

# By a Hair's Breadth

By Headon Hill.

THIS is the first installment of "By a Hair's Breadth," a novel of rare interest just at the present time, while the eyes of the world are focused on St. Petersburg. It tells of the plot and counterplot that keep the Czar in constant jeopardy and how marvelously he is safeguarded by the dreaded "Third Section."

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CHAPTER I

THE EVE OF DEPARTURE.

GENERAL GRANOVITCH, the chief of the Russian secret police—the dreaded "Third Section"—sat writing in the private room of his bureau on the Nevski Prospect. A busy man always, he was busier than ever that day. On the morrow his imperial master was to commence the tour which for months had been the talk of Europe, and on Ivan Granovitch's shoulders lay the responsibility for the safety of the young Tsar and his stately bride.

Presently the general laid down his pen and touched a hand-bell on the desk.

"Has Volborth come yet?" he inquired of the official who answered the summons.

"Monsieur Volborth is in the waiting-room, Excellency," was the reply. "Send him in."

The man who entered the chief's room a minute later was apparently a peasant—a typical Russian moujik, unkempt and ill-clad. A mass of tangled hair framed and nearly concealed his face, and he carried a greasy sheepskin cap in his hand. But as he crossed the room to stand before the desk his step was confident and lissom—by no means the cringing gait that might have been expected from his costume. Moreover, he did not smell of vodka.

The chief leaned back in his chair and smiled approvingly.

"Really, my dear Volborth, I must compliment you on your perfect preparation for disguise," he said. "Why, you must have spent hours on that make-up."

"It is the penalty I pay for having to do most of my real work in my own personality," General Granovitch replied, spoken in cultivated accents. "My value to the section would be largely discounted if I were recognized crossing this threshold."

"I know that," said Granovitch, "and it is a credit to your ingenuity that to the world at large—above all, to that smaller world with which we are concerned—you are still Paul Volborth, literary trifter and favorite of society. But to business. I should like to be favored with your final view of the situation."

"I find no indications which would warrant the canceling or postponement of the imperial journey," replied Volborth. "There is a total absence of movement and excitement in suspected circles, and outwardly everything points to a quite abnormal state of calm. If I were to say to his Majesty, 'Don't go!' I could put my finger on no tangible reason for the warning, and yet—I am very, very anxious, General. It is this deadly stillness among the gentry of the knife and bomb. It is unnatural."

Granovitch stroked his iron-gray beard thoughtfully.

"There was movement and excitement enough two months back—in June," he said, after a pause. "And nothing apparently to account for it. Can it have been that plans were made and schemes laid then which are to bear fruit now? It has before crossed my mind that that may have been a bogus agitation, designed to furnish a reason for the disappearance of dangerous characters whose work is only now to begin—outside our jurisdiction."

"That view necessarily presents itself, but as you know, diligent search by our agents abroad has failed to find these persons," replied Volborth. "Well, Serjov, Krasomouk, and Anna Tschigorin have, to all seeming, vanished from the face of the earth. And Dimitri Petrof, the arch-plotter, and formerly most active of those still in St. Petersburg, is as quiet as a sucking dove. He is perfectly open in his comings and goings. The closest watching has failed to trace him to suspicious company, or to saddle him with the dispatch or receipt of treasonable letters. In this connection, General, an idea occurs."

"And that is?"

"That they have appointed a new executive head—some individual against whom no breath of suspicion has ever blown, even from this office," said Volborth earnestly. "If they were contemplating a grand coup, it would have been quite worth their while to reorganize specially for the purpose of baffling us. It would account for Petrof's present quietude. In order to let the blow come from an entirely unexpected quarter, he may have surrendered his authority to unseen hands, possibly even remaining in ignorance of details of subordinates, of everything."

"That is a startling theory—that of a new gang of the utterly unsuspected," exclaimed the chief, rising and pacing the room uneasily. "Increasing vigilance over their Majesties' persons could alone save them from such people. And I have not only to protect their lives, I must spare them the horror of an attempt. How can we counteract such a danger, Volborth, presuming it to exist?"

