The Czar's Spy

By Chevalier William Le Queux

My fellow-traveler from Stockholm, who represented a firm of paper-makers in Hamburg, and who paid an annual visit to Abo and Helsingfors, acted as my guide around the town, while I awaited the information from the humbled Chief of Police. My German friend pointed out to me how, since Russia placed her hand upon Finland, progress had been arrested, and certainly plain evidences were on every hand. There was growing discontent everywhere, for many of the newspapers had recently been suppressed and the remainder were under a severe consorship; agriculture had already decreased, and many of the cotton-spinning and sawmills were silent and deserted. The exploitation of those gigantic forests from which millions of trunks were floated down to the sea annually had now been suspended, the great landowners were deserting the country, and there was silence and depression everywhere. Finland had been separated for economic purposes from the more civilized countries, and bound to the poverty-stricken, artificially isolated and oppressed Russia. The double-headed eagle was everywhere, and the people sat silent and brooding beneath its black shadow.

"There will be an uprising here before long," declared the German confidentially as we were taking tea one day on the wooden balcony of the hotel where the sea and the low-lying islands stretched out before us in the pale yellow of the autumn sundown. "The people will revolt, as they did in Poland. The Finnish Government can only appeal to the Czar through the Governor-General, and one can easily imagine that their suggestions never reach the Emperor. It is said here that the harsher and more corrupt the official, the greater honor does he receive from Petersburg. But trouble is brewing for Russia," he added. "A very serious trouble—depend upon it."

I looked upon the gray dismal scene, the empty port, the silent quay, the dark line of gloomy pine forest away beyond the town, the broken coast and the wide expanse of water glittering in the northern sunset. Yes. The very silence seemed to forbode evil and mystery. Truly what I saw of Finland impressed me even more than what I had witnessed in the far-off eastern provinces of European Russia.

My object, however, was not to inquire into the internal condition of Finland, or of her resentment of her powerful conqueror. I was there to find that unfortunate girl who had written so strangely to her old school friend and whose portrait had, for some hidden reason, been destroyed.

On the morning of the third day after my arrival at Abo, while sitting on the hotel veranda reading an old copy of the Paris Journal, many portions of which had been "blacked out" by the censor, the Chief of Police, in his dark green uniform, entered and saluted before me.

"Your Excellency, may I be permitted to speak with you in private?"

"Certainly," I responded, rising and conducting him to my bedroom, where I closed the door, invited him to a seat, and myself sat upon the edge of the bad.

"I have made various inquiries," he said, "and I think I have found the lady your Excellency is seeking. My information, however, must be furnished to you in strictest confidence," he added, "because there are reasons why I should withhold her whereabouts from you."

"What do you mean?" I inquired. "What reasons?"

"Well—the lady is living in Finland in secret."

"Then she is alive!" I exclaimed quickly. "I thought she was dead."

"To the world she is dead," responded Michael Boranski, stroking his red beard. "For that reason the information I give you must be treated as confidential."

"Why should she be in hiding? She is guilty of no offense—is she?"

The man shrugged his shoulders, but did not reply.

"And this Baron Oberg? You tell me nothing of him," I said with dissatisfaction.

"How can I when I know nothing, Excellency?" was his response.

I felt certain that the fellow was not speaking the truth, for I had noticed his surprise when I had first uttered the mysterious nobleman's name.

"As I have already said, Excellency, I am desirous of atoning for my insult, and will serve you in every manner I can. For that reason I had sought news of the young English lady—the Mademoiselle Heath."

"But you have all foreigners registered in your books," I said. "The search was surely not a difficult one. I know your police methods in Russia too well," I laughed.

"No, the lady was not registered," he said. "There was a reason."

"Why?"

"I have told you, Excellency. She is in hiding."

"Where?"

"I regret that much as I desire, I dare not appear to have any connection with your quest. But I will direct you. Indeed, I will give you instructions to a second person to take you to her."

"Is she is Abo?"

"No. Away in the country. If your Excellency will be down at the end of the quay to-morrow at noon you will find a carriage in waiting, and the driver will have full instructions how to take you to her and how to act. Follow his directions implicitly, for he is a man I can trust."

"To-morrow!" I cried anxiously. "Why not to-day? I am ready to go at any moment."

The Chief of Police remained thoughtful for a few moments, then said—

"Well, if I can find the man, you might go to-day. Yet it is a long way, and you would not return before to-morrow."

"The roads are safe, I suppose? I don't mind driving in the night."

The official glanced at the clock, and rising exclaimed—

"Very well, I will send for the man. If we find him, then the carriage will be at the same spot at the eastern end of the quay in two hours."

"At noon. Very well. I shall keep the appointment."

"And after seeing her, you will of course keep your promise of secrecy regarding our little misunderstanding?" he asked anxiously.

