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THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER VI.

AN AMERICAN GIRL'S FLUCE.

ANOTHER glance from the window showed Frances that the car had come to a stop near a new bridge over a branch of the Irish. Involuntarily she sighed for the man who had built that bridge—Denton, whose eye was keen and steady, whose muscles were of iron.

But Denton was miles farther on, at the Obi.

"Now," said Neslerov, as the girl sank back in her seat, "let us face this situation, my dear. Let us realize the true significance. We are practically alone, you and I. Save for the poor wretches in that village yonder, we are the only people on this earth just now. Can you realize the fullness of that statement? You are mine—absolutely and wholly mine."

"Oh, you cur! You coward!" exclaimed Frances. Her hand went as if by instinct toward that pocket from which she had drawn her revolver on a previous occasion. Neslerov saw her face turn whiter still, and he laughed pleasantly.

"Of course I guarded against that," he said. "I knew you would, with your American impulsiveness, try to shoot me again. So, while you slept, I quietly took your little toy pistol from your pocket. I have it here. This, I believe, deprives you of the power to do any more mischief."

"Oh, you miserable coward! You thief!" said Frances in a tense voice. "I wish there was a good American fist here to strike that grinning face of yours!"

"Undoubtedly," said Neslerov, with an exasperating coolness, "that would be pleasant for you, but it would be unfortunate for the American who owned the fist. One blow—peste! He would be torn apart by my agreeable savages yonder."

She could not resist the temptation to follow his finger as it pointed through the window on his side of the car. A short distance, on the banks of the stream, she saw a wretched, miserable village of rude huts. Men and women, dressed in leather, undressed skins, heavy cloths from Moscow merchants, stood in groups, all with their faces toward the car.

"Were I to say the word," said Neslerov, "these people would tear you limb from limb and would perform the same agreeable service for any fool who attempted to interfere between us."

"Monster!" she gasped.

"Of course I am a monster to you," he said. "All Russians are monsters to those who do not like us. We may have our little peculiarities. One of them is that what we cannot get by fair means we get some other way. I spoke to your father, and I spoke to you. I offered the honest love of a Russian prince. I was spurned. But now the game is mine, and I shall win. You shall become my wife before your father has time to return from the Obi."

"Never! I would prefer to be torn apart by your villagers!"

"You believe that now while you are in the heat of anger, but a short period of rest and contemplation will show you the folly of your refusal. Think of this. I shall go out now and obtain some food. We may remain here a week. Who knows? Before I leave you I wish to say that until you consent to have the priest of that village make you my wife you shall not be permitted to leave this car. I much prefer, as would any man, a willing bride; but, denied this, I will compel you to obey. It will be the worse for you. I offered love—an affectionate embrace. You refused. Now I command! Think this matter settled only when we are married."

"Never! You have my revolver and, I suppose, one of your own. Shoot me if you will. I will not marry you!"

"It will not be you I shoot. What do you think your father will do when he finds you are left behind?"

"Without doubt he will obtain a special train and come here after me. Then, Prince Neslerov, beware!"

He smiled like a wolf and showed his teeth.

"That is what I wanted you to say. If when your father comes here you are not my wife, I will shoot him dead."

"You dare not!" she gasped.

"I dare anything. No report of mine would be discredited at St. Petersburg. I could prove that your father was a conspirator against the government and was shot while fighting my soldiers."

"There is a government of the United States of America!"

"True, but at a distance. I do not fear it. But consider what I have said. I will return with food."

He left the car, securing the doors to prevent her escape. When she saw him striding toward the village, she leaned against the window and studied the rude people.

"I am helpless—absolutely helpless!" she moaned. "Oh, if he had not taken my revolver I could have shot him—or myself."

She looked about her for some method whereby she could, if the need should come, take her own life rather than submit to his demands. She knew that if there were a priest in

this squalid place he would obey Neslerov, and mumble some words perfectly meaningless to her, but which would give Neslerov power over her. She walked the length of the apartment like a caged lioness.

Women turned into their huts and came out again. She saw Neslerov start back toward the car carrying a wooden tray. She shuddered again.

"God give me strength, courage, calmness!" she murmured. "To lose consciousness would be to fall a victim to him."

She nerved herself to meet him as his footsteps sounded on the platform. The door opened, and he entered with a bowl of gruel, some steaming potatoes, roast fowl, coffee and some coarse bread.

"It is not quite like our usual fare," he said, "but it is better than being hungry."

He set the dishes on a table he improvised out of the back of a seat. He had a large traveling bag with him, and from it he took a bottle of wine.

"We will pledge each other," he said, with a laugh.

"I do not wish any," said Frances. "Come, don't be churlish! Let us get to the unpleasant part. Drink a toast to your future husband."

