His hands shook. His frame trembled.

"Good heavens!" was breathed under his mustache. The words were not heard, but the manner of the man did not escape Papa Paulpoff.

"Who is this—it is a beautiful woman—but her name?" asked Neslerov, and his voice had turned suddenly hoarse in spite of the effort to control himself.

"I found a small picture one day after a party of nobles passed by," answered Papa Paulpoff.

A swift glance of suspicion shot from the eyes of Neslerov to the face of Papa Paulpoff. But the old man's face was perfectly impassive.

"I will buy this. Name your price," said the prince. "And I will buy the other, the one you found."

"Alas, it is lost!" exclaimed Papa Paulpoff. "It was in a small house we had years ago, and it burned down."

"And the picture destroyed?"

Continued in Tuesday's Edition.



"What is it that you say—our Vladimir talking of marrying?"



"I love your daughter."

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