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A Page of Drawings by the Unhappy Czarina of Russia



The Czarina's Drawing of Grand Duke Sergius Hitting Vassili Morosoff for Defending His Wife's Honor. Morosoff Was Subsequently Fatally Injured in His Duel with the Grand Duke.

FEW persons know that the unhappy Czarina of Russia is quite an artist. This little gift is one of her few comforts as the wife of the superstitious and fear-ridden Czar. Here on this page are shown a few of her sketches depicting court life. In the text Countess Von Branitzkaya, for many years the Czarina's favorite lady-in-waiting, throws a new and sinister light upon the death of Grand Duke George, the Czar's brother.

By COUNTESS VON BRANITZKAYA

THIS is the inside story of the tragic romance of the Grand Duke George, brother of the Czar of Russia. As lady-in-waiting to the Czarina and confidante of the unfortunate Duke, I came into possession of many facts which I now reveal for the first time. Indeed, I myself played an important part in the events which led up to the Grand Duke's tragic end.

When the Czarina presented the Czar with a second daughter, and his brother, George, thus remained heir-apparent, his hostility to the Grand Duke, to whom he had always been greatly opposed, was immeasurably increased.

The Grand Duke George was an interesting, romantically disposed youth. He had made the acquaintance of a Caucasian Cossack officer, with whom he became greatly impressed. George retired from the court life, gave up his gambling and sporting, began to read books given to him by the Cossack officer and became taciturn and serious. The change in him was so great and unexpected that everybody was amazed. At first the royal family thought he had fallen in love with somebody, but when they learned what had really happened, they became alarmed and lectured him severely.

George had always been sympathetic to me, because of his democratic and frank manner and of his artistic temperament. But when I heard of his changed views and life and saw how he was ostracized, I often conversed with him on the subjects that interested him. My feeling toward the young man brought him closer to me, and he casually began to pour out his heart. One day while I was taking a walk in the Winter garden he approached me and asked:

"Countess, please tell me, have you been much in France and in England?"

"Yes, quite frequently," I replied. "Well, and have you observed the great difference of life between those countries and Russia?" he went on.

"I have found that there the people are all more or less on a level, and more or less free. But the people in Russia are divided into classes. We have more poverty and more luxury than any other country in the world," I said.

The Grand Duke offered me a seat. We took a seat under the tropical palm trees, and he began: "We have in Russia the bureaucratic slavery, which is just as bad as the feudal slavery. I never thought and never knew of it. Only since my friend, Lieutenant Peter Platonoff, has explained it and has

given me lots of books about the subject, my eyes have been opened. I have begun to see life from a different point of view. But I don't see why my brother (meaning the Czar) doesn't see the point. He could change the situation with one stroke, by making conditions equal to those in France or England. The King of England is better off than a Czar of Russia."

The Grand Duke paused, pondered and continued:

"But I tell you what it is. My brother is a tennis ball of the high bureaucratic clique and the rival members of his dynasty. He merely moves in their hands as they turn him. The trouble with him is that he has neither brain nor eyes to grasp things as they are. He was raised up, like me, in the belief that the Czar of Russia is the man almighty and his family a super-human society. I think our Greek Church is the fundamental cause of all this Russian slavery. How long it is going to last, God knows."

"Your highness, but what would you do if you were a plain Russian subject?" I asked, curiously.

The young Duke looked at me seriously and said: "By Jove, if I were not his brother I would grab him by his neck and keep him a year in those dungeons in which he keeps political criminals. In the meantime I would make the people free, curb the lies of the clergy and the arrogance of the officials."

"I am afraid of the boldness of your views. I don't know what His Majesty would do if he had heard what you have told me."

"Oh, I know what he would do. He would send me out of Europe. But I am not going to tell my views to anyone. I tell them to the people I respect and trust. I trust and respect you as I do my friend, Peter Platonoff. To-day I committed a terrible crime by shaking hands with the officers of my regiment and offering them cigars. But soon I am going to commit a still greater crime by marrying the sister of my friend, Peter Platonoff! She is a beautiful Caucasian girl and I simply adore her. This is her photograph."

