

NARKA, THE NIHILIST.

By KATHLEEN O'MEARA.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Narka was alone in her cell at St. Lazare. No one had been to see her. She had waited and watched all the day long. Every echoing step on the stone corridor made her pulses quicken with hope; it might be Marguerite, or Sibil, or even Basil. But the day dragged on to its close, the bars and bolts of the prison were drawn, and no one came.

Narka had not slept the previous night, and she had hardly tasted food since her arrest; she was physically exhausted, and her nerves were strained and excited to the verge of delirium. When the night closed in she was in a state of one prepared to see visions. For a while the lamp burning outside sent a tawny light into her cell through the window above the door; but this was put out, and then all was black as the tomb, and a horror of great darkness fell upon her. She could not say how long it lasted; but suddenly the external blackness was pierced through by a vivid inward illumination. Her whole life, from childhood to the present hour, passed before her, with its sorrows, its bright hopes, its pathetic failures; every circumstance became invested with a high prophetic meaning, every cruel and humiliating event was instinct with a supreme significance, every incident pointed to momentous issues.

Her faith, hitherto a sort of dreamy mysticism, gradually kindled to a kind of frenzy, that she mistook for inspiration. She saw the divine scheme for the redemption of humanity unfolding before her life a scroll, and she read her own part distinctly written there. God, who had created and redeemed every individual soul, could not overlook the very least of His creatures; with Him there was neither greater nor lesser; the monarch on his throne and the moultonk in his hole were of equal value in His sight; the same hand which fashioned the eagle and bid it soar and fix the mid-day sun, also created the worm, and bade it crawl upon the earth, and both were His creatures, equally entitled to His care. It was, nevertheless, in the order of His providence that amongst men there should be higher and lower; that some should play a grand part in life, and some an obscure one; that some should command and enjoy, and even sin with impunity, while others were condemned to suffer for the sins of all. And these latter were His chosen partners in the plan of redemption. They were to enter into glory with Him through suffering, and become like unto gods.

As the symbolism of her destiny revealed itself to Narka, her heart swelled with a sense of vengeful triumph. She exulted in her Christ-like mission, and in spirit trampled under foot the Pharisees and tyrants who persecuted her. The night wore on in this frenzy of pride and hallucination. The prison clock told the hour. The dawn broke, but in the cell all was still dark. Suddenly a gleam of light crept in through the window above the door, and Narka, looking up as if something had touched her, saw the white figure of the crucifix, alone visible in the encircling blackness.

where she was the central figure, she was not alone—Basil Zorokoff, by her side, he was whispering in her ear; every fibre of her heart was thrilling to what he whispered; she felt his breath upon her cheek, she felt the warm clasp of his arm round her. Ah! let fate do its worst upon her; with that arm clasping her she could never be wholly miserable. But suddenly the smile of rapture that trembled on her lips died away. What fool's paradise had she wandered into? She was in prison, and so perhaps was Basil, for all she knew. There was that box containing the articles in his hand-writing! If the writing should be traced! Narka shuddered, but quickly dismissing the horrible thought, she remembered that Basil was in France, and that his own government could not touch him, and the French police were not likely to be able to identify the writing of a Russian.

The great clock struck 5, and the profound stillness began to be broken by those sounds which announce, even in the prison, that the inmates are awakening to the activities of life. Warders came and went along the flagged passages, doors were opened and shut, the bell summoned the prisoners to the scant morning meal. Narka was not in the category of those who had to obey their cell food was brought to her, she was too faint and feverish to feel any appetite, but she knew that this was partly the effect of hunger, so she ate a few mouthfuls, and went back to her visions. The morning wore on. It was near noon, and she was still sitting on the edge of her bed, listless, tired, her mind strained between something like ecstasy and stupor, when the door of her cell opened, and some one pronounced her name. She started, stood straight up, and felt herself clasped in Sibil's arms.

