

NARKA, THE NIHILIST.

By KATHLEEN O'MEARA.

CHAPTER XXXII.—CONTINUED.

Marguerite could hardly believe her ears. It seemed like a miracle — one of those miracles of charity that she herself performed day after day in the desolate places. She crushed the sugar noiselessly in the tiansie she was preparing for herself with a smile: "God is love! God is love!"

Antonia's eyes were fixed on Narka as if she were some visitant from another world. She looked like one, as she sat slumping by the poverty-stricken bed, the flush of a pure emotion on her face, a light of joy in her luminous dark eyes.

When the song — a Russian ballad — was ended, the child called out, "Enco! enco!" And Narka, stirred by that encore as she had never been by the applause of a salon, sang again; this time, in French, Mignon's lament, "Rendez-moi la patrie, ou laissez-moi mourir!"

The child grew calmer, and ceased to toss on her pillow; by the time the song was ended she had fallen asleep. La mere Drex lifted up her hands in a gesture of wonderment and admiration. Narka rose and moved softly out of the room after Marguerite. When they were out on the landing, by a common impulse the two friends turned and kissed one another. Their hearts were too full for speech.

On reaching the bottom of the stairs they found that a crowd had assembled before the house. Marguerite at once guessed that the police had tracked Antoine, and stepped bravely forward to meet the enemy.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Just as Narka had shut herself in and sat down to realize the happy fact of her voice's return, the main street of the Place was thrown into excitement by an accident. A cab containing two men was coming quietly up the street, when the horse took fright and rushed blindly on, struck against a cart and fell, over-turning the cab. One of the travellers, who was in the act of jumping out, paid for this want of presence of mind by an ugly cut in the head; the other in attempting to follow him had hurt his leg, and lay groaning in the bottom of the overturned cab.

"It is the Commissary of Police!" cried one of them, turning to the by-standers. His face was a picture; it expressed a keen sense of the humorous side of the situation, with a dread of "catching it" if he were overheard by the still powerful though prostrate functionary. For it was, in truth, no less a person than the mighty Commissary who lay trapped in the upset vehicle, groaning with a sprained ankle like a common man. A crowd had gathered in a moment. No one recognized the man on the pavement, but all shrewdly suspected him to be a police agent come to participate in some important arrest. Anyhow, the pair were after no good. It was clearly a judgment of Providence that had overtaken them, in favor of the poor wretch they were after, and the fun of the thing was delicious. People came from the neighboring shops and volunteered help. The cab was soon set on its wheels.

"I have hurt my foot badly," said the Commissary. "Is there a doctor anywhere near?"

"We are close to the Sisters' House, monsieur," said a workman; "you had better let us take you there while the doctor is fetched. Another cab was called, and the two injured men were helped into it and driven off.

Scour Marguerite was in the dispensary, and saw the cab stop at the gate with its procession of ragamuffins. Presently the two Commissaries were assisted across the court into the House.

In a moment several Sisters were in attendance. The injuries proved more painful than serious, and the Sisters were quite capable of dealing with them without the doctor. As soon as the Commissary's sprain had been attended to, and he was made comfortable on an improvised sofa, with pillows at his back, he asked for writing materials, and wrote a short note. Then beckoning to Marguerite, "Ma sœur," he said, in a confidential tone, "I want you to do a little commission for me. I want you to take a cab and drive to the Prefecture, and ask to see M. le Prefet — you will send in my card — and then give this note into his hands."

"Ah!" Marguerite's look of intense curiosity was irresistible. "I will tell you what it is about," whispered the Commissary. "I and my colleague came here to arrest a scoundrel named Drex — Antoine Drex; but we have been hindered as you see. Now it is most necessary they should know this at once at the Prefecture, and send two others to do it, or the fellow may get wind of the matter and slip through our fingers. You understand?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur, I understand," Marguerite's heart was thumping so that she wondered the Commissary did not hear it and suspect. "I don't think they would let me see M. le Prefet," she said, turning the letter in her hand; "I had I not better say you want some one to be sent up here to you?"

"No, no; that would lose too much time," he said, impatiently. "They will let me in at once when you show my card with that word written on it."

"Is he suspected of anything very bad, this Antoine Drex?" she inquired, with an idea that every minute's delay might help Antoine.

