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which I do not understand. If I am still to stand your friend I must understand it."

Upon which Pavlof took his fate in his hands.

"It is a strange story," he said, "and may try your credence at times. But I will tell you the whole matter, and you shall judge me. The man who is dying in the hospital there is Serge Palma——"

"Serge Palma!" echoed Sokolof in vast surprise. "Then who——? Who the devil are you?"

"I am Paul Pavlof."

At which Sokolof shook his head with a perplexed pinching of the brows. He had never heard of Paul Pavlof.

"But Madame——" he asked, with sudden inspiration, "Is she then not Madame Palma?"

"She was Palma's wife. She came out here to join him. He and I had exchanged names on the road. He stopped at Minusinsk. I came on to Kara. Instead of her husband, she found me here."

"You had known her before she married Palma?"

"Yes, I had known her and loved her. But I was very poor, and she was very enthusiastic on the subject of the people."