

# THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

Copyright, 1901, by Charles B. Eberington

## CHAPTER VI.

### AN AMERICAN GIRL'S PLACE.

ANOTHER glance from the window showed Frances that the car had come to a stop near a new bridge over a branch of the Irish. Involuntarily she sighed for the man who had built that bridge—Denton, whose eye was keen and steady, whose muscles were of iron.

But Denton was miles farther on, at the Ohl.

"Now," said Neslerov, as the girl sank back in her seat, "let us face this situation, my dear. Let us realize the true significance. We are practically alone, you and I. Save for the poor wretches in that village yonder, we are the only people on this earth just now. Can you realize the fullness of that statement? You are mine—absolutely and wholly mine."

"Oh, you can't! You coward!" exclaimed Frances. Her hand went as if by instinct toward that pocket from which she had drawn her revolver on a previous occasion. Neslerov saw her face turn whiter still, and he laughed pleasantly.

"Of course I guarded against that," he said. "I knew you would, with your American impulsiveness, try to shoot me again. So, while you slept, I quietly took your little toy pistol from your pocket. I have it here. This, I believe, deprives you of the power to do any more mischief."

"Oh, you miserable coward! You thief!" said Frances in a tense voice. "I wish there was a good American left here to strike that grinning face of yours!"

"Undoubtedly," said Neslerov, with an exasperating coolness, "that would be pleasant for you, but it would be unfortunate for the American who owned the fist. One blow—poor! He would be torn apart by any agreeable savages yonder."

She could not resist the temptation to follow his finger as it pointed through the window on his side of the car. A short distance, on the banks of the stream, she saw a wretched, miserable village of rude huts. Men and women dressed in filthy, uncleanly, unwholesome, heavy cloths from Moscow merchants, stood in groups, all with their faces toward the car.

"Were I to say the word," said Neslerov, "these people would tear you limb from limb and would perform the same agreeable service for any fool who attempted to interfere between us."

"Monster!" she gasped.

"Of course I am a monster to you," he said. "All Russians are monsters to those who do not like us. We may have a little civilization, but one of them is that what we cannot get by fair means we get some other way. I spoke to your father, and I spoke to you. I offered the honest love of a Russian prince. I was spurned. But now the game is mine, and I shall win. You shall become my wife before your father has time to return from the Ohl."

"Never! I would prefer to be torn apart by your villagers!"

"You believe that now while you are in the heat of anger, but a short period of rest and contemplation will show you the folly of your refusal. Think of this. I shall go out now and obtain some food. We may remain here a week. Who knows? Before I leave you I wish to say that until you consent to have the priest of that village make you my wife you shall not be permitted to leave this car. I much prefer, as would any man, a willing bride; but, denied this, I will compel you to obey. It will be the worse for you. I refused love—No! I cannot marry him. You refused. Now I cannot! Think this matter settled only when we are married."

"Never! You have my revolver and, I suppose, one of your own. Shoot me if you will. I will not marry you!"

"It will not be you I shoot. What do you think your father will do when he finds you are left behind?"

"Without doubt he will obtain a special train and come here after me. Then, Prince Neslerov, beware!"

She smiled like a wolf and showed his teeth.

"That is what I wanted you to say. If when your father comes here you are not my wife, I will shoot him dead."

"You dare not!" she gasped.

"I dare anything. No report of mine would be discredited at St. Petersburg. I could prove that your father was a conspirator against the government and was shot while fighting my soldiers."

"There is a government of the United States of America!"

"True, but at a distance. I do not fear it. But consider what I have said. I will return with food."

He left the car, securing the doors to prevent her escape. When she saw him striding toward the village, she leaned against the window and studied the rude people.

"I am helpless—absolutely helpless!" she moaned. "Oh, if he had not taken my revolver I could have shot him—or myself."

She looked about her for some method whereby she could, if the need should come, take her own life rather than submit to his demands. She knew that if there were a priest in this squalid place he would obey Neslerov, and mumble some words perfectly meaningless to her, but which would give Neslerov power over her. She walked the length of the apartment like a caged lioness.

Women turned into their huts and came out again. She saw Neslerov start back toward the car carrying a wooden tray. She shuddered again.

"God give me strength, courage, calmness!" she murmured. "To lose consciousness would be to fall a victim to him."

She nervously tried to meet him as his footstep sounded on the platform.

scious into Jack Denton's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER VII.  
A DUEL.

NESLEROV recoiled, and the writhing of his face in pain and fury, together with the long red cut made by the whip, gave him the expression of a demon.

"You!" said he, gasping.

