

DARKEST RUSSIA

BY H. GRATTAN DONNELLY.

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CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

The wolves were closing in upon him.

They were on all sides, a famished, howling pack of devils, their white fangs and fiery eyes showing with horrible distinctness as they sprang at him.

The rifle, swung with all his strength from left to right, and from right to left, cleared a path for him and no sooner did one of the brutes fall than a score of its fellows literally tore it in pieces.

Alexis was becoming exhausted.

It was too much for him in his weakened state.

One of the wolves, one larger than the rest, made a bound for his throat, but before it reached him sank in death agony with a bullet in its brain.

At the same moment, by the overturned sleigh, Alexis caught sight of the object of his heroic quest.

It was a woman!

With white face she stood there, revolver in hand, her back protected by the sleigh. Shot after shot rang out, and as each time, with unerring arm, the bullet lodged in the body of a wolf, she gained a moment's respite from the cowardly brutes.

But the end was bound to come.

The last shot but one had been fired.

As if by some devilish instinct the wolves seemed to know that their victim was now defenseless, and they prepared for a rush in all the strength of their numbers.

With a howl that could have been heard a league another pack of the brutes had come down from the hills and joined the others.

Then it was that the helpless woman uttered the wild shriek of agony that had reached the ears of her rescuer—had reached even to the courier in the etape.

Alexis sprang forward. He found that the arm was a magazine rifle, and with a prayer of thankfulness he opened fire. Shot after shot, a perfect fusillade followed, and half a dozen of the brutes were lying bleeding in the snow.

Another moment and he had reached the woman. His face was covered with blood, his arms were torn, but he clasped her by a strong effort and began the retreat to a place of safety.

Repulsed by the shots, the wolves



had given way for a time, and then had made a simultaneous rush to feast on the carcasses of those slain by Alexis.

But the feast did not last long.

Maddened more than ever by the taste of blood, they sprang after Alexis and his now unconscious burden.

"He has saved him!" shouted the courier at the moment, as he caught

sight of Alexis, and then as he looked again he exclaimed: "My God, it is a woman! Men, men! to the rescue!"

The soldiers waited no longer. The fact that a woman was in danger seemed to awaken all that was manly in their natures and they rushed to the rescue.

Another moment and it would have been too late.

A volley met the first of the ferocious, maddened brutes. The pack halted for a moment, and gave a long howl of rage. Another volley checked another forward movement. Alexis staggered along with his burden.

Two of the soldiers sprang to his side.

The doors of the etape were thrown open.

In another moment, bruised and bleeding and faint, Alexis Nazimoff staggered into the room; the courier held out his arms to receive the senseless woman from her rescuer. Alexis, with a sigh of unutterable relief, breathed a prayer of thanks, and then as he gave the courier the woman whose life he had saved his brain reeled, the light faded from his eyes, his knees trembled, a shudder passed through his frame, and he fell at full length on the floor.

He had fainted!

CHAPTER XVII.

The Courier's Mission.

The courier bore the insensible form of the woman into the room occupied by Cobb and the baroness.

As the door closed behind him, Karsicheff turned quickly to Nicholas and said in a whisper: "I have a plan—wait!"

Then ordering the guard to resume their arms he gave the command to march the prisoners to the kameras. Alexis had revived sufficiently to move, and was supported by two of the Cossacks.

The injuries of Alexis were fortunately slight. The fangs of the wolves had reached him in one or two places on the arms and on one cheek, but the latter proved to be a mere scratch, though sufficient to draw blood, and the clothing had protected the arms. In answer to eager inquiries he explained that he did not see the face of the woman he had rescued, because just as he reached her she almost fell into his arms and in his struggle during the retreat he had not heard her speak.

But it was the presence of Cobb—so entirely unlooked for, and so inexplicable—that furnished them a topic which kept them wondering for hours. That Cobb's presence had something to do with them, they felt certain, but now that he was here, how were they to let him know that they were near. It is the rule on the highroad to the mines for convoys to march two days and rest one; and as this was their resting place, they felt sure that the morning's light would bring some means of letting Cobb know that they were in the stockade.

But what had brought Cobb and the baroness—for they felt sure it was the baroness, Cobb having spoken of his wife—to that out of the way place? That was the puzzler, and it was to account for that fact that both Alexis and Ivan taxed their imagination.

While they are in suspense we will enlighten our readers.

General Cobb, after his marriage to the baroness, found himself in a position where he could afford to give up all the business interests that formerly occupied his time. From the moment Alexis had left St. Petersburg he had but one object in view—that was to rescue his friend from the horrors of Siberian exile, and if possible restore him to the position from which a chain of adverse circumstances had so cruelly deposed him. Or, if that were not possible, it was

the intention of Cobb, the rescue of Alexis once effected, to take him to America, the baroness having expressed a strong desire to give up her residence in Europe and make her home in the country of her husband. Cobb's plans for the rescue of Alexis were warmly seconded by his wife, and it was determined to make an effort to effect the rescue of Ilda and Ivan at the same time as Alexis.