"I have already endeavored to counteract it," was the reply. "That is to say, for a month past I have made a point of suspecting every one—entirely, I repeat, without result."

"For over a minute there was silence in the room, and then Granovitch, halting suddenly, faced about and confronted Volborth, who was still standing by the desk.

"My friend," he said, "there is no one

better fitted for this task than yourself. You must accompany his Majesty as the chief agent of the section, though not openly as such. Existing arrangements will stand. Restofski will act as the visible head of the police who are to travel en suite, but he will be at your orders. He is absolutely to be depended on, and has done good work under you before. You shall go in the character of official historian of the tour. That will be in keeping with your avowed occupations."

"I am at the disposal of the section," said Volborth calmly. "I should wish to stipulate that my real capacity is known to as few of the suite as possible—say, to Prince Lobanof and the chief aide-de-camp."

"A wise precaution, and it shall be attended to," said Granovitch. "I will send for Restofski at once and explain the situation to him. For yourself, it might be well if you took a last look round."

"I shall be busy between now and the hour of departure, to-morrow," answered Volborth significantly. "I shall see you before we leave? Good! Then, for the present, farewell, General."

The moment he was over the threshold of the private room his gait changed to a shambling slouch, in keeping with his dress. Passing through the antechambers and hall, he bowed obsequiously to several officials, who were well aware of his high position in the section, but who treated him to the stony stare, and in one or two instances to the curse, they would have accorded to the genuine moujik. It was not likely, but it was possible, that even within the precincts of the bureau there might be sharp eyes prying on those whose one duty it was to pry.

Volborth passed through the swing doors on to the broad flight of steps that leads to the street level, and hanged down he met a man who was ascending with the evident intention of entering the building. The one glance that Volborth shot from under his shaggy, false eyebrows told him that the visitor to the section bureau was neither a Frenchman nor a Russian, his somewhat "fodd" tailoring being more suggestive of a British or American tourist. His complexion was florid almost to redness, and his clean-shaven face was broad and good-natured, though, as he stopped and accosted Volborth, the latter was conscious of a curious dilatation of the smiling eyes.

"Sa, can you inform me if this is the American consulate?" he inquired, in a language and accent that left no doubt as to his nationality.

But Volborth, who, speaking six languages like a native, understood him thoroughly, merely shook his head, and grunting inarticulately, proceeded on his way. With a shrug of his shoulders the stranger entered the swinging doors and was lost to view.

"There is either a very guileless or a very deep specimen of the traveling Yankee," muttered Volborth, as he loitered a little way off to see what would happen. "A moujik, especially one of my forlorn appearance, would hardly be expected by a sane person to speak English. I wonder how soon he will discover his mistake—if mistake it was. Ah! he has been already enlightened—and shown the door."

For the American had reappeared on the top of the steps in the company of an official, who by his gestures was evidently pointing out the desired direction. Having apparently thanked his informant, the seeker for the consulate came leisurely down the steps and became merged in the throng of foot passengers on the pavement.

"Let me see," said Volborth to himself, "old Bratski is on duty in the hall of the bureau. He may be trusted to do the right thing and verify that 'error.' Ah! that is well; there goes the shadow."

A nondescript individual had come out of the building and had followed in the direction taken by the American. Having satisfied himself that the spy of the section had picked up the trail, Volborth shambled on, and, passing into the poorer quarter of the city, dived at length down a dark alley, where he entered a wretched house that was little better than a hovel.

He remained but a short time within the house was only one of several lairs he kept in different parts of the city for the purpose of changing his disguise when on his way to or from the bureau. When he came out it was by a back exit leading into another alley behind, and now it was in the garb of a petty shopkeeper that he retraced his way to more aristocratic regions. So much store did he set on preserving the secret of his connection with officialdom that he always took the precaution of a double change before approaching the bureau.