"Basil!" she said, in a frightened whisper, and disengaging herself, she fixed her passionate, yearning eyes on Sibil.

"He has told us everything." "And you forgive me? You forgive us both." "Forgive you! My brave, generous Narka, what have I to forgive?" And Sibil kissed her again, tenderly, clingingly, and then she drew her to the bed, and they sat down together.

Zorokoffs. The moment had now come, she thought, for proposing the only expedient which might do this. She laid her hand on Narka's tense arm; it shuddered under the touch.

"This is what I have dreaded from the moment I heard of your being arrested," she said. "I lay awake all last night thinking how I could save you, and praying to God to show me a way. For, Narka, there is no use in trying to deceive ourselves; you will be handed over to the Russian government and taken to St. Petersburg, and then—But, darling, there is one chance still of saving you. I know not how to propose it, for the sacrifice will be almost worse than the sacrifice of your life."

Narka did not make a sign, but sat staring at vacancy, her eyes still riveted on that unseen horror.

"Beloved," continued Sibil, in her soft, caressing voice, "if you are sent back to Russia, it means Kronstadt—a tremor ran through Narka—'or Siberia; in either case a fate as cruel as death—and you are parted from Basil forever. If you give him up voluntarily now, you will remain free, and you will be still his sister and mine."

Narka did not speak, but she moved her head imperceptibly toward Sibil; the movement seemed to say, "What do you mean?"

Sibil stole one arm round her neck, and speaking rapidly, "Oh, my darling," she said, "if I could take the sting out of the sacrifice for you! . . . but the alternative is so horrible it will give you courage. Renounce Basil; tell him you will not marry him because you don't love him. He will then be free to go and offer himself to Prince Krinsky's daughter, and ask her to obtain your release."

Narka at last was moved from her stony immobility. She slowly drew away her hands from about her neck and dropped them, and looked at Sibil. "Tell him that I do not love him?" she repeated. "He would not believe me; he would know that it was a lie."

"He knew it once, dear; but you may have changed since then. How many women would! Remember it is nearly two years since you have met."

"That will be the devil to pay!" said Ivan, savagely.

"Yes, that will be the devil to pay," repeated Basil, and he got up and walked to the window, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. "You see," he said, still looking out of the window, and speaking with his back to Ivan, "as those infernal papers, which I believe are at the bottom of it all, have been rescued, they have no material proof of her having worked with us; they may accuse her, but if they can't prove anything, they will have to let her go, will they not?"

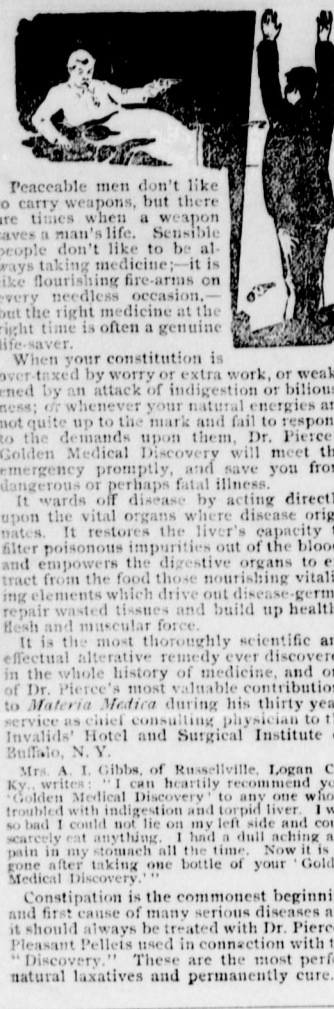
"If the Russian government say they have proof that she has been conspiring—and they won't stick at saying it if it suits them—the French law can't refuse to give her up," said Ivan.

"In that case, my sister must go at once to Krinsky."

"She can't go to him to-day, nor to-morrow either; he left Paris last night for Berlin."

"Confound it! did he?" said Basil, turning suddenly round. "And when is he to be back?"

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