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Thos. Coffey

Publisher CATHOLIC RECORD.

NARKA, THE NIHILIST.

By KATHLEEN O'MEARA.

CHAPTER III.

The wolf hunt proved a failure. The sportsmen came home without having seen or scented the game of which they had gone in search. It had been discovered, however, that a peasant in one of Larchoff's villages had trapped a cub two days before, and carried it off to his father in the village beyond Yrakow. This discovery was a great relief to the population, and calmed their terrors by giving a natural explanation of the premature appearance of the unwelcome visitor. It was evidently the mother that had come down to look for her stolen cub.

"All the same," Narka remarked, "I wish the week were past, and that we were safe over the adventure."

"You don't seriously believe that it forebodes evil, mademoiselle?" said M. de Beaurillon, looking at her with amused incredulity.

"I seriously believe in precedent and tradition," replied Narka. "It is a thing unprecedented for the wolf to come down before the snow without some calamity suddenly following. In the Prince's childhood a wolf was seen in the village one night in October, and the next day a fire broke out, and two thirds of the houses were burnt down."

"That is conclusive evidence, certainly; the wolf was evidently an incendiary," observed M. de Beaurillon, gravely.

"It is very well for you to laugh, Gaston," said Sibyl; "but you have your superstitions in Burgundy too, and a score of precedents that everybody at Beaurillon believes in. I wish we were safe out of the week."

"A week is the limit of the danger?" said Gaston, with provoking coolness.

"If it is not fulfilled within that time, the wolf is voted a false prophet?"

"It so happens that hitherto it always has been fulfilled within the week," replied Sibyl.

M. de Beaurillon in his secret soul hoped that it would be fulfilled this week. He was beginning to feel the place so deadly dull that it would have been a mercy if the wolf brought any change to enliven things. Even a fire in the village would be better than nothing. Gaston had only been three weeks at Yrakow, and it was palling on him horribly. The magnificent vastness of the castle, the barbaric splendor of the interior, the immensity of the grounds, the immensity of the forest, the scale of immensity on which everything within and without was constructed, made the sense of desolation produced by the smallness of the social element proportionately immense. The immobility of life in this enormous palace, with its galleries as long as streets, and its rooms as big as courts, and its halls as vast as ordinary squares, was overpowering. There were seventy servants in the household, but they made no more life in the place than the flies on the pane. M. de Beaurillon sauntered through the vast apartments, and smoked countless cigars, and felt as if he were walking in an enchanted castle where everybody was under a spell of somnolence. Basil was an excellent host, and did all he could to wake up the sleeping inhabitants, but Basil himself was under the spell. He did not understand the need for being always awake; he went spasmodically from mercurial activity to absolute idleness, from hunting a wolf, and similar outdoor exercises, to lounging by the hour on the flat of his back with a cigar in his mouth; he spent hours dreaming and writing in his private study, emerging thence in alternate moods of high excitement and profound melancholy. M. de Beaurillon was very fond of his brother-in-law, but he did not understand him; Basil, for all his physical strength and reckless courage, seemed to him more a woman than a man, a creature made of contradictions, of impulses, of passionate emotions and exaggerations.

The day after the hunt, Marguerite and Narka went out for a ride. As they passed through the village, Narka pointed out the cottage where she and her mother resided since Sibyl's marriage.

"You must take me to pay a visit to Madame Larik as soon as she's well enough," said Marguerite. "When will that be?"

"In a few days, I hope," Narka replied, looking pleased and grateful.

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About three years ago my husband was very ill, and I had frequently occasion to rise in the night and go for a doctor or to the druggist. In my hurry I often neglected to properly clothe myself, and contracted several heavy colds, which turned at last to chronic catarrh. I tried doctors, who helped me, but did not cure me, and several special catarrh medicines. I was relieved but not cured. I was suffering intolerably when Mr. Shuff recommended me to try CHASE'S CATARRH CURE, and it began at once to help, and in about two months had entirely cured me. I cannot speak too highly of this remarkable medicine, and cheerfully recommend it to all sufferers from catarrh. The blower included is a great help to sufferers.

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"She has been much better this last week, and has had good nights; that is why I have been able to stay at the castle. It is seldom that her rheumatism is so bad at this season, poor, dear mother!"

"Ought she not to go to some German baths for it?" said Marguerite.

"Yes, she ought; and I hope some day to be able to take her to Aix-la-Chapelle. Some day sounds vague," Narka added, in answer to a look in Marguerite's face; "but we are waiting on a legacy that is to come to us from an old relative of mother's. I have never seen him, so it is not very cynical of me to look forward to enjoy his money—is it? And the doctor assures me Aix would do wonders for my mother."

