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THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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CHAPTER X.

JANSKY, SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE, NESLEROV lay in his palace in Tomsk, slowly recovering. His heart was filled with rage, and he longed for vengeance.

His closest confidant now was Jansky, who, owing to his meritorious conduct in the apprehension of so great a gang of conspirators as the Paulpoffs, was promoted at the request of Neslerov to a post where he could assist his superior in his plans and ambitions.

He had told Jansky the story of the ride from Moscow, and it was of course colored to suit his purpose. Jansky had received his commission—the first important one since his arrival at Tomsk—to watch the American and find an opportunity to wreak vengeance.

About twenty miles from the city of Tomsk was the village of Tivoloffsky, a small mining town peopled by convicts. To this town the Paulpoffs had been sent. Vladimir was useful in the mines. With his tremendous strength he could do the work of two, and in his simple obedience to the mandates of his superiors he never uttered a complaint. The old people did menial work, cooking for the convicts who had no families or cleaning in the houses of the officers.

This new life came hardest upon the old people, and it was their sufferings that made Vladimir curse under his breath.

One day Jansky entered the room where Neslerov sat or half reclined.

"Well, what is it? I see you have something to say," said Neslerov.

"I have, your excellency," replied the superintendent of police. "It concerns him—your enemy."

"The American?"

"Yes, I have obeyed your commands—he has been constantly watched. And at last we are in a position to strike."

Neslerov sat up straight.

"What? Tell me at once."

"It is not yet revealed what the man's object is, but he and the Paulpoffs are plotting again."

"The Paulpoffs?"

"They and the American. He has visited them twice. It was overheard that he and Papa Paulpoff had a long conversation about a picture."

Neslerov glanced at a painting that hung on the wall. It was the painting he had taken from the Paulpoffs' house at Perm.

"What can he know about the picture?" asked the governor.

"I do not know. That is, as I said, not yet revealed."

"Jansky," he said, "I know what the object is if you do not. Listen carefully now to what I say. It is quite possible the American has discovered the existence of the original of that picture you see there. It is a small medallion, probably in a locket. It was lost some years ago by a member of my family and bears relation to a great mystery—the mystery of Graslov."

Jansky shut his eyes and seemed to be thinking.

"Jansky, your life and mine depend on your action now. Do you understand?"

"I understand nothing."

"That picture, if it is the one I mean, must be brought to me. The American, if he proves to be interested in it, must know or suspect something I do not wish him to know. There are ways whereby even an American could disappear in Siberia. And, Jansky, Vladimir Paulpoff is a most dangerous plotter even here. He ought to be placed where he can do no more mischief."

"I begin to understand," said Jansky grimly.

He bowed and left the palace and rode toward Tivoloffsky.

Two days passed, during which Jansky watched and kept himself in readiness to act. Then, while Mamma Paulpoff was alone in her hut, she heard an imperative knocking at the door. Papa Paulpoff and Vladimir had just gone to the mine. Denton, the American, had left the hut but a short time before. Mamma Paulpoff had been through so much trouble of late that the slightest sound jarred upon her. She turned whiter still and stepped backward as she saw the dark and forbidding face of Jansky. Behind Jansky were two of the Tomsk police.

"You are Mamma Paulpoff," said Jansky, slipping his foot in the door and working his way inside.

"I am; you know me; I was at Perm," faltered the trembling old woman.

"I am quite well aware that you were at Perm, old woman, and also that conspiring son of yours. It showed the mercy of the czar that you received no worse punishment. This is heaven compared to what you deserved."

"We had done nothing, your excellency."

"What! You still persist in that lie! You were all in the game, and you are still at it, let me tell you."

The old woman crouched against the wall.

"Don't lie to me again," thundered Jansky. "I have been watching you every day since you came to this place. I say you are still conspiring."

"It is not so! I swear it in the name of God!" cried Mamma Paulpoff.

"Let me tell you, it will be worse for you if you do not tell the truth. You are receiving a visitor who is suspected."

"I—a visitor! I know no one!" gasped Mamma Paulpoff.

"Oh, do you not? But you were here when he came. Did he come to see you, your husband or your son?"

"Who—of whom do you speak?" asked the frightened old woman.

"Of whom would I speak save that accursed American? He has twice made attempts upon the life of the governor of Tomsk. Yet the governor in the kindness of his heart has not molested him. But he was warned if a third attempt was made it would go hard with him."

"Ah, it is impossible! He is so good—so kind!"