The Grand Duke pulled out the picture of a fascinatingly pretty girl, would not stand conditions as they are. But the trouble with Russian intellectuals and the peasants is that they are worshippers of the Oriental negative philosophy. There is no use to argue with my brother, because he wouldn't change it without force."

I was so shocked at the views of the heir-apparent that I could hardly believe the evidence of my ears.

"Your Highness," I remarked, "I am afraid of the boldness of your views. I don't know what His Majesty would do if he had heard what you have told me."

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A Drawing of Mystic Nature by the Czarina for Her Husband. The Czar Revels in Drawings Such as This and Has a Private Collection of Thousands.

handed it to me and asked me my opinion of his plan. I said that as long as she was below the rank of a Countess the marriage might be declared morganatic, and he, being the Czarévitch, would be put in a critical position.

"But I don't mind the objection of my brother or the family in the matter, and I don't care about being the heir-apparent. I would rather be a happy family father than an unhappy candidate for a tyrannical throne. If my brother Nicolas wants he can make my younger brother Mihail heir-apparent."

The young Czarévitch put the picture of his bride in his pocket, lighted a cigarette and continued: "Countess, I confess to you confidentially that I can turn another page to my family if they pinch me too hard for my liberal views and marriage. I know the secrets of the situation, and if I should join a group of conspirators I could accomplish something. Countess, have you ever heard of the secret subterranean galleries of the palaces?"

I replied that I had heard that such existed, but I never had been in one and did not know where they were.

"There are two subterranean passages from each of the Czar's big palaces which lead out to certain churches. Through them I could lead my whole regiment in half an hour to the Czar's private apartment without being seen by any of his sentinels."

I would need only to capture or kill the sentinels and guards which watch his private apartment and then I could arrest him and bring him out or do what I want. "With my regiment (the Grand Duke, being the Czarévitch, was the chief of a guard regiment) I could overthrow the regime of my brother in a few hours and capture the throne. It may seem fantastic to you, but you know it has been done frequently by our dynasty. Catherine the Second did the same thing with her husband, Peter the Third. Alexander the First overthrew his

father, Paul, with the conspirators, and so on. You, of course, know that. No one of the Russian rulers since Peter the Great has died his natural death. They were either assassinated, poisoned or secretly strangled by their own family. It's already in our blood. But the truth is, I am not inclined to such conspiracies. I am too much a gentleman. At present I am only interested in getting married."

"But what will the Dowager Czarina, your mother, say?" I asked. "Oh, well, I don't care what she will say. She will get more mad at me than she is at Nicolas now. You know she has her own ambitions. Her scheme is to get the throne from Nicolas for herself. Plehve, Bobrikoff, Alexeyeff and Goremynkin are all her secret agents. That's the reason they all plot against Nicolas and Witte. My uncle Vladimir has secretly joined them, and I should not be surprised if they finally dethroned Nicolas. I believe Witte is a sincere and big statesman, the only minister I respect. But he, poor man, can do nothing alone. Nicolas does not trust him because his wife is a Jewess. But what nonsense! He has begun to hate the Jews simply because he was in love with a Jewess himself and could not marry her. Now Witte stands alone between the two fires. I really pity him."

The chamberlain entered and brought me an order of the Czarina. The Grand Duke bowed and left.

His frank and revolutionary talk had dazed me for several minutes. I was made an involuntary conspirator and thus dragged in the family secrets of the dynasty of Romanoffs. My duty was to tell the Czarina what I had heard from the lips of a conspirator. I pondered about the situation for several minutes and decided to keep secret what the Grand Duke had told me.

Two months after this I came again to the court. I met the Czarina in a very nervous condition. "What do you think," she began hoarsely, "the Grand Duke George has married a plain Caucasian girl and now they are on a secret honeymoon trip in Finland! The Czar is mad at him and wants to deprive him of the rights of heir-apparent if he does not give up his wife. Two officers have been sent to arrest the couple, and to separate them forcibly. I don't know how it is going to end. It is a terrible scandal!"

The Czar was so furious that for two days he did not leave his apartment and cancelled all his engagements. His newly married brother and his wife were caught in a small Finnish town and brought as prisoners to St. Petersburg. I was curious as to what would happen and intended to telephone to the Grand Duke, but realizing that he was watched by spies, I gave up my daring intention.

