

The Story of Amaroff the Pole

(Concluded)

About the end of August there began, he continued, a duel of wits between the two men, Amaroff and Nicolin, the reasons and causes of which did not, if he might be permitted to say, concern us. Nicolin's career was dependent on his success. For him, failure spelt permanent disgrace. Yet it was Amaroff who was playing with his opponent as a cat with a mouse, confusing and surprising him at every turn, driving him, indeed, when time grew pressing, into desperate measures. At the last he formed a plan, did Nicolin, a scheme worthy of his most cunning brain.

"This, then, he did," ended the poor caretaker. "He came to me—I who had so great love and honor for Amaroff, my friend, I whom he had turned from crime and aided to earn a wage in honesty—he came to me and he says: 'Kroll, in my pocket is a warrant that will send you back to the snow places in the East; do you fear me, my good Kroll?' And I feared him. 'See, now,' he said, 'we desire to see your friend Amaroff for a little talk. We cannot harm him here in this mad country. Contrive a trick, bring him into your private room behind the bar. Give us the key of the yard door that we may come secretly to him—and afterward you will hear no more of Siberia from me. Do you consent?'"

"Gentlemen, I believed him, also having fear of the snow places; and I consented.

"So Amaroff answered my call, and with some excuse I left him in this room. It was at a time when few members were in the club—about seven of the clock. And that, as I live, is all I have to tell. I waited at my seat behind the bar. I saw nothing, heard nothing—and at last when I went to my room, behold it was empty! I tried to suspect no wrong—but I did not sleep that night. In the morning I saw in the papers that Amaroff, my friend, was dead, and how he died I could not tell."

"So Nicolin won the game," suggested Peace, softly. "And there will be no regrettable incident when the Czar enters Paris the day after tomorrow."

"Of that I have no knowledge," said Greatman; but I saw a sudden resolution shine in his face that seemed to put new heart into the man.

"Well, Mr. Phillips," said the inspector, turning upon me with a warning quiver of the left eyelid, "it is time we were on the move. If we are to meet Nicolin at the studio by seven tomorrow morning, we must get to bed early."

"Certainly," I said. I was rather out of my depth, but I take myself this credit that I did not show it.

"Then do you search the studio tomorrow?" asked Greatman.

"Yes—it has been arranged."

"But will you not first arrest this Nicolin, this murderer?"

"My dear Mr. Greatman," said the inspector, "you have told us your story, and I thank you for your confidence. But I advise you now to leave things alone. I will see justice done—don't be afraid about that. For the rest, please to keep a silent tongue in your head—it will be safer. There is still Siberia for Ivan Kroll just as there may be dangers

from your friends in the club yonder for Julius Greatman, who arranged so indiscreet a meeting in his private room. Good night to you."

The caretaker did not reply, but opening the door, bowed us into the passage that led to the big room. We had not taken half a dozen steps when I looked back over my shoulder, expecting to see him behind us. But he had vanished.

"He's gone," I whispered, gripping my companion by the arm.

"I know, I know. Keep quiet."

As we stood there listening, I heard the sudden clatter of boots upon a stairway, and then silence.

"It appears to me that we shall have an interesting evening," said Addington Peace.

A twist in the passage, a turn through a door, and we were rattling down the back stairs and out into a moonlit yard. In the denser darkness under the walls I made out a double row of big barrows, from which there came a subtle aroma in which stale fish predominated. From amongst them a tall shadow arose and came slipping to our side.

"He's off, sir," said the sergeant, for it was he. "Rushed by, shaking his fist and talking to himself like a madman. Where has he gone, do you think?"

"To Amaroff's studio; and we must get there before him. The nearest cab-rank, if you please, Jackson."

We ran through the yard, hustled up the narrow streets, lost ourselves, as far as I was concerned, in a maze of alleys, and finally shot out into a roaring thoroughfare, crowded with a strolling population. No cab was in sight. Opposite the lamps of the underground station the inspector stopped us.

"It would be quicker," he said, with a jerk of the head, and we turned into the booking-office and galloped down the stairs. Luck was with us, and we tumbled into a carriage as the train moved away.

We were not alone, and we journeyed in silence. Station after station slipped by, until at last we were in the southwestern district again. My excitement increased as we fled up the stairs of the South Kensington station. Here was a new sensation, keen, virile, natural; here was a race worth the trouble it involved. I did not understand; but I knew that on our speed much depended. Indeed, I could have shouted aloud, but for the influence of those two quiet, unemotional figures that trotted on either hand.

I regretted nothing—an hour of this was worth a year of artistic contemplation.

At the corner we found a hansom, and soon were rattling down the King's Road. When the cab stopped, to the inspector's order, it was not, as I expected, at the corner of Harden Place, but a street preceding it. Down this we walked quickly until we came upon a seedy-looking fellow with a red muffer about his neck, leaning against the wall.

I was surprised when we halted in front of him.

