

DARKEST RUSSIA

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CHAPTER I.

The Minister of Police.

Karsicheff, minister of police, was evidently in no amiable mood as he sat, deeply intent on mastering the details of the mass of official documents spread before him.

It was late in the afternoon of a December day in 188—. St. Petersburg was all athrill with the life of a great city. The silvery music of thousands of sleigh bells played a jingling accompaniment to the brilliant scenes that were being enacted on the great thoroughfare that paralleled the historic Neva. To the casual observer the Russian capital at the time presented nothing to indicate that aught but peace and prosperity, happiness and content, were the lot of its people. The brilliant equipages of the nobility whirled along in kaleidoscopic variety, giving an air of wealth and luxury to the scene. Apparently the autocrat of Russia had nothing to fear from the most favored of his subjects.

The season was at its height in St. Petersburg. The czar and his court were at the capital, and a series of brilliant state ceremonials kept society in a whirlwind of social pleasures, and gave an impetus to fashionable frivolity, manifested by a constant succession of entertainments at the great homes of the aristocracy. One of the most magnificent fetes of the season was to occur on the night following the day on which our story opens, and it was whispered that the imperial master of Russia himself had promised to honor it with his presence. It was because of this promise—because of the belief that the czar by this action designed to show distinguished honor to Paul, Count Nazimoff—that Karsicheff, minister of police, on this afternoon sat, with clouded brow, earnestly engaged with the papers before him and which occupied his thoughts to the exclusion of all else.

Constantine Karsicheff was nearing the supreme moment of his life. Success now meant fortune, favor, future greatness; failure meant ruin, dis-



"KARSICHEFF WAS IN NO AMIABLE MOOD."

grace, perhaps even exile. There is but one test applied to the minister of police—and there is no halfway stopping place between extremes. Already ominous signs were not wanting that the czar was far from satisfied. A week before, after a conference with Gortshakoff, president of the council of ministers, the intimation had been conveyed that the czar was growing weary of apparent inaction. "His imperial majesty," suggested the prime minister, "fails to understand why your policy has borne no results, and why the enemies of the state are apparently more active than under any of your predecessors."

"But, your excellency," Karsicheff

had urged, "I am waiting to crush the enemy by one supreme stroke. All my plans are being matured for action that will stamp out Nihilism in Russia as completely as if it had never existed."

Gortshakoff smiled grimly. The veteran diplomat was accustomed to take words, from whatever source they came, with a liberal discount on their face value. "I will report your words to his majesty," he said—and then, as if the thought had suddenly occurred, he added: "But do something."

"Do something, do something." The words of Gortshakoff kept ringing in his brain as Karsicheff, his examination of documents finished at last, leaned back in his chair and summed up the result.

It was to Karsicheff's credit that he had brought the system of espionage to a degree of perfection that had never been surpassed. His agents were everywhere. In the salons of the nobility; in the faculty of the college; among the rank and file in the army; mixing with the merchant and trading classes; drinking in the lowest kabaks (spirit shops)—in all places from the highest to the lowest—the trusted agents of the minister of police, ever alert, were trying to gain some clue that would enable Karsicheff to give the coup de grace to the enemy. These reports were the result of their investigations. There were rumors, suggestions, innuendoes, generalities, everything but facts.

Karsicheff rose from his chair, his face white with rage and disappointment. In all these reports not one definite clue, not one fact to act upon. All guess, all surmise, all conjecture, or else lies! "Something must be done, and at once. Any further delay now, and I may be deposed without a moment's notice! Anything but that, my God! anything but that! It would mean ruin, disgrace, dishonor." Wrought up by the picture his fears had brought before him, Karsicheff strode up and down his apartment, a prey to the most poignant anxiety and apprehension.

Suddenly he stopped, and pulling a bell cord with a quick, impatient motion, he returned to his desk and resumed his seat.

A moment later and the door silently opened to give entrance to a tall, soldierly man. Taking one of the papers from the desk before him Karsicheff ran his eyes over it, and then turning to the man, handed him the document, with the remark: "Have we that name on the list of suspects?"

Radloff, confidential agent of the minister, took the paper, and with a quick glance mastered its contents.

"I do not recall the name, your excellency," was his reply.

"Consult the register and find out." Radloff bowed and withdrew.

"It is my last chance," mused the minister, when his subordinate had withdrawn. "I will arrest him tonight and take the chances of making a sensation that will at least show"—he smiled bitterly as he recalled the prime minister's words—"that I have 'done something.'"

Within five minutes Radloff again entered the apartment, and respectfully approaching Karsicheff, presented the paper. "The name occurs in the report of the students of the Polytechnique, your excellency, marked simply 'Suspect.' No reason is assigned, nor are any particulars given."

"Detail Ferzan on the case at once—or, stay! Take the case yourself. It is important. Spare no expense and lose not a moment. Report to me in person at any place I may be when you have finished. And"—as Radloff was about to withdraw—"I re-

quire a full report. See that nothing is wanting to make it complete."

Radloff bowed and left the room. Once more Karsicheff resumed his restless walk.

