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## THE ACE OF CLUBS.

A ROMANCE OF RUSSIA AND SIBERIA.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

Jana had in the meantime returned to Irkutsk under the protection of Dr. Haas. She constantly reproached herself for not having remained in the hut, leaving Helen behind, and not interceding energetically enough in behalf of Palkin. She often told Haas that she thought he ought to have permitted her to wait the end of the fearful scenes. He told her, however, that his first duty was to watch over her safety and to preserve her for her husband's sake. She finally offered him her hand and said most kindly to him:

"You are always right, my dear doctor."

Now, only Dr. Haas could tell her how he had reached the hut at the critical moment. Palkin had at once carried him to Miller, and he had not hesitated a moment when he heard that Vladimir's safety was endangered. The countess, as well as Haas, agreed that the whole had been a trap to catch the count. Miller called such exiles together as were within immediate reach, regretting deeply that he could not arm them yet. Then Haas had handed him the money of the countess, and Miller had instantly handed it to Palkin, with the words: "This time we have no weapons, but this money will secure us the future, for from to-day I shall lay aside my mask." When they had all started, eight, as we have seen, reached the hut in time.

Jana became deeply anxious about Helen, whose non-appearance troubled her sorely. Dr. Haas also acknowledged that her prolonged absence made him fear some accident. Just then Lina entered and announced that an aid of the governor's had come to escort Jana to the palace.

"What can this mean?" exclaimed Jana. "Can they have heard it already?"

Haas tried to calm her.

"That is simply impossible. And even if they should apprehend trouble at the palace, they cannot interfere with you, countess, as you are not an exile. But be very cautious and weigh every word you say."

When Jana entered the governor's palace, she had already prepared her plan of defence, thinking that the governor might have heard of her nightly expeditions. She expected, on that account, to be received with frowning looks and scant courtesy. How great was, therefore, her surprise when the governor received her in the most friendly manner, offering her a chair, and saying:

"You will be kind enough to pardon me, countess, that I took the liberty of troubling you to come here instead of going to your house, but time is passing, and what I have to say brooks no delay."

The ceremony with which these friendly words were uttered removed Jana's fears. She bowed in silence. The governor continued:

"It is absolutely necessary that you should leave Irkutsk instantly."

"Why?" she asked, not to interrupt him, but to know his reasons.

"I have to go to you and my wife. I ask how I should wish for you, and be kind to all the best of your best friend."

"I am not a heroine, and yet I am capable of remaining where my sense of duty bids me stay."

The governor seemed to be hardly able to repress a tear. After a pause, he continued:

"Assure you most solemnly that my successor will not overlook anything. Believe me, I try to enable you to take measures which may bear fruit in the far future."

"At least, permit me to reflect," begged Jana.

"I repeat again, I give you no friendly advice. For your husband's sake, as well as for your own, countess, I beg you to return at once."

"If you should refuse I fear you will be sorry."

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"But general," replied Jana, trembling, "I swear my husband is innocent!"

"I begin myself to believe in his innocence," said the governor with almost paternal kindness, "for this bitter persecution makes me doubt the crime for which the count was condemned."

"Oh, general!"

"Very well, countess—but just now I can do nothing for you. As soon as the revisor arrives—and that may be to-day or to-morrow—my power here ceases. Believe me, leave Irkutsk. Of course this is not an order, I give only friendly advice. You ought to start to-day."

"And leave my husband. That I cannot do."

The governor sadly shook his head.

"And yet you cannot remain with him here. Day before yesterday the count was caught, being absent from his assigned place of residence. He was at once arrested, and will have to endure the three months' imprisonment which follow such a crime. During this time you will not be able to see him. And besides, I shall not be able to serve you in any way. I have told you distinctly that they are bent upon separating you and him."

"I shall at least be near him in this town!"

"What are you thinking of, countess? They may send him 500 miles farther on, and prohibit you even to write to him. Countess, listen to me! The arrival of this revisor is a grievous insult to me, and I shall soon go to Petersburg to justify myself before the Emperor. I give you my word that I shall then do for your husband all that my best efforts may enable me to do."

She bowed, full of gratitude.

"We shall be very, very grateful to your excellency."