"Good and kind, eh? In what manner does he display it?"

"Oh, he came—he came!"

The old woman stumbled and floundered. It had been borne in upon her understanding by Papa Paulpoff that on no account must she breathe a word to any person concerning the visit of which Jansky spoke.

"Come, out with it!" stormed Jansky.

"He came—I do not know why he came," murmured the old woman in despair.

"I will tell you. He came to conspire against the life of Neslerov, governor of Tomsk."

"No, no! I swear he did not."

"Good! Then if you know he did not, you must know why he did come here. Out with it, now, if you value your life."

"My life! Ah, you would not harm a helpless old woman!"

For answer Jansky brought his whip down on her bony shoulders.

"Have mercy!" cried the unfortunate.

"Will you tell why the American visited this house?"

"I know not!"

"Take her; tie her thumbs—there, over the door!" he commanded savagely.

His two gallant men needed no further bidding. The aged woman was seized, cords were fastened to her thumbs, and she was placed standing in the doorway Jansky had indicated, with her thumbs hung above her head.

"Tear the rags from her back!"

A rude hand tore away her garments to the waist.

"Now, then, old hag," said Jansky, "understand I have come for the truth and will have it. If you do not give it to me, I will kill you. I will get the truth from Paulpoff, who has more sense than you. Now, what was the business that brought the American here?"

"I know not!" whispered the woman, with a great sob.

"The lash!" roared Jansky.

One of his police swung his heavy whip, and the lash came down across the naked shoulders. A livid mark told the course, and Mamma Paulpoff cried out in agony.

"This must be known!" said Jansky. "Either you or some one must tell. What brought the American here? Was it concerning a picture?"

"I know not!" said the woman.

"The lash! Twice!" ordered Jansky. A white line and a red one marked the blows of the whip. Mamma Paulpoff screamed in her awful torture. Her limbs grew weaker, and she hung by the cords tied to her thumbs. The thumbs were black.

"You will learn!" said Jansky. "The officers of the czar must take these steps to protect his empire. With the lesson you have had, tell the truth. What brought the American here?"

"I know not!" answered the woman.

"Hell's fires upon her!" said Jansky, almost beside himself. "The lash! Three times!"

"Your arm is weak," said the police officer who had done no whipping. "Let me try."

A smile of horrible cruelty crossed his face as he stepped by the side of the woman. His whip whistled in the air. It fell—once—twice—thrice, and with a scream, her head fell back. Her eyes glazed.

"Hold! Quick! Release her and restore her to consciousness!" ordered Jansky. "She is unconscious and cannot feel our punishment."

They cut her down, laid her on the floor and poured liquor down her throat.

Groans came from her as they worked.

"God, take me from this awful pain!" she murmured.

"She feels again!" said Jansky in savage glee. "String her up!"

Again she was raised and the cords were fastened to her thumbs.

"Now, hag, tell me why the American came here? Was it to kill the governor or to kill the czar?"

"No, I do not know."

"You lie. The charge against him and Vladimir is that they are conspiring to kill both. The American and Vladimir will be taken to the prison at

Tomsk and shot. Tell the truth. It will save them and you."

"I know nothing!" said the old woman, remembering her husband's warnings.

"The lash, both of you! Kill the old beast!" yelled Jansky.

"It was but a picture—to take a picture!" cried Mamma Paulpoff in tones that pierced the air.

Her weakness had come too late. Both whips coiled round her shrunken breasts. The withered skin was cut as with a knife. One scream came from her writhing lips, and she was still.

"Cut her down. Leave her," was Jansky's curt remark. He watched them lay the still form upon the floor and then led the way to their horses.

"It was a picture," he muttered. "Then Neslerov was right, and the American is on the trail. Both he and Vladimir must die!"

That night Vladimir came home from the mine with Papa Paulpoff. He was the first to step across the threshold.

"My God!" he said. "Who has been here?"

Papa Paulpoff stood stupefied, looking at the upturned face of his wife—dead—bruised—her breast covered with blood.

"The police!" wailed the old man, wringing his hands pitifully. "They have killed Mamma Paulpoff! They will kill you—and me!"

Vladimir's gentle, placid face became distorted with leonine rage. He stooped over the dead body of his mother,



The withered skin was cut as with a knife, touched her blood with the tips of his fingers and wiped them on his own brow.

"If this is Neslerov or the order of the czar," he thundered into the ears of the terror-stricken old man, "I will rend them all! From this moment I live for vengeance!"