The sound of the great bell in the official residence caused him to walk to the window just as a magnificently appointed sleigh, drawn by four coal-black horses, dashed up to the door. Reclining among the mass of furs were two ladies, at the sight of whom Karsicheff's expression changed to one of mingled pride and affection. A moment more and the occupants of the sleigh had entered the house, and a servant announced to the minister that the Countess Karsicheff and Mlle. Olga Karsicheff, his wife and only daughter, had returned from their drive.

CHAPTER II.

The Countess Karsicheff.

Katherine, Countess Karsicheff, was one of the social leaders of the most exclusive society in St. Petersburg. For centuries her family had occupied a foremost position among the great names of the empire. Katherine Karsicheff was of the truest Russian type of the grande dame and of the bluest blood of the old Muscovite nobility. So it was that when Katherine became the wife of the then comparatively unknown governor of Tambov, her family influence was sufficiently powerful to push the fortunes of Countess Karsicheff, until now he was at the head of the imperial police, then perhaps the most responsible and arduous post in the empire.

The family consisted at this time



"HAVE YOU DISCOVERED THE ADDRESS?"

of two children, a son and daughter, Nicholas and Olga. The former ostensibly acted as his father's secretary, but really spent most of his time in the pursuits common to the younger sons of the nobility, the extravagant and riotous dissipations of the capital.

Olga Karsicheff, on the other hand, was a marked contrast to her brother. She was a tall, graceful girl with rather pensive face, the expression of which was intensified by the sadness which continually haunted her great brown eyes.

The Countess Karsicheff, immediately after entering the house, proceeded to her own apartments. As the countess glanced at herself in the mirror she wore a smile of pride and triumph. All day long she had been receiving congratulations on the approaching marriage of her daughter Olga with the dashing young Colonel Alexis Nazimoff, only son and heir of Paul, Count Nazimoff, and the greatest catch of the day in St. Petersburg.

The trousseau had arrived from Paris, and the rich and elegant costumes had been pronounced by the few nearest and dearest friends privileged to inspect them to be absolutely faultless in their perfection.

The wealth and station of the parties, the youth and beauty of the prospective bride and the popularity of the young heir of the house of Nazimoff, the elaborate preparations for the event—all these made the ap-

proaching marriage one of more than ordinary interest and the topic of conversation in the higher circles of society.

No wonder Katherine Karsicheff was proudly triumphant. The marriage of Olga was the one dream of her life, and an alliance with the house of Nazimoff the highest honor her daughter could hope to attain. The union of the two families meant much for both, but most for the Karsicheffs. The influence resulting from the alliance could hardly fail to give General Karsicheff a higher place in the government—perhaps a place in the imperial council. That was the ambition of the countess for her husband. There was not one cloud on the horizon of Katherine Karsicheff's future. What wonder that the proud, haughty face lighted up with a passing smile of perfect satisfaction as her mind rapidly reviewed the past and formed a pleasant picture for the future!

Michael Radloff, five minutes after he had left the presence of the minister of police, emerged from the house by a private entrance which communicated to that part of the establishment wherein Gen. Karsicheff transacted his official business. A brisk walk of ten minutes brought him to the nearest public stand for conveyances, and hailing a drosky, he jumped in, and with a word of direction to the driver, was driven rapidly away. Within a few doors of his destination Radloff alighted and dismissed the drosky. After waiting until he was well assured that the driver was not spying on his movements, he entered a restaurant and sat down at a table somewhat apart from the other people present. A minute later a waiter approached, and handing him a card appeared to wait his order. Radloff gazed with apparent interest at the bill of fare, and then ensued this somewhat unusual colloquy: "Have you discovered the address?" asked Radloff, pointing to the bill and speaking in a low voice.

The waiter took the card, nodded and replied: "Excellent and fresh"—and then in a lower tone—"no, Alexandroffski Uiltza."

Radloff examined the bill of fare again. Then he paused thoughtfully, as if to make a selection. Pointing to another line, he murmured, so that the words reached the waiter's ear alone, "Married or single?"

"Certainly, sir," came the prompt response as the well-trained waiter made a note of the demand; then, softly, "single."

Radloff leaned back with an air of indifference. Really it appeared he was not hard to please. "You can bring the order," he said; and then, as if reconsidering, "at home or away?"

"In St. Petersburg—probably now at the house of"—and dropping his voice to its lowest audible tone, the waiter finished his sentence.

Radloff, cool and collected as he invariably was, could not conceal the look of astonishment caused by the information he had just received. But the transition from his usual impassive manner was only momentary. "It will do," was all he said, and the waiter, with a polite bow, which your well-trained servant on the continent never forgets, withdrew to fill the somewhat extraordinary order with which he had been favored.

(To be continued.)

Mark Twain's Retort.

Many years ago when Mark Twain was a struggling journalist he found himself one day with a note coming due and a total lack of funds with which to meet it. Half distracted, he was rushing around the city in a feverish hunt for funds to tide him over the trying time. He rushed a little too quickly, however, for as he was turning a corner he collided with a little man and overthrew him. The victim regained his feet and yelled:

"You do that again and I'll knock you into the middle of next week."

"My dear sir," said the apologetic humorist, "do it by all means. If I can get through till then without breaking I'm safe."