"But you must facilitate my task, and not put impediments in my way. When you came here, countess, you had an unlimited passport, which allowed you to go where you chose. As usual, you gave me this passport, and I return it now to you, after having taken the liberty of adding: 'With permission to return to St. Petersburg.'"

Jana repeated with great decision: "I do not think of leaving Irkutsk."

The governor tried to master the emotion which he could not quite control. I continued more sternly:

"That is simply womanly obstinacy. I now declare to you that my successor may consider you also an exile, and may send you to work in the mines, hundreds of miles from the place to which he may order your husband, and I shall be powerless. For God's sake, be prudent! You only ruin your husband and yourself! In St. Petersburg you might in the meantime use your influence."

"No, your excellency," said Jana, offering him her hand, "I thank you most heartily for all the kindness you have shown me, and I shall ever be grateful to you! I have learned to know you as a noble, high-toned man, and, therefore, fully appreciate the advice you so kindly give. But the nobler you are, the better you will understand me: I am not a heroine, and yet I am capable of remaining where my sense of duty bids me stay."

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last night were known to him, and that they not only endangered the countess, but might seriously affect her husband's position. The revisor's arrival only increased the danger. The doctor might, in the meantime, stay on the spot and keep an eye on the count. All these arguments, however, made no impression upon the countess, who insisted upon remaining. Jana at last said impatiently:

"I feel I cannot help him, but he will at least know that I am watching near by."

"Even that he cannot know, because he is not allowed to communicate with any one."

"Then it will be enough that I know it," replied Jana, proudly.

Soon however, she hung her head and began to shed tears.

"If they make gendarmes take me and carry me to Petersburg, who will then stay here? Who will watch over him?"

With these words she reached her house. Lina was waiting for her at the door.

"Your excellency, there is a man in the salon, an unknown man, who insists upon seeing you. I do not know why, but it seems to me I have seen that man somewhere. Perhaps he'll bring us news about my son."

Jana had not yet been able to tell the poor woman of her son's sad end. She could now not postpone it any longer.

"At once, my dear! Afterwards come to me, I must speak to you."

"Has your excellency heard anything?"

Jana left her without an answer, only saying:

"Lina, pray!"

At these words the poor old woman sank down fainting. Dr. Haas at once hastening to her assistance.

As soon as Jana entered the stranger who had been waiting for her, threw back his hood and revealed his features.

"I come to pay my debt!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Miller! how reckless you are!"

There nobody will recognize me. Besides, I have friends watching over me. Whether reckless or not, my coming here was necessary. I have caused your misfortune—in return I bring you the certainty of Vladimir's speedy liberation. Only you must at once start for Petersburg."

The fact that Miller and the governor both gave her the same advice made some impression upon Jana.

"You also advise me the same?" she exclaimed, almost unconsciously.

"I do not know who has suggested to you to leave Siberia, but he was right. You will from henceforth have to go to work in Petersburg. Your longer residence here in Irkutsk has no purpose to serve any longer, and is even dangerous."

Miller thereupon told Jana all the events of the past night and showed her how, from this moment, she would be looked upon as being in open rebellion against the government. If Palkin was still alive, he told her, he would of course prosecute her at once. Then there was the captain of the gendarmes, who had also seen her. He repeated his advice to start at once for Petersburg.

"For," he continued, "I have sworn to atone for my crime, and now I can do it. I have the proof in my hands of your husband's innocence. I should have risked my life to bring it to you."

With these words he drew forth the carefully concealed receipts of Schelm, written and signed in his own handwriting, and gave it to Jana.

"Upon the strength of this document," he said, "you can at any time demand an investigation as soon as you can see the head of all the gendarmes or the Czar himself. Your excellency, Providence itself comes to our assistance! This piece of paper proves clearly Schelm's guilt. Mind the date, Oct. 30, 1821. You will easily be able to prove that at that time there could be no conspiracy in existence. That he was only three months later. Vladimir was called because he was the Ace of Hearts. Even this name did not exist on that day. Furthermore, I hand you this paper signed by myself. I swear it by the Holy Gospels."

though I have ceased to believe in them, those who will read it, still do believe—that I was employed by Schelm as agent provocateur. With these two documents your excellency must start to-night."

