

# THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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than any other man on earth and that you hated him worst. But I wanted you to marry him because he was good and noble and a rising man, a brave man and altogether a—

"Hero and angel in one. What did the prince say to that?"

"He only repeated what he had said before."

"Then what?"

"I said—why—now, don't get angry at your old dad—I said you were a self-willed creature and acted on your own whims."

"That is nothing to get angry about. I do. But I fear that between us we have sent the Paulpoffs to their doom."

"For goodness sake, how?"

"It was natural that—"

"It wasn't natural at all. What did I say—that have you done—to cause Vladimir Paulpoff to plot against the czar?"

"Heaven! Are you so blind? The Paulpoffs are as innocent of this charge as you or I. It was against Vladimir the plot was laid."

"I begin to catch your meaning. Who was it—Neslerov?"

"It is impossible to say whether he did or not, but I suspect him. You remember the day he was here. I met him as I came home from the bazaar, where I had been buying books for Vladimir. I did not, of course, suspect that he had been talking with you about marrying me. Unwittingly I told him they were for Vladimir and asked him also to take an interest in him."

"I also told him of a blacksmith in whom you were taking a great interest. He has put that and your independence together and has imagined Vladimir. Well?"

"I had my fears that something was said about Vladimir. It was so clearly a plot that I knew the jealousy of Neslerov had been aroused. When I learned what had been done, I waited two days at Perm to see Governor Gushav, but he was away, and I could not see him. It was the superintendent of police who gave me the little information I got. It seems that an inspector discovered—so they say—that nihilists were meeting in the forge. Letters were found on them which implicated Vladimir. There was a trial, so it was claimed, and Vladimir was found guilty. I am sure Vladimir would have sent to us if he could."

"I don't want to get mixed up in any nihilist scrape."

"But you will help Vladimir, will you not?"

"What can I do?"

"You can at least stop at Perm and see the governor. It will not delay us long."

"I will do that, certainly; but I don't fancy there is much use talking to Gushav. He is a stern old soldier and has no sympathy for lovers or plotters."

"But he is just and honorable."

"Yes, I am sure of that."

"Then come. We will go to Perm together and see him."

"Well, I suppose I must do as you say, but we are about ready to start for the Obl. We can stop at Perm for a day."

"That will do."

The preparations were hastily made, and four days more saw them at Perm. The governor was at home and received Mr. Gordon. The name being an open sesame anywhere in Russia, Mr. Gordon plunged at once into the matter of Vladimir's arrest.

"That he was arrested, if the circumstances were suspicious, I grant, was proper enough," said Mr. Gordon. "But was there a fair trial? Pardon me if I speak plainly. Your institutions of

justice here are quite different from ours at home. I have known where men were hustled off to Siberia with no semblance of a trial."

"But they were guilty," said the governor, with a smile.

"Yes; I believe in all the instances that came under my observation they were."

"It was the same in this case. The Paulpoffs had been using their isolated position for base ends. A circle of the brotherhood of nihilists congregated there. Letters were found upon them. These letters were all signed by Vladimir Paulpoff."

"Did he admit anything?"

"They never do. It is only when a man is captured in the very act of assassination, and he knows he cannot escape the death penalty, that he admits his crime and glories in it. The Paulpoffs denied everything, of course."

"Poor Vladimir! He was as innocent as I am," broke in Frances.

"Impossible. The letters were proof enough."

"Are the letters here?"

"No; unfortunately, they were carried away by one of the men who escaped."

"Then you did not see the letters?"

"No; I regret that I did not."

"What was said concerning them?"

"Their import was given by Inspector Jansky and Prince Neslerov, who found them. Their testimony so pleased the minister of justice that Jansky has been promoted to be superintendent of the police at Tomsk. You seem to think there is some doubt of the guilt of these people," said the governor, turning to Mr. Gordon.

"For my part I am quite sure they are innocent. My daughter has been interested in them since the railway ran through Perm. It is not like them to plot. They are too simple and ignorant."

