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## JOHN CLARK, Jr. AGENT.

# THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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## CHAPTER XV.

### NESLEROV KNOWS HIS PERIL.

ABOUT the time Governor Neslerov was rousing himself from a deep slumber which had not refreshed him after the ball, Jansky, superintendent of police, was groaning and muttering in his own efforts to wake up. He knew he was awake, but the effect of the heavy drug was still upon him. Itzig, however, having succumbed to a lesser quantity than was taken by Jansky, was sooner awake and had been relieved by the day guard and gone to his own quarters. The first question Neslerov asked was for Princess Olga. When he learned that she was still sleeping, he went to see Jansky.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked. "You seem to be ill."  
"I do feel rather ill," said Jansky. "I don't know when I felt like this."  
"You were drunk; that's all. You were drunk when I left you. Did you drink any more?"  
"Yes; in making the round of inspection I discovered Itzig asleep and a bottle of wine half gone. I drank the rest."  
"Itzig asleep! At his post! And this danger near us?"  
"Pooh! The girl suspects nothing. A girl of her age, even though she be a princess, could not dissemble so well. I tell you Olga suspects nothing."

"Then why is she here?"  
"Well, she is eccentric, as you know, and it is quite possible that she would like to be the wife of the governor of Tomsk."

Neslerov laughed.  
"She would like to kill him, rather."  
"Even so, she does not suspect."  
"But this thing of Itzig being asleep at his post—we must examine into it."  
"The poor devil wanted his share in the festivities, I suppose. We must not deal too severely with him. He certainly did not steal the wine. Some one must have given it to him."

"Who? I must find that out. But, since he has been asleep, you had better examine the prisoners."  
"They are there all right. How could they be otherwise?"  
"But you know what it means to me if they escape."

"Escape! I will stake my head they cannot escape. Why, to pass out from the dungeons they must open the iron gate and the door of the guardroom. See, here is the key to the guardroom door."

"Still," said Neslerov hesitatingly, "I wish you would make an examination."  
"Oh, if your excellency wishes it, I will do so gladly. But I promise you they are there."

Jansky was still stupid from the drugged wine, but he knew what he was doing. He went to the guardroom and unlocked the door leading to the dungeons. In the passage he obtained a lantern and passed through the iron gate. He went down the stairs and through the passages, which he knew well, to the dungeon. He entered and stood horror-stricken at the empty chains hanging on the wall. With fear in his heart he crept back to the stairs, glancing nervously around him, for he knew the strength of the American. Neslerov, to whom he went, looked in surprise at the ashen face.

"Curses upon us all!" said Jansky hoarsely. "They are gone!"  
Jansky looked sheepishly at the governor, and Neslerov looked at Jansky like an angry wolf.

"Gone! Both prisoners gone!" cried the governor. "Is this true?"  
"Unfortunately—the thing I thought impossible is a fact."  
Neslerov's face was white.

"I thought—you told me—they were both in chains!" he said, his voice strained and tense.

"I did, and it was true. With my own hands I chained them. The American was in the dungeon at the first landing and Paulpoff was down in the lower cellar. With my own hands I chained them, and I hold the key to the door. The key to the chains still hangs where I placed it. This is a miracle. The men must be devils in human form."

"The American is something like a devil," said Neslerov grimly, "but I doubt if he has supernatural powers. If those chains have been loosened, Jansky, some human agent has done it, and there is a traitor in the palace."

"Whom does your excellency suspect?"  
"My cousin Olga."  
"That girl! She would no more dare go down in those dungeons than she would enter a den of wild beasts. And how could she learn that they were down there?"

"It is not quite a secret. Some of the servants saw them brought in."  
"Since the princess came the servants have had enough to do without talking about two prisoners of whom they know nothing. Anyway, how could Olga, who has spent but little time in Russia and none near Graslov or Perm, ever hear of the Paulpoffs?"

"I know not. But certain it is there is a traitor here. This escape, if escape it is, will cost us dear."  
"If escape it is! It may not be an escape after all! The chains are old and rusty. Perhaps they have given way, and the prisoners may be wandering

around the passages. I will send for Itzig."

Neslerov was terribly disturbed. He paced to and fro in the police office, and his face did not regain its color. He was playing for a high stake—the highest stake—playing for his life—and the game seemed lost.

Jansky sent for Itzig, and he came before them.

"You went to sleep last night!" thundered Jansky, whose theory was that to obtain the truth from a culprit you must terrify him at the start.

"I swear I did not, your excellency!" replied Itzig, shivering in terror.