His own residence, where he lived openly the life of Paul Volborth—man of birth, man of fashion and man of letters—was on the Michael Strasse, and even here he went through the pantomime of ringing the bell and parrying with the confidential servant—himself an agent of police—who opened to him. Had watchful eyes been on the master of the house they would have seen nothing but a shabby tradesman applying for admission that was tardily granted.

Once inside, Volborth hastened to his dressing-room and set about metamorphosing himself into his own proper person preparatory to the "last look round" suggested by the chief of the Third Section. While donning the clothes of a Russian gentleman, he busied his brain with mapping out the few hours at his disposal.

"Yes," he thought, as he surveyed himself in the glass, "the fair Palitzin must have a visit, if some seemingly more important ones are left unpaid. I am due to offer her my respects socially, even were there no other reason. Bah! it isn't a reason, and yet—I don't know. There is something vague and shadowy about that woman—an atmosphere, shall I call it?—that stimulates my instincts, and my instincts have yielded reasons before now. Tarasch," he added aloud to the grave manservant who was aiding his change of attire, "did you take that note to Captain Dubrowski of the Imperial Guard?"

"I did, monsieur, and the Captain



the journey will surely yield no tragic records. But I am forgetting my duties. Let me present to you a friend of mine from America, traveling for pleasure. Colonel Delaval, come here and make the acquaintance of one already distinguished and about to add to his laurels. This is Monsieur Volborth, who is about to accompany the Emperor on his tour."

She had been conversing with Volborth in French—the language of polite Petersburg. But in addressing the man at the window she spoke in Russian, and in obedience to her behest he turned toward the room, presenting the broad, florid face of the American who, not two hours before, on the steps of the Third Section bureau, had accosted the seeming Russian moujik in English.

"Deep waters," thought Volborth, who had recognized his fellow-visitor the moment he entered. "If he knew our language, why did he not use it then? It is curious, too, for an American to speak Russian and not French."

The two men bowed, and were soon in the thick of an animated conversation on the Tsar's tour, the American evincing a natural but exceedingly ill-

this Restofski. However loyal one is, one cannot know a policeman, but he struck me as being fit for the work—if prying impertinence is a qualification."

The American was listening with the air of the knowledge-gathering foreigner.

"But surely," he chimed in, "these precautions of your officialdom are somewhat staid and superfluous? This Restofski now, and his myrmidons—they are more for the purpose of imperial show, I take it, than for any real services they are likely to render?"

Volborth laughed gayly. "You must not expect me to disparage the most cherished of our institutions, Colonel Delaval," said he, with just enough latent sarcasm in his tone to hint at no great fondness for the police. "Seriously, though, the answer to your question must depend on two contingencies—whether any need for Restofski's services will occur, and, secondly, whether he will be competent to deal with it if it does. I am not competent to offer an opinion on either point."

He laid the faintest possible stress on the personal pronoun—so faint that it would not be noticed but by one con-

was to spend his last evening in Petersburg under that roof.

"To some natures the idyllic state is not always satisfying," remarked Volborth. "Possibly my friend, the junior aide-de-camp, having the moon with him on his travels, may cry for the absent sun."

"Ah! you have heard? They talk at the clubs?" said Olga, clearly not displeased with the hint of her conquest. "He is a foolish fellow, our dear Boris, to come dangling here so often. Were he not leaving with their Majesties to-morrow, I should have had to drive him away. It would never do for it to be said at court that I was luring the betrothed of the Tsarina's favorite maid-of-honor to break faith. Boris is such an impetuous boy."

"Captain Dubrowski of the Imperial Guard!" announced a lackey, throwing open the door.

With jingle of spurs and clank of sword the subject of their small talk entered, gorgeous in the glittering uniform of the Household troops. That the Princess was not expecting him was plain to the ceaseless vigilance of Volborth. Equally plain was it that she was ready for the emergency, for even



begged you to excuse him," was the reply. "He was too pressed to write a note, being up to the eyes in preparations for his departure with their Majesties to-morrow. He desired me to say that he was engaged to dine at the Princess Olga Palitzin's to-night."

