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THE ACE OF CLUBS.

A ROMANCE OF RUSSIA AND SIBERIA.

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CHAPTER XXII.

Not ten minutes had elapsed since Lanina and Dr. Haas had left Jana, when Helen rushed in, pale with excitement, to tell her all she had heard.

"I hardly know how I escaped. I waited a whole hour for Nicholas, but he did not return. I asked one of the gendarmes who generally are very kind to me, to call the secretary out. Ah, here you are, you nice little damsel! he shouted at me. 'Clear out from here, and never show yourself again in this house. We have all of us gotten such a scolding on your account! Here comes your betrothed, and quite unnecessary tells the colonel that you have been here. Is that the way you reward our goodness?' And thus he talked on, till he shut the door and bade me go instantly? Oh, countess, save the count; for God's sake, save Nicholas!"

Jana was terrified, but not specially surprised. Since that scene in the coach she had never again fully trusted Palkin, in spite of all his assurances of boundless devotion. She had, however, kept silence, hoping thus to keep him from injuring her or her husband hereafter. Now she quietly rose and said to Helen:

"I shall at once go to the governor. So just a man will surely not deny us his support. Do you, in the meantime, go into town; you will surely meet my husband and Dr. Haas. Tell them all, and beg them at once to come here. You will easily find the doctor, because everybody likes and honors him for the good he has already done."

Helen could not recover; she was still trembling all over with excitement and fear. Jana tried to calm and to encourage her, and did not leave her till she had at least partially succeeded. Then both these good and noble women left the house.

Irkutsk has, like most large Russian cities, a main street, which consists of splendid, symmetrically built palaces. From this street smaller ones branch off with poor log-houses, and then follow mud-holes and so-called suburbs. Every great town, however, has at least one square built after European models.

The main street of Irkutsk crossed the street in which Jana lived, and which at the corner especially looked very much like the main street. Seven superb mansions rose on both sides. They were of massive structure, had several stories, and possessed real architectural merits. At the house of the countess the symmetry ceased. After it followed only poor, smoke-blackened huts, and the end of the street encountered a hill utterly uninhabited.

The house which immediately adjoined Jana's dwelling, although looking very insignificant and even poverty-stricken, was in reality not so badly arranged. It was a one-story log-house, surrounded by a small garden. Here lived the captain of gendarmes. Jana did not know this. Her servants were all aware of the fact, but they did not know of the ill-feeling that existed between the two families.

When she left Miss Jana's house, she went to see if she could persuade the countess to see the count of Dr. Haas. But she found the countess's house locked, and she was obliged to return at once.

She then went to the governor's house, but found it also locked. She was obliged to return at once. She then went to the doctor's house, but found it also locked. She was obliged to return at once.

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Helen tried again to get to the door, but Caroline prevented her. She remained standing on the threshold, laughing loud and cruelly. She said:

"You shall not get away from here till my husband returns; he has just gone out on business about your master!"

"But that is vulgar," cried Helen. "I am in a great hurry!"

"Ha, ha!" laughed Caroline. "Just wait, child, and amuse yourself as you can."

In an instant she had slipped out, closed the door behind her, drew the key out of the lock and left Helen imprisoned.

In the meantime Jana had driven to the governor's palace and asked for an audience. The governor sent an excuse; he could not possibly receive her. Jana begged and implored—in vain. She next hurried to all the upper officials who had been kind to her. No one received her. Two hours she had wasted thus, and now returned in great anguish and utterly exhausted. Lina told her that Dr. Haas had been waiting for some time.

"Your husband has been arrested," he told Jana as soon as she entered. "The persecution begins anew. After I had gotten the money from the bank I accompanied the count to his dwelling. We found a gendarme there, quite at home. He took no excuse. The count had been caught away from his house. The soldier, of course, acted under orders. It was lucky I had money, or matters might have been much worse."

Conflict had a different effect on Jana from the general effect; it roused her energies and inspired her instead of casting her down.

"We have nothing more to hope from the authorities. If law and order forsake us we must seek help with the rebels—what else can we do? Doctor, procure me a man's costume! I shall go to-night to the Tartar mound. My husband cannot invoke Miller's assistance from his prison—it is my duty to do it for him!"

"Oh countess, how can you! You alone! At night! Consider to what danger you expose yourself!"

"Do not prevent me, doctor; I must do it."