"You lie! I went in the guardroom, and you were asleep. I found there a portion of a bottle of wine. Who gave you that?"

"I! A bottle of wine! I never tasted wine in my life. Brandy and vodka, plenty, but wine—I am too poor."  
"Oh, you did not buy this wine. Some one at the fete gave it to you. Who was it?"

"I know not! I swear I know not who put the wine in my room!"

"You are lying. A tray was also there, with dishes. You had your feast and got drunk. Who brought the stuff to you?"

"I swear no one. If there was a feast, it was some one else's."

"How could any one else eat there and you not know it?"

Itzig saw he was lost.

"I may have—perhaps I slept a moment."

"A moment! You slept hours, and the prisoners you were guarding have escaped!"

"Impossible!" gasped Itzig, almost sinking through the floor.

"Enough of this!" said Neslerov. "Itzig is here, and if he has permitted the men to escape he can be punished any time. We are wasting precious moments. Let us get down to the dungeons and find them."

Jansky took a pistol, and so did Neslerov. They went to the guardroom. Jansky took the lantern and opened the door and iron gate. He led the way, Neslerov and Itzig following.

"See? He has gone," said Jansky, pointing to the chains.

"Are you certain this is the room?" "Certain? As I am alive."

"Then for the other, and keep a watch. They are not armed, but remember Paulpoff's strength, and the other is no pygmy."

Again Jansky led the way. He did not tell Neslerov he had not been to visit Vladimir. In his agitation at finding the American gone he had assumed, of course, that if one could escape both could. Reaching an obscure corner, toward which Denton had not

continued to go in his search, they found a narrow staircase leading downward. This short flight brought them to a horrible place—more horrible than the one where Denton had been chained.

This was a dungeon made cold and damp by the water that stood two inches deep on the floor, and in which blind reptiles that had never seen any brighter place crawled around in the slimy ooze. Long strings of rotten moss hung from the walls. Here, in this noisome and terrible place, was Vladimir, chained in the same manner as Denton had been.

"I thought you said he had gone too!" exclaimed Neslerov, a flood of hope and courage showing in his voice.

"I thought so. In my excitement I believed both had gone, but if one is here the other must be. We will search the dungeons."

They did not speak to Vladimir, who was suffering awful tortures, but turned and ascended to the upper floor. Here, winding and turning among the passages, they crept stealthily—three armed men searching for one man who was unarmed, yet fearing that the one might leap upon them and slay them as they walked. But they did not find the American and returned crestfallen to the office of the superintendent of police.

"That man did not set himself free," said Neslerov. "Some one who knows my secret has done this. Olga is here. Who else but Olga could do the thing?"

"Did the Princess Olga come to you during the ball?" Jansky suddenly asked Itzig. "Was it the princess who gave you that wine?"

The pallor of the man's face gave Jansky his answer.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed. "The wine must have been drugged! It was Olga who set him free!"

"Then we must act with extreme caution, for if she knows this much she will ruin me. For a short time we must act as if we did not know the American had escaped. But you and Unseth go must find him—find him—before he gets out of Tomsk. Then, with him again in our grasp, I will deal with Olga. Fool, to put her strength against mine, and in Tomsk!"

"What about Vladimir?" asked Jansky.

"Leave him alone. Let him starve! He can do no harm."  
Jansky went quickly to work. Unseth, upon whom he depended most, had gone to another place in the discharge of his duty. Jansky made several fruitless journeys during the day, but no trace of the American could be found.

Olga, when, late in the day, she joined the governor, noticed the studied

calm and the steely glitter of his eye. She knew he had discovered the escape of Denton, but the resolute girl did not fear him. She merely nerved herself to finish the work she had set herself to do. She had frequent errands that took her near the office of the superintendent of police, and she kept her ears alert to catch the slightest whisper.

It was evening when she went for the seventh time, and loud voices came from the superintendent's office. So ex-



Winding and turning among the passages, they crept stealthily.

cited were the speakers that they did not realize that their voices reached into the hall.

"I tell you it is so!" said the voice of Unseth, who had returned and who seemed to be angry. "How was I to know that a man could escape from the dungeons? I heard it—that the American had passed through Dorky on his way to Tivolofsky. I supposed Neslerov had changed his plans."

"Is he going to Tivolofsky? Old Paulpoff is still there?" said the governor.

"But explain this thing," said Unseth. "How could a man who was chained to the wall in that dungeon get out?"