"Yes, I!" said Denton. "Fortunately, I arrived in time to foil this dastardly attempt of yours to take advantage of a defenseless girl. I have been riding along the railway from stream to stream examining the bridges. I reached this place on my horse a moment ago. A boy saw me coming and hurried to tell me what was going on. I had no idea I should find a friend in need of help. But, thank God, I was in time."

"You will never leave this place alive!" said Neslerov.

He plucked a revolver from his pocket and aimed at Denton.

A woman standing near held out her hands and caught the force of the revolver and bore it into her house. Denton, with flashing eyes, leaped forward and closed with Neslerov.

"It is a battle to the death between giants!" cried a man in the crowd.

The pistol fell from the grasp of Neslerov, and the whip before wielded by Denton dropped to the ground.

The iron fingers of Denton would close on the throat of Neslerov, and it seemed as though the struggle would end at that moment, but Neslerov would wrench himself free and leap at his enemy with a roar.

"It is you or I! One of us must die!" cried Neslerov.

A swinging, crashing blow from the American's right hand sent the governor to the ground, where he lay as if stunned.

"Take care of him, somebody," said Denton in Russian. "I don't want to kill him."

He turned without a look at the fallen man and started toward the hut into which Frances had been carried.

"Look out!" cried a woman.

"At the cry, which was echoed in the crowd, Denton turned suddenly. The dastardly Neslerov had feigned. He had risen to his feet and was creeping upon his enemy with a dagger drawn.

"Oh, you are an assassin, eh?" said Denton as he drew his revolver. "Let me see if we can't settle you once for all."

While it might be that not one of the villagers sympathized with Neslerov, yet his act was not a crime to them. With their sordid understanding of women having no rights, no freedom, no property save what their lords and masters gave them, the men of this place looked upon the eagerness of Neslerov to be married to so beautiful a girl as natural.

One of them, realizing that the governor's safety was necessary to their own, sprang upon Denton and drove a knife through the fleshy part of his arm.

The pistol fell to the earth near that of Neslerov and two villagers picked them up and hid them.

Like a flash Neslerov was upon his feet, and his knife was raised to strike, but Denton, with a quicker movement, drew a knife from his belt. He had hidden two often over the tundra to go unprepared for enemies, human and otherwise.

And now began a duel the like of which the banks of the Irish or its branches will probably never see again.

With a grasp as of iron Denton seized the hand of Neslerov that held the dagger, and with a wrench the governor got it away and cut to the bone half the length of Denton's finger.

But the American scarcely felt the wound. He was not fighting now for life, nor for vengeance. He was fighting for that girl who lay in the hut. He knew that if Neslerov killed him, she would be made such a hell in the power of this monster of brutality that death would be preferable.

A year ago she had told him she did not and never could love him. It had been a quarrel. She didn't want to get married, and he asked her if his rough exterior, the result of years of hard work in rude and dangerous places, was disagreeable to her. He said there were fine gentlemen at Paris, New York, London and St. Petersburg. She had answered that she knew it. She preferred their company to bores. They parted then and had not met till now.

Denton and Neslerov kept fighting on, the villagers too much agitated to step between or utter a word.

Neslerov felt his right arm getting weaker. Denton's knife had slashed through the sleeve of his coat and found the bone near the elbow. An artery must have been cut, for the blood was trickling from the end of the sleeve. Made desperate, he gathered all his strength for a final effort and sprang bodily upon his foe.

Denton, seeing an opportunity and knowing that nothing but a deathblow seemed likely to end the fight, met the plunge and drove his knife into Neslerov's side.

With another curse, a spluttering of blood and a groan the governor of Tomsk sank to the ground at the foot of his adversary unconscious.

"Take care of him, you fellows; no need to let him die," said Denton, examining the wound. "His lung is not touched. Nothing fatal here, I am glad to say. Here, you!"

The old priest came mumbling toward him.

"You know more about surgery than the rest. Get some water, bathe these wounds, take a few stitches in the long cuts and bandage him up."

"Yes, little father," said the priest, trembling. "But what of you?"

"I can take care of myself."

He strode to the bank of the stream, over which he had but a few months before built a bridge, and bathed his wounds. Then he went into the hut to see Frances, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER VIII.  
THE INTERVIEW IN THE HUT.

FRANCES lay on a rude bed, scarcely conscious, and Denton stood a moment looking down solemnly upon the lovely upturned face. He bent over her, touched her brow and felt her pulse. All sense of his own injuries seemed to leave him as he saw her need of immediate care.

Frances felt his touch and looked up at him with about the same expression she might have worn had he been a stern and high priced specialist called in to make an examination.