"I will not. I will not touch it!"

"Drink—drink my health!" he commanded.

"I will not!"

"I will make you!"

He held the cup in his right hand. With his left he grasped her by the hair. He bent back her head.

"Open your mouth. Swallow the wine. I will choke you!" he cried.

With a powerful effort she wrenched herself free and to her feet, and the wine went to the floor with a smash.

Her eyes were glaring with desperation. She clinched her fist and rained blow upon blow upon his face.

Curses deep and terrible burst from him. He clutched her round the waist and struggled with her. She exerted all her strength. She was like a ferocious tigress. Her nails scratched his face and tore his hair. Her blows cut his lips on his teeth. But he was a powerful man and used his strength against this captive woman. With a gasp she succumbed and sank helpless and exhausted almost in his arms.

"Curse you!" he spluttered between his swollen lips. "I have wasted my kindness on you! I should have starved you. But I will delay no longer. I'll drag you to the priest, and in ten minutes you will be the Princess Neslerov—and my slave for life. I'll break your heart, you devil!"

He closed his arms tightly about her and dragged her from the car. The villagers stared in astonishment as they saw him coming toward them with his burden.

"What means this strange happening, little father?" asked a woman of an older man of the village. "Is the man killing her?"

"Let be!" growled the man. "Use your eyes in your house, but meddle not with others. The man's gold is good. He will not hurt her. She is probably his wife."

Russian wives are accustomed to cruelty from their husbands. A beating is but part of their demonstrations of authority as head of the house. The women looked on with apathy, while the men smiled.

"He has married a Tartar," they said among themselves.

"Help! Save me from this man!" gasped Frances as Neslerov half dragged, half carried her into the nearest group.

"Where is your priest?" Neslerov demanded. "Get him at once. Not only he, but all in the place, will receive pay. Call the priest at once!"

"Save me! I am an American! Gordon—the man who built—the road—is my father!" cried Frances, struggling again.

A bent old man was seen shambling toward them.

"Come," said Neslerov roughly. "This young woman and I are to be married. Hurry. We have been left behind in that car, and to save her good name she must become my wife. Proceed!"

"No! For pity's sake, do not!" cried Frances. "My father will pay you well! Do not compel me to marry him! I hate him!"

"I command you to marry us!" shouted Neslerov.

A tall man of about middle age stepped from the crowd.

"It is wrong," he said. "Who you are I know not, but it is not the way to win a wife. Release the young woman. Let us hear what she has to say."

"What she has to say! Curse you!" howled Neslerov. He did release her for a moment and sprang forward. His fist shot out against the man's face. Without an effort in his own behalf he fell.

"I am Neslerov, governor of Tomsk!" shouted the prince, now perfectly frenzied. "I command you, old dotard, to say the words that will make this girl my wife."

"Please do not!" cried Frances. "He has stolen me from my father! He is a cruel monster! I cannot marry him!"

"He is his excellency, the governor," muttered the old man. "We must obey."

Neslerov seized her by the wrist and

swung her toward the priest. The villagers crowded round, awestruck at the great name they had heard. They well knew the governor. Many of them had felt the knout at his command.

"It must be done," again muttered the priest.

"No, no!" cried Frances, trying to wrench away from Neslerov.

A boy slid quietly away from the crowd and ran.

"Stand there, curse you!" said Neslerov, grasping Frances by the hair. The pain of his rude hand on her lovely hair made Frances cry out in terror, pain and shame. "I'll kill you if you move again!"

There was the sound of a quick and stealthy tread. There was a swish in the air. There was a gasp, a murmur from the crowd, which fell back in consternation.

A heavy Russian riding whip swung through the air in an arc and, descending, cut the skin across the face of Neslerov.

"Curse you!" said a hearty American voice. "I'll have your life for this!"

"Jack! Oh, Jack!" cried Frances, and then, the last vestige of her strength deserting her, she fell unconscious into Jack Denton's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL.

NESSLEROV recoiled, and the writhing of his face in pain and fury, together with the long red cut made by the whip, gave him the expression of a demon.

"You! You!" he gasped.

"Yes, I!" said Denton. "Fortunately, I arrived in time to foil this dastardly attempt of yours to take advantage of a defenseless girl. I have been riding along the railway from stream to stream examining the bridges. I reached this place on my horse a moment ago. A boy saw me coming and hurried to tell me what was going on. I had no idea I should find a friend in need of help. But, thank God, I was in time."

"You will never leave this place alive!" said Neslerov.

He plucked a revolver from his pocket and aimed at Denton.

A woman standing near held out her hands and caught the form of Frances and bore it into her house. Denton, with flashing eyes, leaped forward and closed with Neslerov.