"By the help of a traitor, and I will know that traitor and slay him!" said Neslerov. "Some one drugged some wine, and Jansky, like a fool, drank it. Also Itzig, who guards the door. During the time they were asleep the American was set free. The other, Paulpoff, is still there. Your work is to capture that American and bring him here."

"If he knows, he may have told some one," suggested Unseth.

"This is no time to talk! Whether he has told or not, he must be brought back! If I am to be destroyed, I will destroy my enemies first! Go! Bring him back to die!"

Olga quietly disappeared up the stairs.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### MAMMA PAULPOFF AVENGED.

IT was midnight in Tomsk, and the palace of the governor was still. Jansky and Unseth had hidden away to overtake Denton at Tivolofsky. Itzig was at his post in the guardhouse and the new lieutenant of the palace guard paced his measures through the deserted corridors.

But Neslerov was not asleep. Feverish and impatient, he sat in his room, awaiting the return of his police with the American, whose liberty was a menace to the life of Neslerov. He drank deeply from time to time from a bottle that stood on his table. If he spoke, he did it with a loud voice, but no one was near. His thoughts were spoken thus, as with a man half mad with fear.

"Heavens!" he said as he drank again. "If he reaches Perm, and the truth is known, I shall—what will become of me?"

He started as a light footstep sounded on the hard floor, and his haggard face grew paler as Princess Olga entered.

"Why are you awake?" he asked harshly. He was too excited to think of phrases.

"I could not sleep, and I knew you were not in bed," she answered. "I came to talk."

He stared at her. In his eyes she was as beautiful even as Frances Gordon, but his danger made him think her a tigress seeking to devour him. Yet he dared not show it.

"Why are you alone?" asked Olga. "You usually have Jansky, the superintendent of police, with you?"

"Jansky is away. A noted prisoner has escaped and the superintendent has gone to retake him."

"I heard a commotion. I supposed it was something of that kind. Was it a Russian?"

"Yes—a nihilist."

"I hope they will capture him."

"They will! They must!" said Neslerov fiercely.

Olga's eyes were veiled—they did not betray her thoughts.

"There is much concerning this system that is new to me, and it will take long for me to learn it all. I am already weary with the little I have done."

"Better leave it alone. It is a business for men, not princesses," said Neslerov.

"The study has made me wakeful. Bring me some wine."

He opened a bottle.

"Oh," said Olga, "to please me a man must be honorable, strong and wise. He must not be bound by custom, nor yet must he scorn it. There are ways—in the world we live in there are ways—of being great without being eccentric and without following the lead of others. A man whom I love must be patient and whom I love must use his strength against the weak."

A sarcastic smile crossed his lips. "You must look outside of Russia," he said.

"Perhaps," she answered. "But you have not pledged me. Must I drink alone?"

His eyes snapped with the remembrance that Jansky and Itzig had been drugged. But she was so handsome, so smiling, that no sign of evil intent was in her face.

"From your hand," he answered, with a show of gallantry.

She poured him a glass of wine, and they drank. For a moment he waited, as if half expecting to fall asleep. But the wine had no ill effect, and they chatted on. But Neslerov grew more impatient as the night wore on. Why did this girl persist in staying up and talking to him? What was in her mind? Was there another plot? He paced to and fro in the room as he spoke. When his back was turned, she made a quick movement and dropped something—not into the wine bottle, but into the bottle of liquor from which Neslerov drank.

"I think I will retire," said the princess. "It is late, and perhaps I can sleep now."

"I hope you will find rest," he said. She went out. Neslerov watched her with a dark, saturnine face. What did she mean? He poured out a liberal dose of liquor. The wine was too weak for him. He needed something to steady his shaken nerves. He drank it. In five minutes he was staring blankly at himself in a glass.

"What is this—this feeling?" he muttered. "That she devil! I am poisoned! What trick is this? Help! Guard! Lieutenant of the guard!"

The young officer heard, and ran to him.

"Your excellency called," he said. "Yes—quick—I am poisoned—I am drowsy—bring Princess Olga—quick!"

The lieutenant, wild with apprehension, rushed to Olga's room.

"His excellency the governor wants you!" he panted. "He is poisoned."

"He is not poisoned," answered Olga calmly. "He is merely going to sleep. I want you to stay away from him, and I want you to keep quiet."

The officer stared.

"What do you mean? He is ill! The governor called me and sent for you."

"I am going to him, but you must not."

"But I must. It is my duty!"

"Whom do you obey?"

"Neslerov, governor of Tomsk."

"Then from this moment you obey me. Read this!"

She placed before him the same paper she had shown Dermis, his fellow officer. His eyes started from his head.