The blow to the pride of Count Nazimoff, who had seen his son sentenced like a common convict, had been a severe one, and shortly after his son had arrived in Siberia the count was seized by a severe illness, the result of the shock he had suffered. On his recovery his feelings had undergone a marked change. The tenderness and sympathy shown him on every hand had softened his nature, and the hard pride had now given place to a pitiful yearning for the son he had loved so well. Hence it was that when Gen. Cobb, having heard of Kirshkin's confession, and having brought influence to bear to verify the truth of the conspirator's story, appeared before Count Nazimoff to plead the cause of his son, he met with a reception the warmth of which pleased him.

An imperial commissioner was sent to each of the convicts captured in the Nihilist rendezvous. They were closely questioned as to the events that had taken place on that eventful night, and their stories, one and all, served to exonerate Alexis and Olga and Ilda, and to lift from the shoulders of Ivan the responsibility for any complicity in or sympathy with the extreme Nihilists who sought the assassination of the czar.

So it was that after months of persistent and diligent exertion General Cobb had the assurance that the subject had at length reached the czar, with a strong probability that the imperial clemency so earnestly sought would not be denied.

But even if his efforts in this direction failed, Cobb had made up his mind that he would still succeed. He secured through the American minister an imperial passport to Siberia, and a letter from the authorities giving him, as an American traveler favorably disposed and friendly to the Russian government, the right to visit prisons and other privileges not usually accorded. This letter, addressed to officials throughout Siberia, directed them to extend all aid and assistance to General Cobb and his wife and her companion, Caroline Cobb, who were to travel across Siberia if need be. And before he left St. Petersburg a passport for Caroline Cobb was in his possession.

We pass over the long journey of Cobb and his wife. After many adventures and more hardships they reached Stralensk and there discovered Ilda. The letters which Cobb had in his possession made him a welcome guest at the house of the commandant at Stralensk and they had but little difficulty in obtaining a private conversation with Ilda. It was from Ilda they learned to their great delight that Ivan and Alexis were at Chitka and that they could reach that place with comparative ease. It was while on their journey to Chitka that their sleigh was overturned and they were attacked by the wolves almost within shouting distance of the etape where Karsicheff was in command.

Karsicheff and Nicholas, after the doors of the stockade had closed on the convicts, returned to the house.

"Be on your guard, father," urged Nicholas, "you have made a dangerous enemy of the courier, and the slightest mistake may prove our ruin. Try to conciliate him—anything, so there can be no pretext for his going to extremes. Think what would be the consequences if he should make a report to the czar."

Karsicheff said nothing. He knew he had committed a grievous mistake in defying the courier and he felt ill at ease. The presence of Cobb and the baroness, too, was an additional source of danger. What if Cobb should discover the presence of Alexis! That he had not done so already was little

short of a miracle. But if he should discover him and appeal to the courier for Alexis—especially after Alexis himself had won the heart of the courier—there was no question as to the result. Certainly the courier would never leave Alexis and Ivan in his power.

The object now was to blind the courier if possible, to keep Cobb from the knowledge of the presence of Alexis, and to have matters remain in statu quo until the courier and the hated American should depart.

Katherine entered the room. She had discovered the identity of Cobb and the baroness.

"Those people here," she said, "threatens danger. We must be on our guard all the time. A chance word may betray us into trouble that will cost us dearly."

"Olga?" asked Karsicheff.

"She is asleep," answered the countess, "and I would shed no tear if



"HER NAME IS ILDA BAROSKY!"

she never would wake. Her cursed folly has helped to put us where we are. What is your plan about—about them?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the convict quarters.

"We must wait until the courier departs. His presence—"

Karsicheff stopped suddenly.

The door leading to the sleeping apartments opened and the courier entered the room.

Producing his notebook, the courier in a peremptory tone demanded:

"What is the name of that brave fellow who saved the woman from the wolves?"

"I do not know it," replied Karsicheff.

"Then consult your lists and find out," was the sharp rejoinder.

Nicholas saw that his father was again getting on dangerous ground.

He determined to come to his assistance.

"I know the name," he said, looking meaningfully at his father, "the name is Alexis—"

"Alexis Petroffsky," said Katherine. "I asked it from the brave fellow before I bound his wound and gave him some medicine."

"Where is he now?" asked the courier.

"He is—"

"Asleep—soundly sleeping," said Katherine; "he begged me not to disturb him until morning."

(To be continued.)

As Others Hear Us.

A well known Oxford don was asked to speak into a phonograph, and was interested in hearing the reproduction. He listened throughout, then said with scarcely concealed disgust: "Through this machine I am able to speak in a particularly bumptious and affected manner." The worthy man had heard himself as others hear him, that was all. It would be a good thing for many of us to study our method of speaking through the medium of a phonographic reproduction.

World's Fleet.

According to Lloyd's Register there are at present in existence 29,943 steamships and sailing vessels; 11,134 of them belong to England.