In the evening of the same day my butler came in and said that a lady and a gentleman wished to see me without having given their names. I told him to invite them in. To my surprise, the Grand Duke George, accompanied by a fascinatingly woman, entered.

"Countess, I have the pleasure to introduce to you my wife," he began. "I came to bid you farewell. I am going to be exiled to Caucasus and my wife is going to be sent abroad. I wrote to my brother that if he wants to punish me he should exile us both to Siberia, instead of separating us. I would rather be in Siberia, with my wife

Intimate Scenes of Russian Court Life Drawn by the Wife of Russia's Autocrat, and an Explanation of the Tragic Mystery of Grand Duke George's Death After He Had Eloped with a Caucasian Beauty

than alone in Caucasus. I know he will not read my letter, but throw it in the waste basket. But I will escape from Caucasus and join my wife somewhere abroad. She will live in Paris and wait for me. I will disguise myself as a pilgrim and by bribing the frontier soldiers I can get out of Russia all right. When I am in Paris they can't touch me. But I know that they are going to watch my mail and do everything to separate us. Our most earnest request to you is that you permit us to use your address for our correspondence. You see, I will send a special messenger with my letter to you and you can mail it to my wife. Your mail is not watched by the police, so my wife can address her letters to me in your name. The envelopes will have only a letter 'R.' which means it is to be forwarded for me. It is a terrible situation, isn't it?"

"But what can you do in Paris, in case you escape from the Caucasus?" I asked. "The agents of your brother, the Czar, would find you there and separate you again."

"Well, we might leave Paris in cognito and take a steamer to America. We would arrive in America as common tourists or emigrants, would buy a small farm out in the country and live a retired life forever. Who would know that a Mr. and Mrs. Jones, as we would be called, were once actors in a historic drama? Who would know that I was the heir-apparent to the Russian throne if I kept it secret?"

I expressed my admiration of the romantic plans of the young couple, but doubted the possibility of realizing them. However, I gladly consented to act as an agent between the Grand Duke and his wife in the matter of their correspondence. Before leaving he told me that he would join in the future a group of conspirators and act as he had once told me. Then he bade me good-by and left.

The following day the Grand Duke was sent to his country estates in the Caucasus. About the same time his desperate young wife, accompanied by a gendarme officer, left Russia for Paris. For three months everything in regard to their correspondence went well. Suddenly I began to realize that my letters were being secretly opened before I received them and that a strange figure shadowed my

house day and night. It was evident the spies had detected the secret.

One day coming to the court the Czarina met me with an artificial politeness, and I felt intuitively that there was something wrong in her relation to me. Toward evening she said to me that the Czar wished that I should receive the sacraments in their palace chapel. I felt it strange, but said I was very pleased with the honor. But before getting the communion one has to confess to the priest, and I had to do so. Thinking of it, I realized that the proposition of the

Czarina was to find out from their palace chaplain what I had confessed. It was a diplomatic way to try my loyalty and to get to the bottom of the secret plot in which I was involved.

I went to the palace chapel, knelt before the solemn old chaplain and began to confess. As there was nothing else left for me I told briefly of the role I was playing and how it came about.

"Didst thou not realize that in doing so thou wert a tool of the devil?" asked the priest solemnly. "No," I answered. "I never believed in the existence of the devil."

The priest shook his head, crossed himself and continued: "Dost thou regret it and promise solemnly to discontinue such treasonous doing?"

"Yes, I do," I stammered. This established me again at the court and I wrote to the Grand Duke George and I wife how the situation was. I received a short note from him saying that he was in despair about his wife and the banishment. It had made it utterly impossible for him to escape. An army of spies and desperate people surrounded him. His life was made a hourly torture.

Shortly afterward I read the dispatch that the Grand Duke George had died while bicycling near



The Czarina's Picture of the Czar's Gallant Before Dinner Salute.



The Czarina's Drawing of a Duel Between Grand Duke Sergius and Vassili Morosoff.

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A Sketch by the Czarina Illustrating the Sentinels of the Royal Palace Being Fed