"Let me go in your place."

"Miller does not know you. You would make no impression upon him, while I personally, to his mind, his conscience! He must obey me!"

"No one can resist you, countess! But at least do not forbid me going with you. I shall accompany you to the mound!"

"She held out her hand and said simply, 'I thank you!'"

The nights at the North, where all life ceases and every noise is silenced, are infinitely more impressive and grander than those of more southern countries. As soon as the vast plains of Siberia are overshadowed, you hear your own breathing; you notice your heart's pulsation; you count the echo of your footsteps on the hard snow. The ear is susceptible of perceiving the faintest noise.

The whole Tartar mound trembled when Jana, at 10 o'clock at night, three times repeated the magic name:

"Ienar! Ienar! Ienar!"

The name came back echoed from the hills and the mountains, from the valleys and the frozen waters of the Angara, like three shots fired from a mortar. Then all was still as before.

When she appeared in the full costume of a colonel, she was met by the faithful doctor.

Yet he found no difficulty in leaving the house, for the doctor was subject to the same weakness as the countess.

For a long time might have passed, but no one would have noticed it, had it not been for the fact that the countess was so weak.

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He repeated the same unmistakable sign. She tried once more to make herself understood, repeating very slowly all she had said. In vain! The poor woman sank overwhelmed, on her knees.

"Oh, God, enlighten me that I may know what to do! Must we perish thus?"

Haas now walked up to the native, and touching his arm, he said: "Ienar!" The Siberian repeated the name. Then the doctor sat down on the snow and tried to slide down the hill. The Gungus laughed joyfully and disappeared in a crevice of the rocks.

"He will take me to his leader. If that man does not speak Russian he will at least know Miller."

"Oh, doctor, certainly Providence has sent you to me. Return now to town, I'll go with this man."

"No, countess, you cannot do that; I demand it in my quality as your protector! I am responsible to the count for your safety. Believe me, besides, the count might not like your going with this man! You are a lady, and have to think of that!"

Jana at last understood the doctor, and gave him her hand, saying:

"You are right, doctor. Go, then, with God! If prayers and threats fail use money; use it lavishly. I leave the fate of my husband in your hands. I shall do, on my part, what I can. We have hardly 48 hours before us; let us make good use of them."

The Siberian appeared as suddenly as before, but now with a smart sleigh and reindeer. Haas took leave of Jana, sat down by the Gungus, and whispered once more the magic word, "Ienar!"

The Siberian looked assent, and whistled fiercely. The reindeer flew down the slope to the river bed, and then galloped along on the smooth ice as upon a level road.

Jana remained standing still, almost lifeless, following the quickly vanishing sleigh as long as her eyes could discern the faint outlines. Then she knelt down on the snow and sent a fervent prayer to God's throne on high in behalf of Vladimir and the doctor. After having crossed herself she rose and returned to Irkutsk.

CHAPTER XXIII.

In Vladimir's hut the twilight had long changed into night. More than a quarter of an hour Nicholas Popoff had waited for the count, according to his promise, paying no attention to the increasing darkness. At first he wondered why Lanina had not appeared, because he had charged Helen very specially to mention the hour at which he would be there. He had obtained two hours' leave and no more, and knew perfectly how dangerous this step might become for him and for Palkin himself.

"Oh! these women!" he thought to himself. "No doubt Helen has blundered. I ought to have done it myself. Why, is it perfectly dark?"

Nicholas rose, looked for a piece of light wood, kindled it with the aid of a match, and put it into a beam. Thus the smoldering, flickering light illumined the hut at least after a fashion. No other light is known in the Siberian villages.

"Why does he not appear?" Nicholas continued his musings. "I have been waiting an hour now. What can have happened to him?"

He waited half an hour longer. As no one came, he thought it high time to return home, so as to cause no suspicion of his prolonged absence.

He went to the door, opened it, and started back with a cry of surprise and horror. Palkin was standing on the threshold, and behind him he saw the forms of several men, who were walking up and down.

"Colonel! You here!" he exclaimed. The colonel walked close up to him and pushed him with his whole strength back into the room.

"Are you surprised?"

"Where is the count? What do you want here?"

"Ha! ha! The inquiry begins! Well, I can give you an answer. I am here to take those documents which I need (not with them! The count will never return here!)"

"Why?"

"Unnecessary curiosity! Not with those papers or—"

"That is treachery!"