"But Vladimir is not. He is shrewd and intelligent. He has been a reader of books."

"Yes; my daughter furnishes them."

"I am not at all doubtful myself," said the governor, with a grim smile.

"Were I, I would begin an open investigation at once. But, you understand, the accused was a prince and the governor of Tomsk, and the minister of justice has set the seal of his approval on the thing. It is a delicate matter for me to reopen. But I promise you this: I will guardedly look into the thing, and if I see any chance for doubt for your sake I will do what I can to help the Paulpoffs."

"Thank you. That is all we can ask," said Mr. Gordon. "We may see them



She looked out at the savage faces and shuddered.

at Tomsk. I may say to them that your excellency is working to know the truth?"

"You may."

The interview ended, and Mr. Gordon and Frances continued their journey. The first person they saw when they entered the train was Neslerov. The mark made by Frances' bullet was still there, but he had not, to all appearances, been seriously injured. He looked curiously at the two travelers, as if wondering when the outbreak of wrath from Gordon would come. But that gentleman walked up to him and held out his hand.

"How do you do, your excellency?" he said. "We are going to Tomsk together, it seems."

Neslerov was almost stunned, but he took the hand. Was it possible that Frances had not told her father of the scene in Paulpoff's cottage?

It was so, and Frances had her own reasons. She loved the liberty she had for years been permitted to enjoy. But she knew that if dangers and narrow escapes came to her father's ears her liberty would soon come to an end.

It was a long journey, and a weary one as well. Day after day they passed through the same scenes, crossed rivers on bridges that had been built by Jack Denton, Frances' old playmate, and the strong structures perhaps caused her to think of the hardworking young man who built them and was now planning a very large and excellent bridge across the Obl. But what-

ever was in Frances' mind, did not find expression through her lips, for her father and Neslerov smoked and chatted and played cards with two officers going to garrisons on the border.

Frances said nothing more about the prince, for in the place to which they were going he was supreme, and to involve her father with him in a quarrel would have been to invite a disaster similar to that which had overtaken the Paulpoffs.

Day after day Frances leaned her head against the glass window and watched the passing scenes. At last they reached the Obl. The train crossed the border into that province, which was almost as much Neslerov's own as though he were a king.

There were but few passengers by that time, for the road had not been finished, and the train must stop at the Obl. Frances, half dreaming, lay back, looking at the great expanse of tundra, the new villages springing up, the old huts that were now deserted and the waste of railway supplies along the track.

The prince had asked her father to go into another car and smoke. This left her alone, and she closed her eyes and dozed.

She woke up with a start. A hand was on her shoulder. She saw Neslerov bending over her. A smile of triumph was on his face. Frightened, she glanced out of the window. The car was still. She looked forward—the rest of the train had gone on.

"What has happened?" she cried, leaping to her feet. "Where is the train? Where is my father?"

"Speeding toward the Obl, my dear," said Neslerov. "Unfortunately, at this point the couplings between this car and the next were broken, and the officers of the train, not missing you or me—for I had just come in with a cup of coffee for you—left us and went on. We are in a wild place, surrounded by various tribes of the remarkable collection of savages over whom I am governor. But I am governor, and if you will obey me I promise that you will reach Tomsk in safety."

Frances leaned back weakly and stared.

"My father gone?" she cried, and as she looked out at the savage faces that passed and looked at the car in wonder she shuddered.

"Unfortunately, your father was in a forward car. It was with his consent I came to your side. Let us realize the 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 are! 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 the side of the car. A short distance, on the banks of the stream, she saw a wretched, miserable

CHAPTER VI.  
AN AMERICAN GIRL'S PLUCK.

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 Obl.

"Now," said Neslerov, as the girl sat 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."

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able 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 Obl."

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

"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. Show 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 muttered. "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 served herself to meet him as his footstep sounded on the platform. The door opened, and he entered with a bowl of roast, 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 childish! Let us get over 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 toward them with his bur-

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