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THE ACE OF CLUBS.

A ROMANCE OF RUSSIA AND SIBERIA.

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CHAPTER XXIV.

A fearful scene it was that struck the eye in the interior of the small hut. The bodies of the dead gendarmes were lying under the bench on which Popoff had been tortured. Dr. Haas had brought his surgical instruments, and was exclusively occupied in assisting the poor secretary, whose whole body was one vast wound. The walls were spattered over with blood and mud. Four of the exiles lay lifeless on the floor, others were trying to staunch the blood that was abundantly flowing from their gaping wounds. The colonel was tied to the central post. He writhed like a snake and uttered fearful threats and curses.

Miller stood facing him, his hair pushed back from his forehead; all around stood the exiles, and the hut resounded with cries of revenge and of triumph. The light wood was near extinction and flickering light. Now and then the room was bloodily lighted up, and then again it sank back into deep darkness. The exiles, however, had brought lanterns which they now hung on the central post. Jana entered with Helen.

"Where is my husband? Where is Vladimir?" asked the countess, full of apprehension.

"You need not fear, countess," said Miller, bowing before her as he used to do in Petersburg salons, "the count is not here and was not present."

"Add my poor Nicholas?" asked Helen. The stillness of the grave gave the only answer. Miller hung his head. Helen at one glance, counted the dead bodies and saw seven; she examined them one after another. Palkin's curses continued. All looked full of pity at the poor girl who had followed her betrothed to Siberia and now looked for him among the dead.

She soon approached his bloody remains. Haas raised his hands to heaven. At once Helen understood it all and fell in silent despair on her knees.

Miller's opportune arrival had come about in this way. The Tungus had brought Dr. Haas to Ienar-kus, who understood a little Russian and knew Miller's name. The same evening Haas saw Miller, who at once collected a small number of exiles and gave the promise that the colonists of the village itself would also render assistance. The doctor had Jana's money still about him, and was already suspected; he thought, it was therefore, to give Ienar-kus the 40,000 rubles who, in return, engaged to furnish the exiles with the necessary arms. As this was pressing, Miller determined to go and throughout of the men had only heavy coats and a few swords.

Miller-Palkin was trying to persuade the Tungus to surrender the unlucky paper, which he had hidden in the village, where he had hidden it. They first surprised the house of the colonist, seized and bound two Kossaks, and then the captain of gendarmes. In another room they found Jana and her husband. Helen had been told that the captain all the time. Jana was not an exile, she was a noble, and had to her name and rank. Miller had at once started against Popoff. They had, by the captain, for them. Then they had hastened to the village was in, hence no one.

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Miller. "Did you see in your

Jana understood at once. "Blood enough has been shed," she said. "Pardon the guilty man!" Miller shrugged his shoulders and turned round, eagerly.

"The doctor advised you well, countess. This is no place for you! For my husband's sake do not avenge yourself!"

"Your words are in vain, countess. I pray you once more leave us, unless you wish to witness the execution!"

Haas seized her hand, saying, "Come, I beseech you! This is nothing for you, and we cannot change matters as they are. These men have gone too far to stop here!"

She followed him, saying, almost unconsciously:

"Oh, my God! My God! Pardon them! Pardon him, also! And pardon me, who have caused all this shedding of blood!"

Haas was already in the door with the countess, when Helen sprang up and, in her despair, cried:

"Doctor! You abandon him? Stay! You must stay!"

Haas shook his head.

"I can do nothing more. I can assist no one and save no one here."

"Then Nicholas is no longer alive?"

Haas had no answer to give. He turned to the countess, who took Helen by the hand.

"Come, Helen! Let us return together to town. We must submit to God's will, all of us, my child!"

The doctor noticed that the exiles were becoming impatient at this delay; they meant to have their revenge. He therefore drew the countess along with him, saying:

"Come! Helen will follow us soon!"

Helen, however, stood like a statue, and when the door closed behind Haas and the countess, she spoke:

"He is dead! really dead! Murdered by those who despised him because he served them. You will surely punish that man, won't you?" she added, pointing at Palkin.

The exiles bowed their heads.

"That will be the beginning of revenge, but only the beginning. Other men as powerful as this man, have been as guilty of his death. He is dead, but do not believe that he cannot avenge himself!"

