

DARKEST RUSSIA

BY H. GRATTAN DONNELLY.

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CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"Ay!" shouted Karsicheff, "ay! so they do, Katherine; but not such convicts as these—not such convicts as Alexis Nazimoff and Ivan Barosky!" Katherine sprang to her husband's side and grasped the paper, Nicholas, as she did so, looked at it over her shoulder.

On the very top of the list of the convicts were the names Alexis Nazimoff and Ivan Barosky.

With a cry of fiendish joy Katherine Karsicheff grasped the hands of her husband and, looking him straight in the face, exclaimed: "Here—here in our power. What will you do?"

Constantine answered: "Wait and see."

In a few minutes the sharp command "Stoy!" (halt) rang out on the frosty air, and the ring of the lances of the Cossack guard was heard as they rested on the ground.

Another knock on the door.

"Enter!"

The Nachalnik entered and saluted. "The convoy is here!"

"All present."

"All present, your excellency."

"Thirteen men and two women?"

"The number is correct, excellency."

"March them in. I will issue their ration numbers here and then they can be marched to the kamera."

The command was given.

Through the door there entered two Cossacks. They took their places one on each side of the entrance.

The convicts followed.

With faltering steps, their irons keeping a continuous clanking as they moved, the unhappy wretches, two by two, entered the room. With downcast faces the two in front took the place assigned to them by the Nachalnik, the others following mechanically until all had entered.

With but two exceptions all were ironed—the exceptions were the last to appear.

They were Alexis and Ivan!

"Halt!"

It was Karsicheff gave the stern command.

As he uttered the word Alexis and Ivan raised their heads to meet the gaze of deadly hatred in the faces of Constantine, Katherine and Nicholas.

"The infamous Karsicheffs!" Alexis muttered the words between his compressed lips.

"Silence, dog!" said Karsicheff. He had heard Alexis speak, although the

exact words had not reached him.

"Silence! Guard, why are these men," and Karsicheff waved his hand, indicating Ivan and Alexis, "not ironed like the other convicts?"

"By order of the commandant at Chitka, to whom they gave their word of honor not to attempt to escape," said the nachalnik.

"Their word of honor!" Karsicheff laughed derisively.

Katherine and Nicholas took the cue instantly and laughed in chorus.

"Their word of honor," continued Karsicheff; "there is no such thing as honor among such cutthroats as these. Let them be ironed immediately like the other convicts."

"I only obeyed my orders, excellency," said the guard apologetically, "and—"

"You are under my orders now," interrupted Karsicheff, "obey me!"

"Coward!" exclaimed Alexis, making a step forward.

"Seize him!"

"Down with the dog!"

The Karsicheffs, father, mother and son, spoke simultaneously, and the soldiers, in their eager zeal to please the new superior, sprang upon Alexis and bore him to the ground.

"Oh, wretches that you are!" exclaimed Ivan, who could no longer control himself.

Nicholas sprang forward and struck him, and at the same moment he was also seized by the soldiers and thrown to the floor.

"Bring irons—double irons," exclaimed Karsicheff, wrought up to uncontrollable excitement.

A minute later the soldiers had completed their work, and Ivan and Alexis, pale and trembling, were assisted to their feet, and stood helpless with their shackled hands.

Alexis was speechless. He could scarcely breathe. His breast heaved convulsively, and he tottered and would have fallen, but for the grasp of the guard who stood behind him.

Katherine stepped forward. "Look upon those convicts," she said, in a low voice, intense in its depth of bitter hate. "Be not too harsh with them, for they have suffered much—and they are destined to suffer more. That young man," she continued, pointing to Alexis, "was once a brilliant officer in the service of the czar. He was betrothed to the daughter of a noble. But he must needs 'fall in love,' and she laughed ironically, "with a street girl of St. Petersburg. Her music charmed him," Katherine laughed again.

Alexis could only glare at her in helpless agony.

Katherine fairly gloated over his sufferings.

"Yes," she went on, "he was charmed by the music of the syren, and she dragged him to her depths. She was a street vagabond with half a dozen lovers before his time, and she is now the mistress of an officer at the fortress of Araca!"

"Liar—false woman, you lie!" shouted Alexis.

"Gag him—gag him!" shouted Karsicheff.

To hear the order was to obey, and in two minutes Alexis was lying on the ground, shackled, gagged and helpless.

Katherine turned to Ivan.

"This other—this ruffian with the marks of the convict upon him—he was once a student who was lifted out of obscurity by a lady of nobility. He betrayed his benefactors by taking advantage of a young girl who visited her house and whom he, with devilish art, persuaded into a secret marriage. She was the daughter of a noble house. Once freed from his presence, she confessed that she hated him; a decree of divorce was granted her and she is now the wife of a noble in Russia, hating and despising the low-born dog who made her forget her duty to herself and her family!"

As Katherine began speaking a door at the top of the stairs leading to the sleeping apartment of the house softly opened, and by degrees a pale, agonized face appeared at the entrance. As Katherine finished the door opened full and Olga appeared. With a cry of mingled joy and sor-

row, of deepest anguish and of passionate devotion, she screamed as she saw Ivan:

"No, no, my love, my love! I am true, Ivan, true always, true till death"—and before any one could prevent her, Olga had flown down the steps and cast her arms around the neck of her husband!

