

DARKEST RUSSIA

BY H. GRATTAN DONNELLY.

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CHAPTER IX.

An Astonishing Discovery.

With one glance around the apartment, which gave no sign of being tenanted but a moment before by nearly a score of people, Ivan bounded up the steps and, removing the oaken bar, which had been carefully replaced when the door was closed after Ilda's entrance, stood silently for a moment.

"Without there!" he asked. "What do you want?"

"Admittance!" was the prompt reply.

"Your object at this hour?"

"Speech with you!"

Ivan glanced once more about the room.

Then with the single word "Enter!" he flung the door wide open.

A tall, soldierly figure stood in the doorway an instant, and then without a moment's hesitation entered and, descending the steps, calmly surveyed the apartment.

Ivan, closing the door, descended and stood face to face with a stranger, whom he surveyed with keenest interest.

"Now, sir, the object of this visit?" asked Ivan as he pointed to a chair.

The stranger, ignoring the courtesy and speaking in the unmistakably peremptory manner of a man accustomed to command, after another glance around the room, fixed his eyes upon Ivan. "I seek information of a young girl—a musician."

Ivan could not repress a slight start of surprise; but he managed with an effort to control himself as he returned the fixed glance of the stranger. "Her name?"

"Ilda Barosky!" As he uttered the words the stranger unbuttoned the great coat which enveloped him to the throat, and displayed an officer's uniform. Then with an easy indifference, he threw himself into the chair with the air of a man who had come to take possession and was bent upon something of a long stay.

"Why do you seek Ilda Barosky here?" asked Ivan.

"Because," was the quick reply, "she was seen to enter this house and has not since left it. She is here."

"Seen to enter it—by whom?"

"By my servant, whom I ordered to follow her."

Ivan's eyes flashed. "May I ask by



what right an officer sends his servant to play the spy upon a defenseless girl because she happened to be alone and unprotected. When an officer—a man of rank—forces his attentions upon a girl who, being a musician, is presumably of lower degree than himself, he can have but one object in view—her dishonor!"

The stranger sprang to his feet, and half-drawing his sword, said in a voice of anger: "Stop, sir! When you attribute my visit here, or my actions, to a dishonorable motive, you lie! It is because I am a man of honor—be-

cause I respect the girl, that I am here to-night. Summon her here!"

Ivan stood motionless.

"Well, sir!" The stranger spoke with some impatience.

"Here she comes not," said Ivan calmly. "I forbid it!"

It was now the stranger's turn to start!

"You forbid it!" he exclaimed. "And pray, sir, by what right do you assume to decide for the girl?"

"By the right of being her protector."

The stranger changed color. It was as if he had received a blow that stunned him. His voice—his whole manner—changed in an instant. He spoke with an evident effort, painfully, hesitatingly, as if afraid to trust his speech. "You are—not—her—" and he paused.

"I am her brother," was the simple reply.

The effect of this announcement on the stranger amazed Ivan. The pained and anxious expression of his face changed to one of gratified relief, which in its way gave place to a look of astonishment and surprise.

"Her brother!" and as the stranger spoke he extended his hand. Ivan grasped it involuntarily. "You surprise me," said the visitor, "but since you are her brother I have no right to object. I may leave a message for her, may I not?"

Ivan bowed.

"Then say to her," continued the stranger, "that Alexis Nazimoff—"

"Alexis Nazimoff!" Ivan interrupted with a start, and then, with an eagerness which astonished the stranger, he repeated, "Alexis Nazimoff! Are you Alexis Nazimoff?"

It was now the turn of Alexis to be astonished at the intense interest of Ivan. "I am," he replied.

"Colonel Alexis Nazimoff?" went on Ivan eagerly, as if to make assurance doubly sure.

"I am Colonel Alexis Nazimoff." This with a faint suggestion of a smile at the other's eagerness. "But why this—"

"And the betrothed husband of Olga!"

Had a shell suddenly exploded beneath his feet, Alexis Nazimoff could hardly have been more astounded. With a look of profound amazement at Ivan, and then a glance at his surroundings, he paused a moment before speaking, as if he hardly comprehended the inquiry.

"Mlle. Olga Karsicheff," Alexis said, in a tone of more hauteur than he had yet assumed, "and I have been betrothed for two years—but—" as the possible significance of Ivan's words forced itself upon him—"who are you to speak of Mlle. Karsicheff in such a manner? I—"

He was again interrupted by Ivan, now speaking with feverish haste, his words flowing in a very torrent, to the amazement of Alexis.

"Tell me, tell me," he exclaimed, as he grasped Alexis' hand with a grip of iron, "tell me, do you love her, do you worship her—is she all in all to you—has she given you her heart—do you possess her love—do you dare to make her your wife?" and he paused out of breath by his impassioned string of questions.

Alexis gazed at him in wonder. Then, as if speaking to himself, he said, "This man is insane."

"No, no!" exclaimed Ivan, "I am not insane. Listen to me—listen, for God's sake—for your happiness, mine, the happiness of Olga, depend upon your words. Do you love Olga with all that devotion, that depth of affection, that would make you give up all—life itself, if need be—for her happiness? Tell me—answer truly, for the dear God's love—would you force Olga to an unwilling marriage? would you drag a helpless, friendless girl, to an unloved life with you if her heart were

given to another? Answer me now, for God's sake, for life and death hang upon your words!"

