

THE STROKE THAT SAVED.

The great palace of Moscow was brilliantly lighted. It was Christmas Eve, and the opening ball of the festive season had brought wealth and royalty together at the winter home of the Czar.

In the salon all was magnificence. Gorgeous decorations and splendid flowers graced the room; costly mirrors threw back the light of a thousand gasolens, and the walls were beautiful with coloured tapestries. The royal divan was unoccupied. Throned on the floor for the evening before off the mask of stern authority, and moved among the guests with courtly grace, greeting all with kind and pleasant words. The great Czar went slowly through the room. The quiet smile seemed to have erased the lines of care from his brow, but there was an anxious, watchful look in the deep gray eyes that told of the sleeplessness of his mind.

The rounds had been made. Every where he had been met with expressions of humble submission and through good-will, but his mind was restless: he had a dim foreboding of some impending evil, and sank into a cushioned chair, a prey to uneasiness and unhappy thoughts. How long he rested he knew not, but presently he was called back to his situation by a light touch on his knee and the whispering voice of his page: "They await you, sire." And with a hurried glance at the scene of gaiety and joy he slipped away.

Outside in the avenue all was different. Long lines of heavy carriages and graceful sleighs awaited the ending of the ball; horses stamped impatiently on the crisp hard snow; and weary drivers, muffled in their great fur coats, huddled in the protesting shelter of their carriages.

Far off in the west wing of the palace there was but little signs of festivity. The great massive building loomed, a tower of black. One single window was lighted, and the slender ray that struggled forth seemed almost swallowed in the darkness. Figures passed repeatedly before it, and the drivers noted it and wondered.

Inside of the palace the ball was at its height; soft strains of music floated through the long suites of rooms; foreign ambassadors, stately nobles, young and dashing officers, chatted in little groups, danced with Russian beauty, or wandered aimlessly through the grand rooms.

Long since the Czar had slipped away, not unnoticed, for the watchful eyes of a pale young nobleman, who sat apart from the crowd, had marked it. The Czar had gone through a small door to the left, half-hidden by hanging curtains, and through dark narrow corridors up long flights of stairs to the little room on the left wing, where the solitary light peered out into the darkness.

His Majesty was expected, matters of state had called him away from the gay scene in the salon to the council chamber. As he stepped into the room every eye was bent, and when he had acknowledged the customary salutation, a sigh of relief passed from the lips of the councillors as they proceeded to their places around the central table. They were old men, silver-haired nobles of great learning, men eminently worthy of the high offices they occupied. One alone in the room was not a councillor; young and handsome, tall and broad of shoulder, the Count of Bolkhov was there, by right of his position as captain of the Czar's bodyguard, to stand between his royal master and the dangers of secret societies. And, after a few whispered words from the Czar, he left the room and took his stand in the dark hallway.

Nihilists were strong in Russia, and the pale young nobleman who sat apart from the crowd in the gay salon, was the Count of Kharkov, of all the socialists the most powerful, fearless and dreaded. There was a wild, unnatural light in his eyes that seemed to tell of strange workings in his mind. He smiled to himself, but it was a dark, forbidding smile that boded no good. He was evidently waiting for something, for as minute after minute passed he sat tapping his foot impatiently on the marble floor.

Finally he arose, and with forced calmness, quietly walked toward the half-hidden door that led to the left wing. He entered unnoticed and waited in the darkness. Presently the door opened, a form entered noiselessly. Again and still again the door opened, and each time a new figure jointly him, until twelve men were gathered there in the gloom.

Not a word was spoken. Quietly the little man started down the long, dark hall that so lately echoed to the footsteps of the Czar. Up the stairs and down another hall; up the stairs again and still no sound.

With his back against the door he lunges once again with a grim determination to save the Czar from the hands of these furious men—there is one left to fight. Again and again he strikes. Fate seems to favour him in that unequal strife, for the brave sold for still holds his own in the dark hallway. There is nervousness in the steady parries and quick thrusts; death looks him in the eyes and he dreads it not. Already there is blood on the rich uniform, and a half-moment thrust had laid open the broad forehead. His strength cannot stand the furious onslaught much longer.

Suddenly there is a signal from the room; it tells him that his master has escaped, and with a rapid thrust he clears a momentary passage through that circle of swords and is gone. Down the long hall, down the stairs, out into the chill night air he flies, with two of the baffled swordsmen at his heels. A sad smile passes over his bleeding face as he hears the hoarse cries of rage and disappointment from the room above. The Czar is safe and he is content.

Down the deserted streets the death chase continues, the shrieking, bleeding man who colors the fresh white snow with his life blood at every step, and with his two furious pursuers. Through street after street he flies. He cannot last long; his eyes are growing dim, but with a final effort he dashes down a narrow side street and turns to meet his death. He listens. Nearer and nearer comes the pursuing footsteps. He shrinks into the darkest shadow of the houses. For a moment scarcely dares to breathe. Two panting men dash past and are gone. His mind becomes a blank; he reels and falls heavily upon the pavement.

The clock on the church in the great public square has struck three, and the city slumber on, unconscious of the great tragedy that has been so narrowly averted. The salon in the palace is empty and dark, the festive guests have gone to their homes all in ignorance of the fierce contest that had occurred in that very building an hour or their departure.

In front of a plain, unimposing house in a quiet street of the city, a dark figure lines prone in the snow. It is the body of the Count of Bolkhov, captain of the royal guard; the firm hand still grasps the trusty sword; there is a crimson blot on the snow at his head, but he is still alive.

And a dream comes to him as he lies there bleeding and unconscious. He is no longer the stern captain of the finest troops of warriors in Russia. He is a little curly-headed lad, lying soft prayers at his mother's knee. It is again Christmas Eve, and he is imploring with innocent lips the Sacred Infant to watch and guide his steps through life.

The dream changes. Now in the vigour of early manhood, he kneels with downcast head before the throne of the great Czar. Peter is speaking: "Count Bolkhov, consider well what thou sayest; I offer thee the captaincy of my guards; accept and I shall be thy father's friend; thou shalt be a Romanist forever." There is silence for a moment. Then with trembling lips he utters: "Sire, thy will is mine." And the dream ends.

But there is a movement in the house before which he lies. Someone is descending the stairs, the door is opened and there is a cry of dismay as the prostrate man is seen lying at the very doorstep. Strong hands are ready to carry him into the house, and tender, ministering fingers are soon washing away the blood and applying restoratives to the wounded officer.

Over him bends a gray-haired man, who seems to recognize the handsome features. The officer is breathing more freely, and finally the large dark eyes open to stare vacantly, into the face above. Quiet yourself my son," says the old man. "You are safe, but can you recognize an old friend?" The eyes of the wounded man rest for a moment on the kindly face, and with a groan of shame and grief he mutters in a half choked whisper, "The Abbe Nonnory."

"Aye, son," answers the priest, and with a quick sign he motions to his attendant to withdraw, and he is alone with the dying man.

"Father," the pale soldier whispers, "you know my sin?" "Aye, my child," the old priest answers, "nor is it too late to repent. Some unknown cause has brought you, wounded and dying, to the door of a hunted and despised priest of God. Ah it grieved me greatly to hear that you had performed the honours of the world to the true faith; but repentance can make you once more a friend of the all-loving Father."

The stricken man was silent for a long time. A great struggle was going on in his soul; grace was fighting for the mastery. The old man saw it and said nothing. The minutes crept on. Then slowly the young soldier raised himself off his knees, and with a contrition burn a newly awakened love, he made a true and fervent confession at the feet of the old priest.

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