"He is not suspected — he is known to be a dangerous villain. Ma sœur; not a word more here, but go!"

Marguerite slipped the letter up her sleeve and went out. Once in the street, she stood debating. It was a hard task that was set her. Must she execute it? Poor Antoine! She knew he was more sinned against than sinning. But a voice whispered, "You are bound to obey the law." She heard it; still she hesitated.

"Charity is the greatest commandment of all. Charity is the law of God," she agreed with this voice; still she hesitated; but after a moment's delay she glanced quickly, furtively, up and down the street, and then started off in the direction of Cour des Chats, walking as fast as she dared, and quickening her pace to a run when she turned into the dirty alleyway that led into it. Antoine was sitting as she had left him, only smoking a pipe. His mother had gone out to the laund; the idiot child, lulled to rest by Narka's song, was still fast asleep.

Marguerite closed the door, and then, dropping her voice, "Antoine," she said, "the police are in pursuit of you. The Commissary was on his way here when he met with an accident; he is now at the House, resting, and I am going to the Prefecture with this letter from him desiring some one to be sent to arrest you."

Without waiting to see the effect of her information, she turned quickly away, and closed the door after her.

An hour later two police-officers drove up to the entrance of the Cour des Chats, an crossed over to the house where Antoine was lodging. They went up and knocked at the door, guided by the instructions contained in the Commissary's letter. Some one said, "Come in." But on opening the door they found, instead of Antoine Drex, Scour Marguerite, knitting by the window.

"Pardon, ma sœur," said one of the agents, taking off his hat; "we are looking for Antoine Drex. We have come to arrest him."

Marguerite's heart was beating like a hammer on an anvil, but she looked at him, and said, composedly, "You had better go to the House and tell M. le Commissaire that you found me here in place of Antoine Drex."

The two police-officers looked at her as if they could not believe their eyes. Presently they began to understand. They were young, they were brave, they had hearts of men.

"Ma sœur, I have the honor to salute you," said one of them.

They both bowed and walked out of the room, and she heard the sound of smothered laughter on the stairs.

"But, were remaining; now the Commissary to face. Marguerite knew there would be no sympathetic laughter there. The Commissary, indeed, flew into a great rage when he heard the trick that had been played him, and sent for the Superior, and whipped Marguerite on her unoffending back; he threatened to denounce the community as accomplices of all the rascals and rascals of the district, to have the House shut up, etc., etc.

Marguerite meantime had followed the agents to the House, and walked bravely in to receive her reward. She was very frightened, but she did not show it, and this assumption of coolness made matters worse.

"So, ma sœur, this is how you respect the law," he said, the angry Commissary; "before you went to the Prefecture you gave that scoundrel a blind sockedaddle."

"Monsieur le Commissaire, I am incapable of anything so mean," replied Marguerite; "I told him plainly that I was going to the Prefecture with a message from you for his arrest."

"And you are not ashamed of helping a blaguard like that to evade the law?"

Scour Jeanne scolded Marguerite; but the community had a merry time of it at recreation that evening, nor were they to be checked in their fun over the Commissary's misadventure and the sorry figure he made in his official discomfiture by Scour Jeanne's attempt to frown and look aggrieved.

Narka had heard nothing of the event, not having left home since she had parted from Marguerite. At 10 o'clock that night she was a little startled by some knocking at her door. She supposed it was the concierge with a letter; but before opening she asked who was there.

A voice that she did not recognize answered, "A friend of Scour Marguerite."

Narka drew back the bolt. She did not know what fear was, but she was conscious of an unpleasant sensation when she beheld a huge man, with his head and shoulders concealed by a shawl, step quickly in and close the door behind him. He threw back the shawl, and Narka recognized Antoine Drex. He told her what had happened, and how he had been hiding in a wood-yard all the afternoon and evening, and now implored her to shelter him till morning and give him some food. She fetched him bread and wine and some cold meat, and he rolled an arm-chair into the little kitchen, which was the only addition to the salon bedroom in her apartment. But Antoine declared he was lodged like a prefect.