"You are merely knocked out by the shock," he said, with assumed indifference. "You will probably be all right as soon as we get to Tomsk."

"Yes, if I could get there," she whispered. "My father will be anxious."

"We must relieve his anxiety as soon as possible. You must not worry."

"What will you do? And Neslerov?"

"Never mind Neslerov now. Keep cool. You've got to be braced up a little. I wish I had some wine."

"There was some in the car," she answered. "Neslerov had it. He tried to make me drink, but I would not."

"Kill him!" said another. "It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

CHAPTER IX.  
DENTON TURNS LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEER.

DENTON presented an unruffled front.

"Take me to the governor," he said.

"The governor is resting," growled a fellow whose face was a mass of grey hair. "You will kill him."

"Nonsense! Take me to the governor. If you kill me, he will die."

"Why is that, builder of bridges? Is there a god who avenges the death of Americans?"

"It will need no god to do that," said Denton. "The case is simply that Neslerov needs better care than you can give him. He is badly injured. It is necessary that he should be taken to Tomsk at once. I can start within the hour. There will be no other train to the Ohl in four days. Do you desire to keep your precious governor here and have him die on your hands?"

"No, let us see what the governor has to say," he said.

It was a solemn crowd that marched in two columns, with Denton between, to the hut of the village priest, where Neslerov lay.

"Why do you bring him here?" asked the priest. "Heard you not what his excellency said?"

"Hold your peace. Wait till you hear them speak together," was the reply.

Neslerov looked up at his conqueror, and an expression of hatred came into his eyes. Denton made no show of sentiment or compassion.

"I understand you commanded these villagers to kill me," he said, standing at the side of the bed and looking coldly and sternly at his victim. "I just wanted to say before they kill me—that they certainly will do if I resist—that in that case you would probably die here for lack of proper care."

"You cannot help me—you would not," answered Neslerov.

"That is for you to say. I am not a murderer. I had no desire to kill you. You attacked me, and I defended myself. I am going back to Tomsk, provided your savage villagers don't kill me, and I merely came to ask if you would be pleased to go."

"How?" he asked.

"In the same car you came thus far in."

"But how? There is no train due for days."

"I will take you to Tomsk if you promise never again to molest Mr. Gordon or his daughter."

"I promise," said Neslerov. "I will order the villagers to permit you to go."

Denton then went to the car and examined it. He discovered where a flaw in the iron had weakened the rivets and he had saved her from her low spoken tones.

He was followed at a short distance by several young men, among whom was the boy who had run to tell him that a woman was being roughly handled by Neslerov, and who had taken his horse to shelter. He ordered the boy to bring the horse. Mounting, he was soon out of sight. He did not go far, however. He rode along the track until he reached a siding a short distance from the bridge, where there was an old construction engine.

Denton examined the old bulk. It was only for drawing one or two cars. Denton carried water from the river and filled the boiler and built a fire of wood.

Soon after the villagers were surprised to see a wheezy, rickety old engine coming slowly, with a prodigious noise, into view. Denton's horse had no difficulty in keeping up with it.

The old engine was coupled to the car, and then Denton went for Frances.

Oh! and stopped at Perm. We saw the governor, and he promised that if he discovered that Vladimir was innocent he would help him."

"He might as well have said that if he discovered the moon was cheese he'd give it to you for lunch. Things like that are rarely corrected in Russia."

"When we left Perm, Neslerov was on the train. Of course, as papa did not know anything about the shooting in the house of the Paulpoffs he greeted Neslerov as a friend. Everything went well till we had crossed the border and come into Neslerov's own province. At this place—I had been sleeping—I woke up. The car had become detached from the train. I was alone with Neslerov. He took my revolver from me and dragged me here and ordered the priest to marry us. Then you came."

"Yes, I think I came just in time," said Denton.

Then a stern look came again upon his face.

"Frances," he said, "I do not know, of course, how this matter will end. If he finds it advisable to keep silent, then I may find a way to assist this Vladimir. I think we shall soon be on the way to the Ohl."

With these words he left the hut and was met at the door by an angry, threatening mob of villagers.

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

Neslerov nodded, and Denton went on the engine.

It was an exciting start, though the audience was small. The villagers stared, then laughed as the little old engine puffed and screeched and scraped as it got under way.

But it had a man in charge of it who was accustomed to overcoming difficulties. And the way he made it go and work would have made glad the heart of the man who had abandoned it on the siding six months before.

In the car was silence. Neslerov was too weak to talk; Frances would not talk to him if he wished. She remained at her end of the car, save to go in mercy to him and offer him water at intervals.

At intervals such times he would look up at her with an earnest, inscrutable expression on his face. She would not speak, nor he.