He brought his clinched fist down on a wooden table and wrecked it completely.

"So will I crush them who have done this thing!" he cried. "So will I smash their hearts!"

While he raged Papa Paulpoff sank by the side of Mamma Paulpoff and wept.

CHAPTER XI. THE PRINCESS OLGA.

THE train from Moscow came snorting and screaming into the station, and among the passengers, mostly officers and convicts or men connected with the railway, were two women. One of these was about fifty years of age, thin and subdued in appearance, and her face bore the marks of suppressed anxiety. The other was scarcely more than a girl—twenty at most—but her carriage was noble, and her entire appearance that of one born to command. Her lovely face and well-shaped head rose above a collar of ermine, although it was not winter.

"To the palace of Neslerov, governor of Tomsk," she said to a drosky driver, and she and her companion were soon on the way.

Neslerov was at dinner when a servant announced the Princess Olga.

"What about the Princess Olga?" he asked.

"The princess is here—she has asked to see your excellency."

"Here! Olga Neslerov, here!" rising from the table. He had improved much in the last few days, and his face wore a calm look that had not been there since his meeting with Denton.

He found the princess in the reception room.

"Princess Olga!" he exclaimed, kissing her hand. "Fair cousin, what happy circumstance brought you here? And why have you come unannounced and unattended?"

"I saw no reason to herald my approach," she answered, "and I am unattended. This is my attendant."

The woman courtesied and looked uncomfortable, but Neslerov paid her not the least attention.

"Well, since you are here, I am pleased to see you," said the governor. "Your branch of the Neslerov family and mine have not been too friendly. I am glad that at last one of you has had the grace to begin a reconciliation."

Princess Olga smiled.

"Whatever feeling my branch of the family may have for yours could scarcely be said to interest me," she said. "Remember, I have spent much of my time out of Russia, and—it happened twenty years ago."

Neslerov turned to the door and then stopped.

"You refer to the unfortunate mystery of Graslov," he said soberly. "It was that, I fear, that ruptured the former friendships. Yet I have insisted and proved that our family was not to blame. It was either an accident or was done by our enemies. Pardon me! I was so glad to see you that I forgot that you must be weary after your journey. Let me have you shown your rooms, and I will order dinner for you when you wish."

"Thank you. We are both hungry. I

will join you in ten minutes, and Therese will be ready to go to the servants' dining room in that time."

"You have become a regular cosmopolitan," laughed Neslerov. "Your visits to America and London have almost taken away the traces of our Russian habits."

"Some of them could be well dispensed with," she answered.

In response to his summons a servant appeared and conducted the women to their rooms.

"Now, what devilish luck could have brought her here at this time?" said Neslerov to himself. "I must be cautious. But it is so long—she was not born—she can know nothing. But I must be discreet."

"Well, we are here," said the princess to her companion when they were alone. "Now, obey me; let me do the planning. Neslerov must not suspect us. It would ruin all, and there is no telling what he might do. The governor of a province in Siberia is almost supreme."

Her attendant shuddered.

"I lived in dread of Siberia for twenty years!" she said, with a shudder. "And now you have brought me here."

"But not as a convict—as a friend, a woman, like myself, resolved to right a wrong."

The princess was soon ready and joined the governor in the dining room.

"I have just been thinking, Olga," he said, his face wreathed with smiles, "that it is at least three years since we met. Your face has not changed much, but you are now a woman and were then a little girl. You are one of the most beautiful women in Russia."

"Thank you."

"And, I might say, the richest."

"Nearly so. But the wealth brings its responsibilities. It is difficult in Russia to do those things that are just and proper with our wealth."

"I never found it so," said the governor, with a laugh.

"Perhaps," said Olga, "you are not interested in the question. To me it is a burning one. Our nobles have too much wealth and our lower classes have too little opportunity to rise. It is not so in England, France or America."

"You had better leave those questions for older heads, princess. You will become involved with the government before you know. You were not born to waste your beauty and talents in such matters. You were born to be admired, to enjoy your wealth."

"I do enjoy my wealth and do what good a girl can do with it. As to being admired, I meet few from whom admiration seems to come with sincerity."

"Oh, as to that, you cannot expect to find the courtiers at beauty's court all as gruff and outspoken as a drosky driver."

"I have met some who were," she said, laughing pleasantly.

They ate slowly, chatting the while.