"The seal of the czar!" he cried, and he, like Dermis, fell to his knees. "I obey—command me!" he exclaimed.

"Remain quiet. I did not come to Tomsk for nothing. This night will mean much to Russia. Work will be done that will avenge a terrible wrong. All you need do is to remain quiet and do not attempt to interfere."

"I dare not," he said. "You have the seal of the czar! It commands all to obey you! I obey!"

She left him, staring and wondering, and went to Neslerov. The governor was sleeping. He opened his eyes as he heard the door open.

"The hiss as he tried to regain his strength. He would have killed me," he said.

"Yes, I!" she answered quietly. "You are asleep. It will not be long."

"What will you do?" he asked, with a gasp.

"My work," she answered. "I shall release him—Vladimir."

She made a tremendous effort to rise and snatched her, but fell with a groan to the floor. Quickly Olga, taking a pistol from her pocket, ran across the hall to Itzig.

"You!" he cried as she entered. "You brought me wine that was drugged, and my prisoner escaped."

"True," said Olga. "And now the governor when they visited him. You know where he is."

"You have no authority!" said Itzig, cowering before the pistol.

"I have this."

She showed him the paper. His face grew white, and he sank shivering to the floor.

"The seal of the czar! Oh, princess, I did not know! I obey! I will do anything!"

"Help open the door."

The hinges were soon off and the door was opened. The iron gate resisted the united efforts of the two, but they sawed out the lock.

"Take the lantern!" commanded the princess.

Trembling in every fiber, Itzig lighted a lantern.

"Lead the way to the dungeon where Vladimir is concealed."

"I obey."

"And I will guard you, princess," said the officer.

Thus they descended the stairs, Itzig leading with the lantern, Olga following and the officer close behind her ready to protect her. Potent was the seal of the czar.

They found the giant blacksmith in his chains. The hunger he felt had not yet sapped his strength. The key the princess had taken from its peg soon released him.

"Come!" she said.

"But who are you, and what does this mean?" he demanded.

"Come! We have no time to waste with words. Tonight you have the work of your life to do. Come!"

The four ascended, and Itzig extinguished his lantern. The eyes of Vladimir blinked as he entered the great hall, which was kept lighted all night.

"You are Vladimir," said the princess. "I am Olga of the Neslerovs. Do you know the story of the picture?"

"The little picture," cried Vladimir eagerly—"the little one that Papa Paulpoff said he found? Yes; he told it to me and to the American one day in the hut at Tivolofsky."

"Then you know the truth. The American was to go to Perm and start the investigation."

"Yes, but he was brought here."

"I released him last night. He went from here to Tivolofsky to bring Papa Paulpoff to tell his story before the governor general, who has not yet arrived. Jansky, the superintendent of police, and Unseth have gone to fetch him. They will kill him; they will not risk taking him alive. It is your duty to ride to Tivolofsky—ride as for your own life—and save the American and Papa Paulpoff. Bring them here. Do you understand?"

"Yes; but a horse."

"Lieutenant, in the name of the czar, the fleetest horse in the stables for Vladimir!"

"I obey—the fleetest horse."

"You must be furnished," said Olga. "Will you eat?"

"Eat! With the American and Papa Paulpoff in danger! No; but a drink of wine."

He watched her as she stepped into Neslerov's room. He saw the governor. "Neslerov!" he said. "Is he dead?"

"No! I drugged his liquor. Here is wine. It is not drugged. I drank it myself."

He drained the glass, and the officer entered.

"The horse is at the door, princess. I weep no one at the stables. I saddle the steed myself."

"Good. You will be a captain tomorrow. Now, Vladimir, go!"

He mounted and was off. He followed the line of the new railway and could not lose his way. His horse was fast, the best horse in Neslerov's stable.

"For the American! For Frances! For the honor of Graslov!" muttered Vladimir as he strove to increase his horse's speed.

He passed through villages asleep under the bright stars. The hoofs of his horse rang out on the pebbles of one road or sank into the mud of another. But on he went. Tivolofsky, like all the other villages, was asleep. Its quiet was rudely disturbed by the hammering of the iron shoes as the horse bore him through the silent streets. Right well he knew the way to the hut where Mamma Paulpoff was murdered. Two horses stood before the door. His own dashed up and whinnied. They were from the governor's stables. Like a madman he leaped from the saddle to the ground. He heard shouts, a pistol shot.

It was something like a demon that Jansky and Unseth saw coming in like a whirlwind. In a corner crouch-