"Call it what you choose! I have no time for discussion. Hand me the papers!"

Now Popoff saw clearly that he had been caught in a trap, and that Palkin was his enemy. With the strength of despair he seized the colonel by the throat, crying:

"You shall at least pay for the others!"

The colonel, however, a man of Herculean strength, pushed the poor, weak man easily back, seized his hands, and pressed them till the fingers were stiff, and he sank down on the floor.

"People! Here!"

In a moment two gendarmes had seized Popoff, who was crying for help with all his might, hoping to attract the attention of neighbors or passers-by, and bound him with ropes.

"Now search him accurately! This time nothing shall escape me!"

Nicholas, however, when thus confronting imminent danger, had recovered his presence of mind, and a scornful smile even played on his lips. The gendarmes began to search him. He was stripped of his clothing; even his hair was thoroughly searched. Nothing was found but a tobacco-bag and a penknife. Palkin was foaming with rage.

"You think, perhaps, you will cheat me once more. Well, we'll see. All has not been tried yet. And if I have to kill you I must have those papers. Speak, where are they hid?"

Nicholas silently shrugged his shoulders. This gesture made the colonel furious.

"Tie him to that bench and fetch a nagaika!"

Nicholas turned deadly pale. The nagaika is a knot, a strap of leather with two knots, the end of which is forked, like the tongue of a serpent. After a hundred blows the flesh is generally gone from the bones, and no man is able to bear five hundred blows.

Nicholas was tied to the bench, and they only waited for the man who had been sent for the knot, which was kept at the inspector's house.

"Obey me!" said Palkin to Popoff. "You have a moment's time yet to consider. Don't be obstinate! Tell me your secret."

"You may murder me, wretched hangman," said Popoff, "but you shall never learn my secret. I'd rather bite off my tongue, you wretched spy and traitor! I shall yet live to see you overthrown!"

Palkin laughed cruelly and sat down, facing the bench. The nagaika was brought in.

"Well! Now begin and strike slowly, so he may have time to reflect and give me the answer I want."

The knot whizzed through the air and fell upon the bare back of the wretched victim. Instantly a dark blue mark appeared, and Popoff uttered a heartrending cry. He bit into the wood of the bench and did not complain further.

After the 20th stroke the blood poured forth in streams, and large fragments of flesh were torn off. The pain was too fearful. Nicholas let go the bench in which his teeth had made deep indentations and began to cry madly. Palkin was calmly smoking his cigar.

"At last!" he exclaimed. "Have you opened your mouth at last? Perhaps you will now be kind enough to answer?"

With a gesture of the hand he ordered the gendarme to stop. The fellow coolly wiped the leather strap with his fingers. Pieces of flesh came off, which he coolly threw aside. Popoff's throat rattled like that of a dying man.

"Where is the paper I want," asked the colonel. Nicholas turned his face to the cruel man, and in his bloody, tearful eyes invincible resolution still spoke clearly.

"You shall get nothing from me, cursed hangman," he replied.

"Well, let us see!"

And down came the nagaika again. The torture was all the more cruel, as it had been interrupted. At the first blow Popoff uttered a perfectly fearful heartrending cry. Palkin laughed. At each blow Popoff's cries became less violent, his trembling less preceptible. At last he hardly breathed. Palkin thought the gendarme was tired.

"Strike better!" he ordered, or you share Popoff's fate!"

The gendarme struck with all his force. He struck the backbone. Popoff uttered such a fearful cry that the soldier himself was terrified.

"Will you answer now?"

"Never!" breathed Nicholas, who was dying.

"Strike! strike! I say," shouted Palkin. "Below, at his legs and feet! Make him feel the nagaika!"

At this moment the door opened and Dr. Haas entered. He slowly walked up to Palkin.

"Where does this man come from?" shouted the colonel. "Who let him in? Ah! the doctor."

In the meantime the nagaika had very rarely fallen and run. Nicholas gave no longer any sign of life. Haas went to the bench and put his hand on Popoff's head.

"Enough of this torture," he said in a tone of command. "Your victim is dying!"

"Go on, strike hard!" cried Palkin, furious at the interruption. "I can talk to the doctor afterwards."

The gendarme raised the knot, but at the moment Haas snatched it from his hand and threw it aside.

"Enough!" he exclaimed. "Why, the