"To ascertain that, my Tarasch, was said Volborth to himself. He trusted this man implicitly, but it was characteristic of him that not till an hour before he started would he confide the fact of his own approaching departure.

He placed a sprig of gardenia in his button-hole, flicked a speck of dust from the silken lapel of his frock coat, and, taking his hat and cane from Tarasch, descended into the street. No one would have dreamed that the well-groomed Russian gentleman of the modern "Frenchified" type was the most trusted agent of the secret police, starting on the first stage of the most terrible responsibility ever confided to man. In age, perhaps, nearing forty, clean-shaven save for a carefully trained mustache, and with a face showing to a marked degree, when in repose, the impassive coldness of his race, he would never have been credited with his most deadly attributes—an alertness that never slumbered, a swiftness that struck sure, and an inexorable disregard for feeling that never spared.

In a word, Paul Volborth's success had hitherto been due to a devotion to duties for which, by temperament and choice, he was pre-eminently fitted. Had he loved his work less, he would still have done his work well from sheer ability; wedded to it as he was, he became the most potent factor in the councils of the Nihilists, who had to make allowance in all their schemes for an unknown force that seemed ever in their midst—penetrating their secret souls and yet utterly untraceable.

To such a man the sensation of being "all at sea," and that at such a crisis as the present, with the Emperor's life depending on his knowing the set of every undercurrent, came as a bracing nerve- tonic. While dressing, he had rapidly surveyed the revolutionary combinations in the capital, and he had decided not to fritter away his few hours in fishing waters already well explored. Rather would he act on the theory which he had imparted to Granovitch, and try for a thread to the "new grouping" which a growing conviction told him existed.

"Take me to the house of the Princess Palitzin," was the instruction he gave to the droschki driver, who drew up in response to his hail.

A few minutes later he was mounting the staircase of a splendid mansion on the Great Morskaja, escorted by two Swiss lackeys in the canary and red Palitzin liveries. Arrived on the first landing, he was conducted some way

down a corridor hung with priceless art gems to a curtained door which the senior servant flung wide, at the same time announcing the visitor.

"Ah, Monsieur Volborth, truant and man of bad faith. So at last, after many days, you deign to visit poor me?" was the playful greeting accorded him by a lady who came forward with outstretched hand.

"Only five days, Princess," said Volborth, raising the hand to his lips with easy gallantry. "But you are right—to me, at any rate, the days have seemed as years." Here he became conscious that the room had another occupant—a man standing at one of the windows gazing down the street. Volborth had the knack of seeing without looking, and he added quite naturally, and without allowing his hostess to perceive that the sight of that silent figure was the cause of the addition, "I have been very busy, and I am only here now because I am come to make my adieus."

"You are leaving Petersburg, then? Ah! gay one, for Paris, without doubt?" said the Princess with no more semblance of interest than politeness required.

"For Paris later; but to-morrow for Vienna in the train of their Imperial Majesties," said Volborth, speaking rapidly, so as to gain the advantage of surprise. "Congratulations, my dear Princess; I have been appointed recorder of their Majesties' wanderings, and am to travel en suite."

For the fraction of a second a gleam blazed up in the fine eyes of the Princess, though it might well have been due to what was, as it stood, an interesting announcement. Then she broke into a ripple of merry laughter.

"You are one of Fortune's spoiled children," she said gayly. "I do, indeed, congratulate you, and their Majesties also. With such a bright butterfly as our own Paul for its historian,

informed curiosity about the topic of the hour, and the Princess chiming in with light persiflage.

She was a striking personality—the Princess Olga Palitzin, daughter of one of Russia's noblest houses. Though she must have been fully twenty-seven years of age, she had kept a rare, almost childlike, freshness of complexion. Her features were fine and clearly cut, and her face knew how to vary its expression according to the feelings she wanted to show. She had soft, full lips, and steel blue eyes that gazed intently and yet gave no sign of how much they could comprehend.