"Listen to me," she said, turning to Miller. "You seem to be the leader of the others. They have tortured him to death to extort his secret from him. I have kept it to you. What do I now care for Count Lanin? I shall avenge myself and him at the same time."

She sat down on the bench and took Popoff's cold head in her lap.

"You searched in vain for that document," she said, turning to Palkin, "and yet he had it in his possession. Now that he is dead you shall see it. Do you know what he did? He had a false tooth inserted as large as two ordinary teeth, and in that he kept the paper. Will you be kind enough," she added, turning to Miller, "to take it out."

Palkin roared with fury, while Miller thought the girl was crazy.

"Follow my advice, my child," he said to her in a gentle voice. "Go with the countess. You will see bad things here, and you are already in a fever."

"We Russian women are still half savages," she said, never letting go Popoff's head. "Yesterday I was a cheerful, merry girl—to-day I cannot weep, and only thirst for revenge. You think I am insane. I swear to you I tell the truth. He is dead, you say. Will you have the courage to open his firmly closed mouth, while I will hold his head? Do you think I do not love him because I thus treat his body? Then you are mistaken, for I only carry out his wish."

"Do so. He was my life, my all. To-day I have lost all!"

"Do that," she continued as she opened Popoff's mouth with her fingers and a small dagger.

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dagger then to Miller, saying in a flood of tears:

"You see, I am too feeble."

Helen's courage had made a deep impression upon Miller. He took the dirt, but he also tried in vain. To end this fearful scene he struck the handle with his whole strength. The front teeth dropped out! The whole body shook and Popoff uttered a cry of pain that sounded superhuman. The powerful blow had aroused the last breath that dwelt in the body.

Miller dropped the dagger in amazement. Nicholas opened his eyes and saw Helen, Palkin in pounds and the exiles around him. That glance revealed all. With a superhuman effort he raised his bloody arm, took out the false tooth, handed it to the nearest bystander and whispered "Lanin! Schelm!" Then he breathed his last. "And now," said Helen, "break the tooth."

Miller struck the apparent tooth with the dagger. When the ivory broke a small roll of paper dropped on the floor, Miller picked it up and examined it.

A receipt by Schelm! That is Schelm's own handwriting! 30 October. Conspiracy Law. Secret funds. . . . I do not see at once what this means, but it must be a weapon of very great importance.

Palkin could not help, by a powerful curse, to show his wrath at having failed to secure the paper.

"I was a fool!" he cried in his fury.

"Ha! ha!" said Miller. The bird is singing again! We must have made a good bargain."

"You shall know it all," said Helen. "I know all, and shall have strength enough, I trust, to tell you the details. And then all is at an end. Now I have done my work. Do you now administer justice and avenge yourself. I shall pray for him here."

She knelt down by the body of her betrothed.

"And now," said Miller, turning to Palkin, "it is your turn." Did you perhaps, think we had forgotten you?"

Miller turned next to the exiles with these words:

"We have transgressed the criminal laws of this country. We shall henceforth be looked upon as murderers, and be hunted down like wolves and bears. To-morrow I shall procure arms for you all. To-day we must create general terror. This man here is one of our bitterest and most powerful enemies. I need not accuse him before you; you know yourselves of what he is capable. What punishment do you decree against him? What has he deserved?"

"Death!" cried the exiles unanimously.

"Death? Really? Have you thought of nothing better?" laughed Miller scornfully.

"Listen to me! Far in the west of the world, across the ocean, in America, they have a law they call Lynch law. This law says: An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth! This man has had one of us murdered, killed by the knout! I condemn him to the same penalty!"

At these words Palkin changed color, and tore madly at his bonds.

"What! You will dare touch your colonel?"

Miller laughed aloud.

"You shall see what we think of your rank."

In the meantime the exiles looked at each other; some one had to be found who would take upon himself the duty of the executioner. Miller grasped their secret thoughts.

"Well, we must have an executioner? Bring the captain from Irkutsk in here!"

The exiles all agreed, and two men immediately went to the inspector's house.

"Listen to me, although I do not know you," said Palkin now. "Don't do this. Do not disgrace a superior officer by striking him with the nagaika. Rather kill me at a blow, at once! What harm did I ever do you?"