"And then you will come on and spend the autumn at Beaurillon and the winter in Paris."

"That would be a charming programme," said Narka, smiling, "but mother has a great desire to spend a month in Munich, her native place, and then to make a little tour in Germany; and I don't know whether the legacy would admit of all that and a journey to France. Though, with our simple habits, a little money would go a long way."

Marguerite had lost sight of this fact in Narka's position, that she and her mother were very poor, dependent almost wholly on the generosity of the Zorokoffs, who had given them a cottage and a large garden.

"But you have travelled already?" Marguerite said.

"I have been to St. Petersburg several times with the Princess; we spent some winters there, and had masters. It was there chiefly that I learned singing. The Princess had me taught by a great Italian master from Rome. What a delightful man he was, and how I did enjoy his lessons! We used to go twice a week to the opera—your aunt was so good to me! She was an angel, the Princess. I was always sorry she was not Russian."

Marguerite smiled. "I hope you will come soon to France and stay with us," she said. "I do so long to convert you!"

"That would be a cruel trick to play me. I should be the either sent to Siberia or put into a dungeon for the rest of my life."

"Oh! I did not mean a religious conversion; I meant to convert you to being a little more French and a little less Russian. They would not put you in prison for that?"

"No, they would not put me in prison for that. But ought you not to be satisfied with having converted Sibyl? Don't you think she is a very creditable convert?"

"On the whole; but she has many heresies still; she maintains, for instance, that the climate here is better than in France, that she never felt so cold in St. Petersburg as she does in Paris. She also clings to the belief that a paternal Muscovite government is the best in the world. There is only one point on which her conversion is entirely satisfactory. She admits that French husbands are perfection. Would it be hopeless to try to convert you to that belief, Narka?"

"Quite!"—spoken very emphatically.

"How heartily you say that! I don't wonder you owe a grudge to the race for having stolen away Sibyl. What a loss she must have been to you!"

"And not to me only. Her departure left all these poor people"—glancing round over the country—"glancing round over the country—"at the mercy of the Jews and the bureaucrats who prey on them like wolves."

"But don't the Prince and Basil protect them?"

"Basil does what he can; but he has not much power. As to the Prince, he is nearly always at St. Petersburg, looking after the future. Meanwhile the Stanovoi, who is a grasping, cruel man, has it all his own way; he and Larchoff are in league—a pair of devils."

"The Prince must be a very odd man," Marguerite said, looking confidential. "My maid tells me stories about his goings on when he is here that would make one think he was stark, staring mad."

Narka laughed. "I dare say he would be looked up as a lunatic in any country but Russia; but his madness is harmless enough—more so, indeed, than his sanity. He keeps every body in commotion day and night while he is here. He never goes to bed or undresses at night; he smokes and drops asleep in a chair, sitting bolt upright; every now and then he falls off his chair and bangs himself on the ground; and then he starts up, seizes his gun, that is always beside him, rushes to the window, and fires out at the night. He does this four times, rushing to the four sides of the house as fast as he can go, and throwing open the windows with as much noise as he can make. Sibyl and Basil had the greatest difficulty to prevent him doing it this last time; they said you would all be so frightened, and they should not know what to say to you to explain it."

Marguerite's eyes grew round with amazement. "And was that why the Prince ran away in such a hurry?"

"Probably that had something to do with his flight. He says he can never sleep a night through here without exercising himself in fire-arms, and he pretends it is protection to the village against wolves and Larchoff."

"He certainly would pass for a lunatic in France," said Marguerite, her face breaking into dimples of suppressed laughter. "And used he go on in that way when Aunt Isabelle was alive?"

"Not so badly. She kept him in order. He gave her his word once

that he would not shoot at the night for a month; but one night he jumped out of bed and emptied his revolver through the window as fast as he could shoot; the Princess rushed in and caught him in the act, and he declared he had been asleep and dreaming, and had no intention of breaking his word. He went back to bed; but presently she and all of us heard a noise from down-stairs of some one howling in pain. We all rushed out to see what was the matter, and there in the middle of the hall was the Prince whipping himself with all his might, and roaring like a bull. He said he could not go to sleep with remorse for having broken his word, and felt he must get up and whip himself as he would have had one of the servants whipped for offending in the same way. The Princess besought him to stop, but he would not; he went on whipping and yelling till he had given himself the number of stripes he thought proper, and then he went up to bed; his back was scarred with welts, and hurt him for days."