Jana's face had undergone a great change as Miller proceeded in his statement.

"You are right," she said, "I must start to-night! I must not be reckless now, when Vladimir's liberty is at stake. I thank you for having come to me, to-day otherwise I should never have agreed to undertake this journey, and who knows but to-morrow it may be too late."

"And now, your excellency, if my evidence should at any time be necessary, I will appear at your bidding, should it cost me my life. Do not hesitate to resort to extreme measures! In a few months my evidence will be of great weight. We have arms,

now, and in a short time my name will be so well known that it will reach even the Czar's ears!"

"You frighten me! What are your plans?"

"You have assisted us in procuring arms, and we shall make a good use of them! I repeat, if you ever want me, summon me and I shall come! I mean, above all things, to atone for my crime."

Jana offered him her hand.

"If your life should have to be imperiled in order to prove Vladimir's innocence, how shall I ever be able to accept such a sacrifice?" He knelt down before her and kissed the hem of her dress.

"You know how to inspire even criminals with lofty feelings, countess. I bless you! Leave here. Do not fear; I shall watch over him!"

Jana next called Dr. Haas.

"Doctor," she said to him, "I shall leave here to-night, following your advice. Will you accompany me or wait for me here?"

"When will you cease asking my opinion, countess? I do what you order me and what you think right or proper."

This perfect devotion, so unselfish and so modest, moved Jana to tears.

"I will obey you, doctor, and ask you: 'Where do you think you can serve me better, here or in Petersburg?'"

"Here I cannot do much. Mr. Miller is perfectly able to watch over the count. There might be fighting, and he is born for fighting, while I would be useless in such a case. Permit me to accompany you, countess!"

Miller here walked up to Dr. Haas and said:

"You know my past. The countess has just shaken hands with me; will you also have the kindness to take my hand in yours?"

Haas hesitated a moment and Miller noticed this, although it was but a moment. "There is my hand!" said the doctor in his usual mild voice.

Miller was on the threshold. In a muffled voice he said, "Till we meet again," and disappeared.

That same evening Jana left Irkutsk with Dr. Haas. Lina remained behind in charge of the house.

"I want to die in Siberia," she said, "and not leave my son's grave. Why should I return to Petersburg? I was not allowed ever to see my son; I shall at least be able to visit his grave!"

On the third day after these events, during the gloaming, when Jana's carriage was stopping before the tollgate of a little village, it suddenly opened to let a sleigh pass through that was on its way to Irkutsk. The revisor was just leaving the city. Neither Jana nor Haas could see his face.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

On the third day after Jana's departure, Count Palkin presented himself at the palace of the governor general of Irkutsk. He had come in a coach, and found it difficult to mount the stairs. His sharply marked features had become still more angular in consequence of his sufferings; his eyes glowed with fierce but subdued excitement; his face was pale, and his whole form bowed. He had had to spend several days in bed, partly from the chastisement he had received and partly from the effect of his fury. Still sick and trembling, he slowly crept along the passage in the palace and told the adjutant on duty that he wished to see the governor on very important business. The governor admitted him at once.

"Your excellency," exclaimed Palkin, as soon as he stood before him. "I have been the victim of an incredible outrage. Count Lamin and his wife have formed a conspiracy with a number of rebels and caught me in a trap. An exile, whom I imprudently employed as my secretary, has betrayed me and an officer of the police are all involved in the same plot. The whole affair looks like a rising against the Czar. I therefore come to ask your excellency to punish the guilty. The matter is this—"

The governor had so far patiently listened to Palkin, who had spoken in a threatening tone and almost lost his breath, but when he began his narrative he interrupted him coolly, saying:

"I know all, colonel, and I hope the criminals will not escape their well-deserved punishment. It seems, however, as if you also were somewhat to blame—but this will appear in the investigation. The killing of Popoff is a crime, the cruelty of which I shall never approve of. As to the guilt of Count Lamin, I think you must be in error!"

"Your excellency," cried Palkin, turning pale with wrath, "will surely not shelter that rebel!"

The governor looked sternly at him.

"I have no intention to shelter any one. If it depended on me, I should let justice be administered, and the guilty ones be pun-