"It is a battle to the death between giants!" cried a man in the crowd.

The pistol fell from the grasp of Neslerov, and the whip before wielded by Denton dropped to the ground.

The iron fingers of Denton would close on the throat of Neslerov, and it seemed as though the struggle would end that moment, but Neslerov would wrench himself free and leap at his enemy with a curse and growl.

"It is you or I! One of us must die!" cried Neslerov.

A swinging, crashing blow from the American's right hand sent the governor to the ground, where he lay as if stunned.

"Take care of him, somebody," said Denton in Russian. "I don't want to kill him."

He turned without a look at the fallen man and started toward the hut into which Frances had been carried.

"Look out!" cried a woman.

At the cry, which was echoed in the crowd, Denton turned suddenly. The dastardly Neslerov had feigned. He had risen to his feet and was creeping upon his enemy with a dagger drawn.

"Oh, you are an assassin, eh?" said Denton as he drew his revolver. "Let me see if we can't settle you once for all."

While it might be that not one of the villagers sympathized with Neslerov, yet his act was not a crime to them. With their sordid understanding of women having no rights, no freedom, no liberties save what their lords and masters gave them, the men of this place looked upon the eagerness of Neslerov to be married to so beautiful a girl as natural.

One of them, realizing that the governor's safety was necessary to their own, sprang upon Denton and drove a knife through the fleshy part of his arm.

The pistol fell to the earth near that of Neslerov and two villagers picked them up and hid them.

Like a flash Neslerov was upon his unarmed foe, and his knife was raised to strike, but Denton, with a quicker



And now began a duel.

movement, drew a knife from his belt. He had ridden too often over the tundras to go unprepared for enemies, human and otherwise.

And now began a duel the like of which the banks of the Irish or its branches will probably never see again.

Steel flashed on steel.

The blood from the wound in Denton's arm was flung over the face and

clothing of Neslerov, while that from the bruises on the governor's face grew thick and dark, making him truly hideous.

With a grasp as of iron Denton seized the hand of Neslerov that held the dagger, but with a wrench the governor got it away and cut to the bone half the length of Denton's finger.

But the American scarcely felt the wound. He was not fighting now for life, nor for vengeance. He was fighting for that girl who lay in the hut. He knew that if Neslerov killed him and was not killed himself, the girl would be made such a hell in the power of this monster of brutality that death would be preferable.

A year ago she had told him she did not and never could love him. It had been a quarrel. She didn't want to get married, and he asked her if his rough exterior, the result of years of hard work in rude and dangerous places, was disagreeable to her. He said there were fine gentlemen at Paris, New York, London and St. Petersburg. She had answered that she knew it. She preferred their company to bores. They parted then and had not met till now.

Denton and Neslerov kept fighting on, the villagers too much agitated to step between or utter a word.

Neslerov felt his right arm getting weaker. Denton's knife had slashed through the sleeve of his coat and found the bone near the elbow. An artery must have been cut, for the blood was thrown from the end of the sleeve. Made desperate, he gathered all his strength for a final effort and sprang boldly upon his foe.

Denton, seeing an opportunity and knowing that nothing but a deathblow seemed likely to end the fight, met the plunge and drove his knife into Neslerov's side.

With another curse, a spluttering of blood and a groan the governor of Tomsk sank to the ground at the foot of his adversary unconscious.

"Take care of him, you fellows; no need to let him die," said Denton, examining the wound. "His lung is not touched. Nothing fatal here. I am glad to say. Here, you!"

The old priest came mumbling toward him.

"You know more about surgery than the rest. Get some water, bathe these wounds, take a few stitches in the long cuts and bandage him up."

"Yes, little father," said the priest, trembling. "But what of you?"

"I can take care of myself."

He strode to the bank of the stream, over which he had but a few months before built a bridge, and bathed his wounds. Then he went into the hut to see Frances, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INTERVIEW IN THE HUT.

FRANCES lay on a rude bed, scarcely conscious, and Denton stood a moment looking down solemnly upon the lovely

turned face. He bent over her, touched her brow and felt her pulse. All sense of his own injuries seemed to leave him as he saw her need of immediate care.

Frances felt his touch and looked up at him with about the same expression she might have worn had he been a stern and high priced specialist called in to make an examination.

"You are merely knocked out by the shock," he said, with assumed indifference. "You will probably be all right as soon as we get to Tomsk."

"Yes, if I could get there," she whispered. "My father will be anxious."

"We must relieve his anxiety as soon as possible. You must not worry."

"What will you do? And Neslerov?"

"Never mind Neslerov now. Keep cool. You've got to be braced up a little. I wish I had some wine."

"There was some in the car," she answered. "Neslerov had it. He tried to make me drink, but I would not."