Narka was glad to harbor a hunted fellow-creature, to give sanctuary to a victim of that long-armed and cruel tyrant, the law. Very likely Antoine was deepyed in plots against the government; but Narka was not the one to think worse of any man for that. Every political opinion was dear to her for Basil's sake. Nevertheless, though she was glad to open her door to Drex, she felt that in doing so she was incurring a great personal risk, and if Antoine rested easily, she did not. All night long she lay awake, listening to every sound; a dog that barked, a cart that rumbled, made her start. She was up before Antoine gave signs of stirring. Then she prepared some food for him, and, with his shawl drawn round him, he stole out in the early morn, and went down to the House just as the gate was opened.

Marguerite was horrified when she heard where he passed the night. But Antoine assured her that no harm would come to Narka; no one had seen him coming or going. The street had been quite deserted both at night and in the morning.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Narka never gave a thought to the possible consequences to herself, from the moment she saw Antoine Drex safe out of her house; but the event had excited her extraordinarily. She forgot that his coming to her for shelter was the natural result of her visit to him with Marguerite in the morning, and she magnified the incident into a portent. She must be destined to play some part in this great revolutionary drama that was being enacted all over Europe, or else why did these chances pursue her?

Some event was at hand, she said to herself, some great event in which a role was surely reserved for her by fate or by Providence.

"Do you believe in prepresentiments?" she said to Marguerite, when they met that afternoon.

"Certainly!" was the emphatic rejoinder; "I believe them to be a sign of indignation." Marguerite knew that Narka was morbidly fanciful at all times, and she made a point of snubbing her fancies. Just now she seemed excited and overwrought.

Nothing occurred during the day to justify Narka's presentiments, but at about 10 o'clock that night she was again startled by a visitor. This time it was a ring, a very light ring, but to her imagination on the watch for signs and portents, it sounded preternaturally loud in the stillness of the morning, and she magnified it. Marguerite had said they would shelter him at the House until he could get away to Calvados, his native place. Narka went to the door and asked who was there.

A voice answered in Russian, "It is I, Naska."

Her heart gave a great leap, a low cry rose to her lips, the bolt flew back — she never knew how — and then she was in Basil Zorokoff's arms. For one long moment life seemed over; she was conscious of nothing but the wild rapture of possessing him; his strong arms were clasping her, his cheek was pressed against hers. Was it some sweet madness, or was she in heaven?

"Are we alone?" he whispered, raising his head and glancing round the dimly-lighted room, while he relaxed his hold of her.

"Yes, quite alone. Oh, Basil, is it you, or am I dreaming?"

She trembled and clung to him as if she was afraid he would escape if she let him go. He drew her to the little couch, and they sat down together.

"I frightened you," he said, laughing. "I ought to have given you warning, and not come down on you like a thunder-bolt; but there was no time, unless I telegraphed on the road, and that would have been a risk."

"I am not a bit frightened, only beside myself with joy. Oh, Basil! Basil! my heart is so full that I could sob for happiness. He bent down and kissed her tenderly. She could see that he was aged; but he was grander and handsomer than ever.

"Where have you come from?" she said; "have you escaped, or did the prince consent to your coming away?"

"Consent?" Basil threw back his head and the gesture she remembered so well. "I escaped in disguise by the same train that took him to Berlin in attendance on the emperor, who is gone to visit his brother Kaiser."

"Then he does not know that you have escaped?"

"He knows it by this time, and he is on his knees, tearing his hair, and swearing by St. Nicholas that Basil Zorokoff is the greatest wretch under heaven. Oh! it is a fine thing to be a loyal subject, and hate one's own flesh and blood for love of the emperor."

"When did you get here?" asked Narka.

"An hour ago. I have come on here from the train."

"Then you have not seen Sibil? You did not know she is in town?"

"I did know it; but I came straight to you."

"My own, my own!" She locked her arms round his throat, and let her head drop on his breast. "You came first to me!"

"Of course I came first to you. Let me look at you." He put his hand under her chin, and held up her face so that the light from the shaded lamp fell upon it.

"My poor Narka," he said, gazing at her with great tenderness, and then kissing her as he usually did, but you are as beautiful as ever. And in spite of all you have gone through — the prison — He felt her shudder in his arms, and she nestled closer to him.