Suddenly at a siding toward which he had been aiming Denton turned the engine to the right and brought the little train to a standstill. They had been on the road sixteen hours and had traveled 210 miles.

Frances and Neslerov both looked up as the train stopped and saw the grimy engineer enter the car.

"There is a village near here," he said, "and just beyond this siding there is a small signal box. I have just visited it, and there is a train coming this way from Tomsk. Undoubtedly, as there is no regular train due, this is a searching party out after Frances Gordon. Now, I have no wish to start an international controversy. What story shall we tell?"

"Tell the truth," said Frances. "It does not, as a rule, harm any person who is innocent."

"No," said Neslerov; "not as a rule. But we are in a part of the world where customs are different from yours. If you tell the truth, you will never make the world believe you. But you will not understand. I cannot tell you."

"I know what you mean," said Frances scornfully. "You mean that your reputation is so bad that if it were known that you had that car left behind to compel me to marry you everybody will be sure I am your wife. Is that it?"

"Yes, something like that."

"But, then, there is my word," said Denton.

"Your story will be believed by your people, my story by mine," said Neslerov. "Let us each tell what we please. I do not care."

Denton nodded and went back to his engine. But he did not start. The whistle of a speeding locomotive was borne to him by the breeze. It came—engine and car, the same as that he was on, but a modern locomotive of American make. Gordon was in the car with some officials from Tomsk.

"Hey! That you, Denton?" he gasped as the grimy bridgebuilder stepped into the car, which was stopped at the side of the construction engine. "My girl and the governor of Tomsk got left behind in a car. Seen?"

"I'm all right," said Frances as she emerged from her car and flew to her father's arms.

"Did Denton save you? What was it? Where is Neslerov?" asked Gordon.

"Oh, he is in there," said Frances coolly. "We've had a lively experience. I thought at one time we'd be killed by some savages. But Mr. Denton and the prince—oh, let's get on; I'm tired out and hungry."

Denton heard and wondered.

In every new experience he had had with Frances Gordon he had been made more and more astonished by the uncertain moods, the whims, the strange turns her caprice would take.

"Hitch on to this train and haul her back to the Ohl," said Denton. "If the road doesn't want this engine, I can use it at the Ohl bridge."

This attachment was soon made, and Mr. Gordon, after visiting the prince and congratulating him upon his escape from the savages, assisted in transferring to him some of the comforts to be found in the other car. The Russian officials swarmed around him and praised his courage.

"And that American! He is a brave one too!" they said.

"Yes; he is brave—braver than I," said Neslerov weakly.

The train started back toward Tomsk. It had about ninety miles to go to reach the Ohl. During the journey Denton and Frances found themselves side by side in the rear car, with no one near enough to hear their low spoken tones.

He was followed at a short distance by several young men, among whom was the boy who had run to tell him that a woman was being roughly handled by Neslerov, and who had taken his horse to shelter. He ordered the boy to bring the horse. Mounting, he was soon out of sight. He did not go far, however. He rode along the track until he reached a siding a short distance from the bridge, where there was an old construction engine.

Denton examined the old bulk. It was only for drawing one or two cars. Denton carried water from the river and filled the boiler and built a fire of wood.

Soon after the villagers were surprised to see a wheezy, rickety old engine coming slowly, with a prodigious noise, into view. Denton's horse had no difficulty in keeping up with it.

The old engine was coupled to the car, and then Denton went for Frances.

Oh! and stopped at Perm. We saw the governor, and he promised that if he discovered that Vladimir was innocent he would help him."

"He might as well have said that if he discovered the moon was cheese he'd give it to you for lunch. Things like that are rarely corrected in Russia."

"When we left Perm, Neslerov was on the train. Of course, as papa did not know anything about the shooting in the house of the Paulpoffs he greeted Neslerov as a friend. Everything went well till we had crossed the border and come into Neslerov's own province. At this place—I had been sleeping—I woke up. The car had become detached from the train. I was alone with Neslerov. He took my revolver from me and dragged me here and ordered the priest to marry us. Then you came."

"Yes, I think I came just in time," said Denton.

Then a stern look came again upon his face.

"Frances," he said, "I do not know, of course, how this matter will end. If he finds it advisable to keep silent, then I may find a way to assist this Vladimir. I think we shall soon be on the way to the Ohl."

With these words he left the hut and was met at the door by an angry, threatening mob of villagers.

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"

"There he is!" growled an old man, evidently the leader. "He tried to kill his countrymen. Kill him!"

"It is the governor's command. He put the iron rod, the bridge, the devil wagens through our country. The czar does not wish it, and we must avenge the wrong. Kill him!"