Denton went to the car, still on the main track, and brought from it the remains of the bottle of wine Neslerov had opened. This he took with him to the hut and offered some to Frances.

"I don't want it. I refused it before," she said.

"Oh, don't you want it?" he asked ironically. "I suppose in your keen and subtle mind there is no distinction between a glass of wine offered by Neslerov when you were his prisoner and by me when you are ill."

"I did not mean that," she said meekly. She reached out her hand, took the cup and drained it.

"Now, then," said Denton, coolly seating himself on a stool near her bed, "tell me this whole miserable business from the beginning."

"I haven't thanked you yet, Jack," she said, with a return of color.

"Never mind thanking me. I did merely what any other American would have done, and, seeing you in danger, it would not have been manly, indeed, to stand off. I accept your thanks, but let's get to the business. How did you happen to be here—with Neslerov?"

"We were in Moscow," she said. "There was a meeting about the new railway."

"Yes, I know. That was what took Neslerov there."

"He had an interview with papa while in Moscow—"

"Why do you hesitate? It is not a new experience to have a man want to marry you, is it? You gave him the usual answer, I suppose."

"Oh, Jack! There was but one answer papa could give him. I do not like the prince, and papa knows I will never marry a man I do not love."

"Everybody knows that—who knows you," said Denton soberly.

"He told him about you—and about Vladimir—and the prince got angry."

"About Vladimir! Who is he?"

"Vladimir Paulpoff, an ironworker, now sent—"

"Never mind, we will get to that afterward. You started for the Obi,

where Gordon is to take a house in Vashlov."

"No, not yet. I must tell you about Vladimir—poor fellow! I met him in the forge—in his shop—one day while the railway was being put through Perm. Papa and I went there. He is a marvelous man, Jack. You would think as much of him as I do if you knew him. He is so handsome and strong. He is—"

"Do you mean young Paulpoff, the blacksmith of Perm?"

"Yes, Jack. Do you know him?"

"I've had him turn out some iron for small bridges. Well?"

"He is so intelligent, and was so anxious to learn, to improve, I helped him. I used to send him books, papers, magazines, scientific works—anything I could get hold of that would help him. He studied hard, poor fellow! He grew to—I think he loved me—"

"Of course you returned his affection. You've done it so—I mean it came quite easy."

Tears glistened in her eyes, and she turned away her head. She had quarreled with this man and had said she would never marry him, and their friendship had been almost cut asunder. But he had saved her from Neslerov. Now he was chiding her.

"One could not know Vladimir without admiring him," she said suddenly, with a great accession of spirit. "I fail to see why I should be put through this catechism by you."

"You needn't be if you don't want to," he answered coldly. "This is a nice, quiet village. Neslerov is lying not far away, somewhat cut up now, but he will get over that. I could go on my way and leave you if my questions are distasteful. The thing is that there must be an explanation to this affair, and I'd like to know what it is to be. It is no trifling matter to cut the governor of a Russian province to pieces."

"Have you been fighting?" she asked quickly.

"No," he replied, with a tinge of sarcasm. "Neslerov and I indulged in a few pleasantries. He doesn't feel as gay over them as I do; that's all."

"Oh, I see your hand is bandaged—I never noticed it. Oh, Jack, forgive me!"

"We were following a course of inquiry," he said, putting the bandaged hand behind him. "This Vladimir—you met—there was an attachment—so far, so good. Now, how did that lead to this affair?"

"I wanted to see Vladimir and went by train from Moscow to Perm. I found a drosky at the station and was driven to the shops. Shops, house—all were deserted. I found Neslerov there with a painting under his arm. He was taking it away. It was a beautiful picture, a beautiful face. I asked the prince where Vladimir was. He said that all the Paulpoffs—father, mother and Vladimir—had been sent to Siberia."

"Sent to Siberia! That big simple hearted fellow! For what?"

"Conspiring with others to kill the czar. We were alone; the drosky driver went out, and Neslerov tried to kiss me. I fought him; I shot him."

"You shot Neslerov?"

"Yes, I shot him. I would again. I then returned to Moscow, but did not tell my father anything about the matter, save that Vladimir was sent to Siberia. We soon after started for the Obi and stopped at Perm. We saw the governor, and he promised that if he discovered that Vladimir was innocent he would help him."

"He might as well have said that if he discovered the moon was cheese he'd give it to you for lunch. Things like that are rarely corrected in Russia."

"When we left Perm, Neslerov was on the train. Of course, as papa did not know anything about the shooting in the house of the Paulpoffs he greeted Neslerov as a friend. Everything went well till we had crossed the border and come into Neslerov's own province. At this place—I had been sleeping—I woke up. The car had become detached from the train. I was alone with Neslerov. He took my