"Good evening, Harrison," said the inspector. "Anything to report?"

"They're there, sir. They came about ten minutes ago. Job and Turner are

watching the door in Harden Place, and I came here."

"They didn't see any of you?"

"No, sir; I am sure of it."

"You had better join the others in Harden Place. Keep within hearing, and if I whistle, kick in the side door of the studio—it can be done. There is a man who I fancy will have a key to the door that is due in about five minutes. If I have not whistled before he arrives, let him through. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective faded discreetly into the darkness, while the inspector turned to me.

"There may be complications, Mr. Phillips, and no slight danger. I must ask you to go home."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

"Mutiny," he said; but I could see that he was smiling. "You are rather a fraud, Mr. Phillips—rather a fraud, you know. There is more of a fighter than a dilettante in you, after all. Come, then, over you go."

A jump, a scramble, and all three of us were over the wall, dropping into a ragged shrubbery of laurel. We groped and stumbled our way through the growth of bushes until we emerged on a grass plot. Then I understood. We were at the back of Amaroff's studio. On one side where we stood was the outhouse, its sloping roof reaching up to the long windows under the eaves—the upper lights, as sculptors call them. And even as I looked there came through these windows a flicker of light, an eye that winked in the darkness and was gone.

We crept softly forward until we reached the shadow of the outhouse. It was roofed with rough tiles, which came to within seven feet of the ground. Fortunately, they did not project out from the wall of the building.

"You must help us up, Jackson," Peace whispered, "and then go round to the door, which I see at the back there. If they make a bolt that way, blow your whistle. If I whistle, start hammering on the door as if you were a dozen men. Now then, take me on your shoulders."

He scrambled to the roof like a cat. Lying flat he thrust out a hand. A hoist from the sergeant, and I landed beside him. We waited a few moments, and then commenced to work our way up the roof. From its upper angle I found that the greater part of the interior of the studio was within our observation.

The moonlight that drifted through the opposing panes flooded the center of the studio with soft light, in the midst of which the bust in bronze rose darkly upon its pedestal. A minute, and then the eye of light winked out, flickered, explored the pools of shadow, and finally steadied on the wall as three men moved from the room beneath us, following one by one. A second lantern came into play, and before our eyes commenced a search such as I could have hardly credited, so swift, methodical and thorough were its methods. The cushions were probed with long pins, the cracks of bare boards, and the nails that held them in position were studied each in turn, the plastered walls were sounded inch by inch, the locks of desk and drawer were

picked with the ease of mechanical knowledge.

We heard it before the men below; the faint patter, patter on the road outside of a runner in desperate haste. The footsteps grew silent, and in the pause there must have come a sound, audible to them though not to us, for the lantern slides were shut down like the snapping of teeth, and the men vanished into the gloom. Only the moonlight remained, bathing the Nero in its gentle beams. I glanced at Peace. His expression was one of beatific enjoyment, but his whistle was at his lips.

I could not see the entrance door, so that the struggle was well-nigh over before I knew it was begun. The stranger fought hard, as I judged from the scuffling thuds, yet he raised no cry of help. Then the eyes of the lanterns glowed again and they led him into the center of the studio with the glint of steel marking the handcuffs on his wrists. It was Greatman—the fox that had run into the den of the wolves!

"And so, mon ami, you play a double game."

It was not until he spoke that I realized that I could hear what went forward within. The big ventilators above me were open, and Nicolin—for it was he—did not modulate his voice.

"It is you that killed him," cried the prisoner, raising his fettered hands. "You that have betrayed me. Murderer and liar that you are."

His frail body shook to the fury that was on him; but the Russian laughed in his black beard, stroking it with his hands.

"I had almost forgotten," he said. "It may be that you have some cause of complaint against me. But now that you are here, you will doubtless be kind enough to save us trouble. Where, my good Kroll, are the bombs hidden?"

"Do you think I shall tell you?"

"Remember, Amaroff is dead. They will not go to Paris now. Do not be foolish. Show me the hiding place, and no harm shall come to you."

"No."

"Then you will return to Russia. The Odessa forgery will carry you there by English law—but, remember, it is for something more than forgery that you will have to answer when you arrive."

There was a silence, and then Nicolin spoke again—two words.

"Sagalien island."

"I shall not go there," said the prisoner, simply. "I shall not go there—Nicolin the spy, Nicolin the murderer and liar!"

"Then you will achieve a miracle. For, as the Czar rules, before a week is out you will be on the sea, and within a month—stop him, stop him!"

He had sprung from them with a bound like that of a wild beast, and with his fettered hands had gripped the shaft of the bust of Nero, swinging it high above his head. For a part of a second, as a film might seize the photograph, I saw him stand in the moonlight with that cruel face in bronze rocking above his own white face in flesh and blood below; yet, as I remember it, there was neither fear nor anger in his expression. And then, as it were, the shutter clicked,