All her movements were graceful, and she had a singularly even voice, that produced a strange impression. It was exceedingly soft and melodious, but at the same time so quiet and indifferent that it seemed as if its owner could never love or hate, or indeed feel any intense emotion. The Princess, being to the manner born, moved in the very highest of Petersburg society, and she was equally at home in Paris and Vienna.

"You will have to behave yourself, you naughty Paul," said she in her Parisian manner, but still speaking in Russian. "They tell me that the tour will be little better than a progress of policemen, with our august sovereigns as a centerpiece. The name of the Third Section man in charge has been kept very dark, but a little bird whispers me that it is Restofski who goes in command of the army of spies."

Volborth nodded a careless assent. "I know it to my cost already," he said, with a grimace of amused disgust. "I was no sooner selected for my literary mission than I was hailed before Granovitch to have all my antecedents turned inside out in the presence of

scious of a merited innuendo. This scarcely perceptible emphasis was one of those baits which he habitually threw out in the course of his wily fishing; but, keenly as he watched, he could detect no sign either that the American or the Princess rose to it. Not by the quiver of an eyelid did they show that they possessed the knowledge which Volborth disclaimed, much less that they suspected him of implying that they had it.

Olga Palitzin was toying with a jeweled paper-knife, and with it she stabbed playfully at Volborth.

"Of course you know nothing of such things, Paul," she laughed. "How should you, when Colonel Delaval is probably right, and there is nothing to know? But come, let us discuss something more interesting than vulgar fry like Nihilists and police agents. What fun you will have on the journey, Paul! You should gather materials for a comedy in watching the pretty idyl between those fondest of betrothed lovers, Boris Dubrowski and his maid-of-honor. Was there ever such luck as for them both to be of the suite? No parting, no tears, no possible cause of jealousy!"

Volborth raised his eyebrows and regarded her with a significant smile. No social rumormongers were there, and he knew that the fair Irma Vassili had found her cause of jealousy already in the beautiful woman who spoke thus lightly of her betrothal to the Tsar's handsome aide-de-camp. The imminent breach between the two affianced members of the royal household, owing to Dubrowski's sudden infatuation for Olga Palitzin, was on every lip. Volborth had already taken steps to test the depth of that infatuation by ascertaining that the captain

as she rose to greet her latest visitor she tossed the American a side glance which distinctly said "Goi!" and to Volborth himself accorded a deprecatory shrug suggestive of compulsory adieu. Colonel Delaval obediently bowed himself out, but Volborth, nodding with friendly familiarity to the new-comer, held his ground. He did not intend to be hampered with a companion on leaving the room.

The young officer's usually bright and handsome face was clouded as he grasped the hand of his hostess.

"I am desolate, my dear Princess," he began. "I have only ten minutes at your disposal, and, alas! I must use them for saying farewell!"

"What! you do not dine with me to-night?" exclaimed Olga, and for once Volborth thought he could catch a metallic snap in her generally even tones.

"Unfortunately, no," replied Dubrowski ruefully. "His Majesty has commanded the attendance of an extra aide-de-camp this evening, and I am next for duty. I cannot help myself in such a case, as you know. I can only obey—and hate my luck."

Polite usage offered only one course to Volborth. He rose and took leave of the Princess, with a cheery Au revoir to Dubrowski, who was, however, far too perturbed to care about or understand his meaning. Olga's adieus were abundantly civil, but they were spoken with a rapidity that scarcely veiled the satisfaction she felt at his departure.

"I must take advantage of this change of plans," Volborth said to himself as he closed the door behind him. "Whatever object she had in asking him to dinner to-night she will endeavor to gain now—in the next few minutes."

He cast a quick glance up and down the corridor, and after taking half a dozen steps toward the head of the staircase, quietly went back on the tips of his patent leather shoes to the door. It was veiled with a heavy portiere, and, gliding behind the velvet folds, he applied his ear to the panel.