"Don't let us talk of that," she said, in a low voice; "it is all past, and we are together. I want to hear about you. Tell me everything; tell me all that has happened since we parted. Remember how little I know — only hints from Sibil in her letters first, and since then stray news of you through Ivan Gorff. Tell me the story yourself now."

And Basil, with his arm round her, and his hands locked about her neck, told it rapidly, passing lightly over all that was too painful and humiliating to go into, but lacerate her loving heart, but enlarging complacently on the work he had done, the results he had achieved, the brilliant hopes he cherished. Narka saw with pride that he had ripened greatly during the interval of their separation; his mind had gained in shrewdness and insight, his faculties had evidently grown in power of vigor and quickness with which he summed up the situation, weighed chances, forecast probabilities, and arrived at practical conclusions. It was clear that he had thrown his whole soul and his whole energies into the service of patriotism. He looked a patriot and a hero every inch, so strong and straight and bold in his manly beauty — a lover for a queen to be proud of. And Narka was proud of him; her heart swelled with pride in him, she admired him more than she had ever done, and she loved him with her whole soul. And yet — she was conscious of a disappointment somewhere. It was noble in him to be absorbed in this grand impersonal object, to have cast away, for the sake of serving his oppressed fellow-countrymen, all the pleasures that his youth and rank might have claimed; she admired and applauded the nobleness that this choice evinced, and yet there was a vague disappointment somewhere. Schenk's cruel words recurred to her with a sting that even the joy of Basil's presence could not allay. "He does not love you; he only loves his ambition. If he marries you, it will be from a sense of honor." Yet Basil was a washed and loved, and she was beautiful, and he had come to her before he went to the sister whom he loved so dearly. How could she doubt but that he loved her best? If only he had lingered a little longer on the joy of their meeting, and then entered eagerly on the question of their approaching marriage!

There was a moment's pause while these reflections sped rapidly through Narka's mind, and then that subtle electric consciousness which flashes thought from one soul to another with whom it is in close sympathy touched Basil.

"And Sibil?" he said; "she has been true to you?"

"In what sense true? Does she know of our engagement?"

"I have not let me suspect it if she did. And, dear Basil, I am afraid she will resent our marriage as bitterly as the prince."

"I hope not, when she knows the whole truth — when I tell her how dear you are to me, and how much I love you. I hope to win her consent without great difficulty. She will be so glad to see me, it will be easier to persuade her."

Narka's heart sank a little. Was Sibil's consent, then, essential?

"You see, Basil went on, "we are still in my father's power. I am absolutely penniless if he does not relent, and I could not ask you to marry a beggar. I have brought trouble enough already on you. God knows, without that."

"Oh, but I am going to make our fortune," Narka said, with a sudden thrill of exultation. And she told him of Zampa's offer, and the splendid career that was ready waiting for her.

"And I am to live in idleness while you work?" Basil said, with a laugh; and he caressed her.

"I look for you to work for the good for cause, while I work for bread. Don't you love me well enough to eat my bread?"

She drew herself up, and keeping one hand round his neck, she laid the other upon his breast. "Say, Basil, do you love me well enough to eat my bread?"

He took her hand and kissed it, and held it clasped. The husband ought to work for the wife," he said, "not the wife for the husband."

"That is the philosophy of pride and of your aristocratic traditions. A patriot should be above such prejudice. Marguerite was glad when she heard this chance of helping you was in store for me."

"Marguerite! Ah! how is she?" There was a pause in his voice as he said the name; it struck cold on Narka's heart.

"She is very well. I see her every day."

"Does she seem happy?"

"She is perfectly happy. She loves her vocation."

"Ah! That vocation is a wonderful thing. But she was an angel always — Marguerite."

Nobody knew this better than Narka, yet to hear Basil say it, and pronounce Marguerite's name in that soft undertone, burned her like the sting of a wasp.

"Good heavens! is that midnight?" he exclaimed, as the little clock on the mantel struck the hour. "How the time has sped! I have kept you up so late, dearest. I have not slept myself for four nights."

He made a movement to rise, but Narka clung and nestled to him.

"Must you go?" she said, rubbing her cheek against his coat caressingly. "Tell me about Sibil; will she be very angry with you for coming to me first?"

"I don't mean to tell her. I sha'n't say I have seen you."



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