Marguerite was seized with such an immoderate fit of laughter that she had to rein in her horse and go at a foot's pace till it was over. "Why, he is as mad as any maniac in Charenton!" she exclaimed, when she was able to speak.

"He is a little eccentric," said Narka; "but his eccentricities are all very harmless. The Princess kept them within bounds, and so did Sibyl in a lesser degree."

"I don't wonder you miss Sibyl." Marguerite said.

"There is one good thing that has come to me out of Sibyl's departure," Narka resumed. "It has led to mother's and my living in the village. You can't get really to sympathize with the sufferings of people, and help them, until you come close enough to share them; we never realize them so long as we are in a fool's paradise of luxury and ease. The pain of poverty is like every other pain; nothing but personal experience can make us understand it, and teach us the kind of relief it wants. It is like a man born in the tropics trying to realize cold from a description in a book. He never could do it. No description could give him the physical sensation of feet and hands tingling and perishing, of blood chilled in his veins, of eyes blinded and smarting in a bitter icy wind. He must leave the tropics and go up into a Northern climate to know what it all means. To live in a great palace amidst luxury and abundance of every sort is like living in the tropics. I never realized what our wretched peasants had to endure until I came to live amongst them in the village, and saw how they suffer in every way—from poverty, from the climate, from ignorance, and, above all, from the cruelty of the Jews and the government officials."

"But is there no redress? Is there no justice to be had for them?"

"Father Christopher keeps telling them they will get justice in the next world."

"Even in this there are laws to protect the weak against the strong. God has not left Himself without witnesses on the earth."

"I wonder where His witnesses are in Russia?" Narka laughed.

"The people themselves are His witnesses; they believe and they hope in Him."

"Then why does He let them be crushed and tortured and destroyed?"

"Oh, Narka, that pagan 'why' is always in your mouth!"

"It is in the mouth of the people everywhere—everywhere. They are downtrodden, and oppressed, and made to suffer injustice."

"Not in France," protested Marguerite. "The people are not downtrodden there."

"They are in Russia. Why are they? Why does God permit it? If His justice is anywhere on earth, it ought to be everywhere—in Russia as well as in France."

"Wrong cannot be made right in a day. We must be patient."

"We are patient, heroically patient—under the wrongs and sufferings of others." The passionate irony in Narka's voice sounded more bitter than the words themselves.

"I am sure we are trying to make the world less bad and life less hard on the poor," said Marguerite. "Don't you think that they have much less to suffer now than they had a thousand years ago—or even a hundred?"

"In France, I dare say, thanks to your glorious Revolution."

"Oh, Narka! you call it glorious? That dreadful reign of terror, when the people rose up against God and murdered the King!" Marguerite felt again that vague repulsion which had made her more than once shrink away from Narka.

"The people rose against a reign of tyranny that had ended by driving them mad. Would that Russia could follow the example of France, and have her revolution!"

Marguerite was shocked at the passionate hatred expressed in Narka's tone and words; but she remembered her father dropping on the road into exile, and her young brother dying in Siberia, and revulsion gave way to pity.

"If you ever make a revolution in Russia," she said, "let it be a revolution of love, not of hate."

Narka laughed. "And burst our chains by kissing them."

"There is nothing love might not do if people would only believe in it," said Marguerite; "if only they would let it rule the world instead of hatred. If they would let it have its way like the blessed sunshine it would turn this world into a paradise. I wonder why people can't believe in love?"

As she threw back her head, and put this question to the winter sky, there was a light in her eyes that contrasted strikingly with the flame in Narka's—the light of love and the flame of hate—hate just in its cause and cruelly provoked, but even in those beautiful eyes its effect was repulsive.

Narka was surprised to see what strength of feeling lay beneath the bright, buoyant, and seemingly thoughtless happiness of the young French girl. Sibyl was right: there were slumbering forces underlying Marguerite's nature which only needed certain opportunities to develop. Narka felt this recognition forced upon her, and she would not perhaps have acknowledged that the discovery caused her something like a sense of alarm or disappointment. The two girls, as by tacit consent, put their horses into a canter, and rode on a long way without exchanging a word.

At last Narka said, "We must not forget that we have to get back." She looked at her watch, and saw that it was 4 o'clock. They turned their horses' heads homeward.