"You have not quenched my thirst for knowledge," said the governor. "If I were in St. Petersburg and you did me the honor to ask me to visit you, it would even then surprise me. But that you have come to Tomsk, more than half way across Siberia, to visit me is, to say the least, amazing."

The princess gave her silvery laugh again.

"You are as conceited at any other nobleman I have met. I did not come to see you. I came, first, to ride on the new railway; second, to study the conditions existing in this part of the empire, and, third, to look into this new proposition of the czar to induce peasants to serve in Siberia along the line of the railway. It is a very good idea, if the country will support settlers."

"It will under proper help from the government at the start," replied Neslerov. "I am glad you came to me. We shall have a fine time making our investigations."

"I notice that you do not seem to have the free use of your arm," said Olga. "Have you been ill or injured?"

"A slight injury. I fell from an unruddy horse."

"You must be more cautious. It must have been a wild beast. You have the name of being an excellent horseman."

When their meal was finished, they strolled together through the rooms of the palace.

"I am quite interested in your palace," said the princess. "It is not the finest I have seen, but it is excellent."



"My cousin, whom I have never seen!" she exclaimed.

There are some barbarisms, but I presume you get accustomed to them—in Siberia."

"Yes, in Siberia one gets accustomed to almost anything," he answered.

She continued her inspection with interest and suddenly came to a stop before a painting. Neslerov's face became a shade paler.

"My cousin, whom I have never seen!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands and gazing raptly at the picture Vladimir had painted. "Surely, Nicholas, that must be Princess Alexandra, who married your elder brother."

"I think you are mistaken," said Neslerov. "You surely must have seen Alexandra."

"Yes, when a mere infant. It is only from other portraits that I recognize her. She was very beautiful. Oh, what a terrible sorrow to her! To lose her child, heir to a fine estate and princely title, and then lose her own life, so young, with the horrible mystery still unsolved as to whether she died of grief and a broken heart or by the hand of an enemy. Oh, that mystery of Graslov! Will it ever be solved?"

"I fear not," said Neslerov solemnly.

"I did not know you had this picture," said Olga. "It is much finer than any we have at home. It was done by a master hand."

"It was," assented Neslerov.

The painting had saddened Olga, and she passed on, making no more of her laughing criticisms.

She soon returned to her rooms, where her attendant was awaiting her. The woman's face was pale, and she seemed to be struggling with emotion. Olga stood before her, with a peculiar light in her eyes.

"Therese," she said, "an oil painting of my unfortunate cousin, Princess Alexandra, hangs in Neslerov's own room."

"What?" gasped the woman, starting up. Then, as some strange terror overcame her, she shuddered, and with the whispered cry "We are lost!" she fell to the floor unconscious.

CHAPTER XII.

PRINCESS OLGA BEGINS TO ACT.

NOW, Therese, tell me what you have learned. Why did the fact that the picture of Alexandra hangs upon the wall of Neslerov's room make you faint? You have learned something. Tell me."

Therese was sitting in a chair, her face white and drawn, and in her eyes was a bewildered look.

"It was not so much what I heard, princess, as what I knew and suspected," she answered.

"I know what you know. I suspect what you suspect. Tell me what you heard," she said sternly.

"It was in the serfs' hall," she said in reply to the princess. "I was eating; no one seemed to ask who I was, and they talked as servants do. Vladimir Paulpoff is in danger of his life."

Princess Olga gave a start, but recovered her composure.

"Go on," she said. "Tell me all."

"It seems there is an American—I do not remember what they called him—but he is an American who builds bridges over the rivers for the new railway. He knows Vladimir Paulpoff. He is also a friend of that American girl—you remember—we met at the fair in Moscow?"

"Frances Gordon? I remember her. She gave liberally to the charities. Well?"

"It would seem from what I heard that the governor is in love with her, and that she rejected him. These things are well known among the servants. It seems the American and Neslerov had a fight and Neslerov was injured."

"He told me he fell from a horse. Go on."

"It is believed among the servants that Vladimir is also in love with the American girl and that she is in love with him. And the American—I do not know—but he may be in love with her."

"Three lovers! She is fortunate—no, I would say most unfortunate. With one true and honorable lover any woman is fortunate, but with three—and one like Neslerov! It is too much."

"You do not seem to suspect where the picture came from."

"Do you mean the oil painting of my cousin, the Princess Alexandra?"

"I mean it. You say it hangs on the wall of Neslerov's room. It is undoubtedly the one painted by