Alexis Nazimoff gazed at the man before him as if he could scarce believe his senses. This man—here—in this place, with these gloomy surroundings, to talk thus of Olga Karsicheff—of his betrothed wife—of the daughter of the powerful minister of police. But Ivan's manner moved him. "No," was his reply, "I would never marry an unwilling bride."

Ivan dropped his head and sank on a chair.

"Thank God, thank God," was all he said.

"Pardon me," said Ivan at length, "I was somewhat overcome by my agitation in the first place, and by the joy and hope which your words gave to me, and will give to one who is dearer to me than life itself—Olga!"

That name was again repeated. Alexis was annoyed.

"I must ask you to explain," he said, "by what right you speak of Mlle. Karsicheff, my betrothed wife, as 'Olga!'"

Ivan arose. He took a hurried step to the right—and left—pause a moment, and then returned to Alexis, who sat following his movements with intense interest.

Seating himself, he turned to Alexis and said: "You are a man—a soldier—can I trust you fully and freely? Will you give me your word of honor to keep, as an inviolable secret, what I am about to say?"

Alexis paused before making reply. At length he spoke: "Yes, on the word of honor of an officer and a gentleman, you may trust me. I will keep your secret."

Ivan began his story. He spoke in a low and impassioned voice, but the earnestness and sincerity which marked the tones went home to the heart of Alexis, and left in his mind no doubt of their truth. In a few words Ivan made known what the reader has already learned of his early life and that of his sister Ilda. Alexis listened with interest until Ivan began his story of his career in the house of the Baroness von Rhineberg. "It was here," Ivan went on, "that I first saw Mlle. Karsicheff. She and the baroness were devotedly attached to each other and the baroness frequently brought her into the library. From the first moment I loved Olga, but it was not with that hopeless passion that a peasant might feel for a princess—she was so far above me in rank, birth, station, everything."

"But as time went on, and the baroness left us together—never dreaming for a moment that the secretary would dare to raise his eyes to one as exalted as Mlle. Karsicheff—we became more and more acquainted. There were many tastes we possessed in common—music and literature and art. Finally, at the baroness' solicitation, I began to give Mlle. Karsicheff lessons in English pronunciation, and together we began to read the British poets. You may imagine the result. One day I felt myself carried away by my love for Olga, and there on my knees, in one breath, I told her of my adoration, and begged her forgiveness. I found that my love was returned."

Alexis started.

"Olga then told me of your betrothal. While you were away in Asia there was no immediate peril, and for months we lived in a fool's paradise. We both knew that the end must come with your return, and that the secret must be revealed. For weeks I have begged and prayed Olga to fly with me, but she has refused, preferring to wait until the last hope was gone—an appeal to you! Now that you have returned, Olga was to have told you all, but you came into my life to-night, and you know the story. Now do you wonder that I was so astonished when you revealed your name?—do you wonder at my fervor and anxiety as I asked you if you would make Olga an unwilling bride?"

Alexis sat spellbound.

Ivan watched him with anxious eyes.

"What you say may be true," at length said Alexis, "but I must have better proof than your simple word."

"You shall—you shall!" eagerly cried Ivan. "You shall hear it from the lips of Olga herself."

"When and where?" asked Alexis, rising to his feet.

"Here and where you stand within an hour's time."

"What! Here! Man, are you mad! Mlle. Karsicheff here! Why, but an hour ago she drove home with her mother and family, from the fete at my father's house."

"No! By agreement with me she went to the home of the Baroness von Rhineberg, and is there now."

"Good God!" exclaimed Alexis. "Can this be true?"

"It is true," replied Ivan. "See," he exclaimed, producing a key, "here is the proof. This will admit me to the Rhineberg mansion and I can bring



her here. Shall we put it to the test? Will you hear the avowal of her love for me from the lips of Olga herself?"

"Yes! Go!" almost shouted Alexis. "We shall put it to the test. In God's name go, and let me be convinced, and I swear that if Olga Karsicheff enters that door to-night she shall never be my wife."

"And I swear to you she shall enter. On that I stake my happiness—and hers!"

And now the great strain under which Ivan had been since Alexis revealed his identity began to tell upon him and for a moment he leaned back against the table.

By taking a drosky at the nearest stand he could reach the house of the baroness and return in twenty-five or thirty minutes. But Alexis here! What if he discovered the real character of the place! There was a rule, as Ivan well knew, that forbid the members when concealed from coming forth until a safety signal was given. Even suppose one of them entered, Alexis could explain that he was Ivan's friend.

As these thoughts, one after another, rushed through Ivan's mind, Alexis sat regarding him with a searching look. The idea that Olga Karsicheff, daughter of the haughty countess whose pride was so well known, should have descended to a misalliance with this man—

His reveries were interrupted by Ivan.

"Here! You are a man and a soldier, and I have trusted you. Do me this one favor—will you trust me?"

"Yes."

(To be continued.)

Nicaraguan Railroad.

The Berlin chamber of commerce has received the prospectus regarding the railroads which it is proposed to build in Nicaragua. Detailed information is being furnished those desiring to submit tenders for materials or for excavating work.

Largest Pea Cannery.

It is estimated that the factory at Longmont, Colo., cans more peas than any other in the world. The factory has been enlarged this year, so that its capacity is 16,000 cans an hour, which exceeds all records.