Katherine, with speechless rage, sprang to her daughter, and grasping her, strove with desperate strength to tear her from Ivan. Olga, with all the power she possessed, clung to her helpless husband. "Trust me, Ivan; trust me. I'll be true. I love you now as I loved you then. Oh, God."

She ceased, for her mother's fingers tightened around her throat till the delicate skin was bruised by the cruel, merciless grip of the talons of Katherine.

"Take her away!" shouted Karsicheff.

Nicholas with a brutal wrench tore his sister from Ivan, and while with one hand he attempted to stop her



"WHO IS COMMANDANT HERE?"

cries, with the other he half carried, half dragged her, aided by his mother, to her room. Olga's frantic cry: "Ivan trust me. I will be true," rang out even after the door closed—and then there was silence, for the hapless Olga had fainted.

"Merciless mother, inhuman wolf!" exclaimed Ivan. "Your cruel lie could not have deceived me. Oh, God! Were I able, I would brain you with these shackled hands!"

He could say no more.

One of the soldiers with superserviceable zeal sprang up and knocked him down.

"Brave fellow," said the countess, pouring out a glass of vodka and handing it to the cowardly soldier, "you know your duty."

The soldier drank the liquor and turned to his comrades with a smile.

They looked at him with contempt. The act had been too much, even for them.

But among the convicts there was that painful agony with which a sympathetic heart sees suffering of whatever kind while helpless to avert it or alleviate it. They began to murmur.

"Silence, cutthroats! We will have no mutiny here!" shouted Nicholas, who had returned to the room.

The word "mutiny" caught the ear of Katherine.

"What easier," she said, "Mutiny—a shot—" and she looked at Ivan and Alexis.

"Hush! not before witnesses; we will find the time."

Just as Nicholas finished there came across the air the sound of a bugle. It was followed by a shot!

"Hark!"

All present recognized the sound!

"It is the signal of an imperial courier!" said Nicholas; "we must wait."

Some of the guards got ready to present arms.

Constantine moved to the door.

The sound of bells was heard, and in another minute a sleigh drawn by three horses reeking with foam and

with dilated nostrils, which sent forth steaming streams on the frosty air, pulled up at the etape!

A tall, bearded man jumped out, and in another second he had entered the house.

The imperial courier had arrived!

CHAPTER XVI.

The Imperial Courier.

"Who is commandant here?"

The imperial courier uttered the words in the sharp, authoritative voice of one accustomed to command.

When he heard the words, Constantine Karsicheff felt that he was no longer the autocrat of the etape. Before the courier's arrival his will had been supreme and his word law. At his command any of the Cossack soldiers would have with unquestioning obedience sent a bullet crashing through the brain of any of the prisoners Karsicheff might have indicated.

But now he felt that a stronger will than his was present—that a power superior to his own had arrived, and that he was now subordinate to an authority that could and would make it respected.

For the corps of couriers imperial of Siberia possessed a rank and rights and powers and privileges far exceeding those of an ordinary commandant of an etape. The requisitions of an imperial courier for fresh horses, for supplies, for accommodations, must be filled with promptness and his orders take precedence of all others. In a word, under the code of regulations, from the moment an imperial courier arrived at any station on the road his powers were supreme, and he superseded the commandant as authority for the time being.

"I am," said Karsicheff, in response to the demand of the courier.

A frown passed over the face of the courier. The half sulky tone in which Karsicheff had spoken, together with the fact that he had failed to salute, produced a bad impression on the mind of the courier.

His voice assumed a harder tone, and his air of command was intensified.

"A sleigh with some travelers has broken down on the edge of the pine forest yonder. They are surrounded by wolves. The pack is growing larger—hark!"

The howling of hundreds of wolves was borne across the night in a blood-curdling chorus.

"We must to the rescue," hurriedly resumed the courier. "Let your soldiers follow me." And as he stepped to the door he turned an instant, and waited for Karsicheff to give the command.

"I have no soldiers to spare."

As Karsicheff uttered the words he turned half way from the courier.

(To be continued.)

Trading Off Old Love Tokens.

A society man whose perfect dancing is the envy of all the men he knows and the admiration of all the women stopped on Charles street the other day to greet an acquaintance.

"I'm amusing myself this morning selling old jewelry," said the society man.

"Old jewelry! Whose?" queried his acquaintance.

"Why, the returned love tokens of a lot of girls I know. Things they have given men whom they adored for a brief season and with whom they exchanged gifts of jewelry, which, like the cat, 'came back' when a coolness ensued.

"But the funniest part is their reasons for parting with these souvenirs of affection—they want the money to buy mementos for other men who have supplanted the first in their changing affections. Hence my mission to the pawnshops and dealers in old gold." He drifted away to seek a sign of three balls, humming the waltz that was played at the Spielgartenfest and jangling in his pockets the love tokens, some of which were worn as pledges of never-dying affection on that occasion.—Baltimore Sun.

Strange to say, the world has never produced a deaf and dumb pugilist.



"I AM TRUE, IVAN, TRUE ALWAYS, TRUE TILL DEATH!"

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