In those Northeastern countries the twilight is short, and night closes in almost as suddenly as the dropping of a curtain. When they re-entered the village of Yrakow it was growing dark; the moon had risen, and a few stars had sprung out. Just as the castle came in sight the two riders were startled by shrieks that seemed to come from the forest. They pulled up their horses and stopped to listen. In a moment the groom, whom a curve in the road had hidden, came trotting up, and said something in Russian which evidently alarmed Narka. She was going to turn back, when some further information from the servant caused her to change her intention, and she went on.

"What has happened?" inquired Marguerite.

"He does not know, but he saw Sophie Gorff running from the road without anything on her head."

"Was she running from the wolf, do you think?"

"That is not likely; the wolf would have been pursuing her." Narka stopped her horse again and hesitated; but after a short parley with the groom she rode on again.

"Sophie is out of harm's way now, at any rate," she said. "Dmitri saw her cross the road toward her own house. What could it have been?"

Moved by lingering curiosity, they both cast a backward glance toward the forest. As they looked, they heard the report of a gun.

"Who can be shooting at this hour?" exclaimed Narka. "It must be as black as night in the forest."

Presently they saw the figure of a man carrying a gun emerging from the road adjoining the park.

"It is Basil, I do believe," said Marguerite. "I dare say it was he who frightened Sophie." She called out and made signs with her whip, but Basil held on his way, and strode across the park without looking round.

"How stupid of him not to hear!" said Marguerite.

"Perhaps he hears, but does not want to come out of his way."

"Is he such a boor as to do that? No Frenchman alive would be capable of anything so rude," protested Marguerite, indignantly.

Narka's face positively beamed as she looked at her. "You think Frenchmen are so much more gallant? You think Russians are boors?"

"I think Basil is behaving like a boor, and I shall tell him so," said Marguerite, with the prettiest show of offended dignity.

Narka gave a light laugh that sounded musically sweet.

"I want to stop a few minutes here," Marguerite said, as they came to the little Catholic chapel. "Do you mind going on alone, and leaving Dmitri to mind my horse?"

"Why may I not wait and come in with you?" said Narka.

"Oh! if you don't mind."

They both alighted and went in.

The chapel was merely an oratory attached to the house where Father Christopher lived. It had been built for him by the Princess when his office of tutor to Basil came to an end. The Roman Catholics at Yrakow were few, and these with others scattered through neighboring villages on Prince Zorokoff's estates were the persons who profited by the old priest's ministry. His congregation was composed chiefly of foreigners—professors and servants—residing in families or living in the village; but, small as it was, it gave him a good deal to do, owing to the distances over which it was scattered. He had to visit the sick in places a long way off, and these distant visits were one of the whips that Larchoff held over the Father's head. They afforded an outward semblance of truth to the charge of proselytizing which Larchoff was constantly threatening to bring against him, and which in Russia is regarded as a heinous crime, visited, like high treason, with the penalty of death.

The little chapel was almost dark; there was no light but the red glow of the sanctuary lamp. A few worshippers were kneeling in the shadows, waiting for Father Christopher to come into the confessional. Marguerite knelt down at the altar rail, and was at once absorbed in her devotions. Narka, from a *prois dieu* a little behind, watched her with an odd mixture of admiration, envy, and satisfaction. The faith that could thus absorb a human being in an instant must be very strong—too strong to be shaken by any earthly feelings, by any mundane interests, by any promptings of passion. Narka had had a glimpse into Mar-

guerite's nature, and that glimpse had shown her, beneath the light child-like exterior, a woman endowed with a supernatural creed which makes the weakest creature invulnerable against self, fitting her to cope victoriously with perils against which mere natural strength is frail and faithless. How fervently the girl prayed! In the red light of the lamp above her Narka could see her lips moving rapidly. She envied her being able to pray like that. But it was easy for Marguerite to do so; it was easy for her to believe in God's love, and call Him Father, and ask that His will might be done. He had not tried her faith by injustice and cruel wrong; He had not confounded her hope and turned it to despair. This loss of faith in an Almighty love was perhaps the bitterest suffering which the hard ways of God and man inflicted on their helpless victims, Narka thought, as she watched the happy young French girl praying.

They had not been many minutes in the chapel when Father Christopher entered from the sacristy, and after kneeling a moment before the tabernacle, went into the confessional.

Marguerite stood up, and whispered to Narka.

"Would there be time for me to wait and go to confession now?"

"Oh no," Narka replied; "it is too late. You had better come to-morrow morning. You will find him before Mass."

Marguerite assented, and they went out and rode home.

TO BE CONTINUED.

The Bible.