"I have already given my word," was the response; and the man bowed and left, much, I think, to the surprise of the hotel proprietor and his staff. It was an unusual thing for such a high official as the Chief of Police to visit one of their guests in person. If he desired to interview any of them, he commanded them to attend at his office, or they were escorted there by his gray-coated agents.

The day was cold, with a biting wind from the icy north, when after a hasty luncheon I put on my overcoat and strolled along the deserted quay where I lounged at the further end, watching the approach of a great pontoon of pine logs that had apparently floated out of one of the rivers and was now being navigated to the port by four men who seemed every moment in imminent danger of being washed off the raft into the sea as the waves broke over and drenched them. They had, however, lashed themselves to their raft, I saw, and now slowly piloted the great floating platform toward the quay.

I think I must have waited half an hour, when my attention was suddenly attracted by the rattle of wheels over the stones, and turning I saw an old closed carriage drawn by three horses abreast, with bells upon the harness, approaching me rapidly. When it drew up, the driver, a burly-looking fair-headed Finn in a huge sheepskin overcoat, motioned me to enter, urging in broken Russian—

"Quickly, Excellency!—quickly!—you must not be seen!"

And then the instant I was seated, and before I could close the door, the horses plunged forward and we were tearing at full gallop out of the town.

For five miles or so we skirted the sea along a level, well-made road through a barren wind-swept country whence the meager harvest had already been garnered. There were no villages. All around was a houseless land, rolling miles of brown and green, broken and checkered by bits of forest and clumps of dark melancholy pines. The road ran ever and anon right down to where the cold, green waves broke upon the rocky shore. In a few weeks that coast would be ice-bound and snow-covered, and then the silence of the God-forsaken country would be complete.

After five miles or so, the driver pulled up and descended to readjust his harness, whereupon I got out and asked him in the best Russian I could command:

"Where are we going?"

"To Nystad."

"How far is that?"

"Sixty-eight," was his reply.

I took him to imply kilometers, as being a Finn, he would not speak of versts.

"The Chief of Police has given you directions?" I asked.

"His high Excellency has told me exactly what to do," was the man's answer, as he took out his huge wooden pipe and filled it. "You wish to see the young lady?"

"Yes," I answered, "to first see her, and I do not know whether it will be necessary for me to make myself known to her. Where is she?"

"Beyond Nystad," was his vague answer with a wave of his big fat hand in the direction of the dark pine forest that stretched before us. "We shall be there about an hour after sundown."

Then I re-entered the stuffy old conveyance that rocked and rolled as we dashed away over the uneven forest road, and sat wondering to what manner of place I was being conducted.

Elma Heath was in hiding. Why? I recollected her curious letter and remembered every word of it. She wished Hornby to know that she had never revealed her secret. What secret, I wondered?

I lit an abominable cigar, and tried to smoke, but I was too filled with anxiety, too bewildered by the maze of mystery in which I now found myself. Two hours later we pulled up before a long log-built post-house just beyond a small town in a hollow that faced the sea, and I alighted to watch the steaming horses being replaced by a trio of fresh ones. The place was Dadendal, I was informed, and the proprietor of the place, when I entered and tossed off a liqueur-glass of cognac, pointed out to me a row of granite buildings fallen much to decay as the ancient convent.

Then, resuming our journey, the short day quickly drew to a close, the sun sank yellow and watery over the towering pines through which we went mile after mile, a dense, interminable forest wnerein the wolves lurked in winter, often rendering the road dangerous.

The temperature fell, and it froze again. Through the window in front I could see the big Finn driver throwing his arms across his shoulders to promote circulation, in the same manner as does the London "cabby."

When night drew on we changed horses again at a small, dirty post-house in the forest at the edge of a lake, and then pushed forward again, although it was already long past the hour at which he had said, we should arrive.

Time passed slowly in the darkness, for we had no light, and the horses seemed to find their way by instinct. The rolling of the lumbering old vehicle after six hours had rendered me sleepy, I think, for I recollect closing my eyes and conjuring up that strange scene on board the Lola.

Indeed, I suppose I must have slept, for I was awakened by a light shining into my face and the driver shaking me by the shoulder. When I roused myself and, naturally, inquired the reason, he placed his finger mysteriously upon my lips, saying:

"Hush, your high nobility, hush! Come with me. But make no noise. If we are discovered, it means death for us—death. Come, give me your hand. Slowly. Tread softly. See, here is the boat. I will get in first. We shall not be heard upon the water. So."

And the fellow led me, half-dazed, down to the bank of a broad, dark river which I could just distinguish—he led me to an unknown bourne.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CASTLE OF TERROR.

The big Finn had, I found, tied up his horses, and in the heavy old boat he rowed me down the swollen river which ran swift and turbulent around a sudden bend and then seemed to open out to a great width. In the starlight I could

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