Miller interrupted him angrily.

"You pretend not to know me, and ask me what harm you have done me. And yet you arrested me at the same time with the Ace of Hearts, and I owe it to you that I am here in exile!"

"I only did my duty at that time."

"Perhaps you also murdered this man from duty, who was my friend? You only gratify me immensely by your prayers, which show me what cowards you are, after all."

Palkin, now convinced that nothing could prevent his destiny from being fulfilled, showed contempt, and boastfully said:

"Do what you choose, robber! You shall see how a colonel of the gendarmes can die. You shall not hear my voice, and see how differently from your friend I shall bear your torment!"

"We'll see!" said Miller.

The door opened, and four of the exiles dragged the captain in. He trembled and looked deadly pale; when he saw the corpses

lying about he fell on his knees and cried, addressing Miller:

"Pardon me! Mercy!"

Miller kicked him back with his foot.

"Get up, dog! You shall escape with your life if you obey our orders."

"Whatever you order I'll do it cheerfully."

"I have sentenced this man here to receive 500 blows with the nagaika. That is your duty, as you are an officer of the police. Carry out this sentence and your life shall be spared!"

The captain sprang up.

"A knout! Give me the knout! I understand that art to perfection. You shall see it!"

With these words he took the instrument of torture in his hands, approaching Palkin and letting the leather strap whizz through the air. At the same instant, however, he started back; he had recognized in the bound prisoner his terrible colonel.

"That man I am to beat? No, never!"

"Well," said Miller, "then you will have to die, too. Comrades this vermin writhing at our feet is one of our worst and cruellest enemies. He has the death of many a brother on his conscience. You are all of you soldiers, and therefore it is no disgrace to any one to carry out the sentence which I pronounce. It is death for the captain of Irkutsk, and death by being shot. We have only two guns, but they will suffice. Two men forward!"

Instantly two exiles advanced who had once been dependent on the hated captain, and had suffered accordingly.

The hesitation of the captain had, however, been founded only upon the fear of the inferior before the superior. When he saw death so near to himself his apprehensions vanished and he cried:

"Stop, I'll inflict the punishment!"

"First tear off the gold lace of his uniform," commanded Miller.

"Consider!" cried Palkin. "You are committing treason against the Czar."

The captain saw only death threatening him visibly. Like a wolf he fell upon the colonel, tore off the lace and the whole uniform.

"Consider!" cried Palkin once more. "It is high treason!"

The captain, half insane with fear, tore off his shirt also, leaving the broad back of the colonel of the gendarmes bare. The exiles looked curiously at the proceeding.

"Captain, take time to reflect!" cried Palkin once more.

"Strike!" commanded Miller.

The nagaika whizzed through the air, and Palkin uttered a cry that went through marrow and bone as Russians say.

"Captain, strike harder, if you wish to save your life!"

The man struck almost without knowing what he did. At the 20th blow Palkin roared like a wild beast.

"Rather kill me at once, but cease torturing me!"

Miller laughed aloud.

"Did I not say so? You have weakened very quickly. Captain, mind, if you do not use the nagaika well—"

Miller's revenge was however, not to be complete. Suddenly one of the exiles who has stood sentinel, rushed in exclaiming:

"Take care! A troop of soldiers is approaching the village. We must have been careless and allowed one of the Cossacks to escape."

"Let us escape!" cried Miller. At the same time he drew his dagger and threw it at Palkin, but the hut was too dark and the dagger stuck in the post without injuring Palkin. Miller jumped out of the window; all the others had scattered in a moment. Helen alone remained near the body of Popoff.

She did not listen to one of the exiles who asked her to go with them. The captain alone saw and heard nothing; he continued pitifully to inflict blow after blow. "Only when all the exiles had left and the room had become quiet, he looked around, and lo! he was alone with Palkin, Helen only kneeling at her betrothed's side. The heavy tread of approaching soldiers, the rattling of arms became audible. The captain became aware that help came for Palkin. Instantly the wretch fell on his knees before the bound colonel.

"Pardon me! I was compelled to do it!"

The revengeful look of his superior, however, changed his mind. He pulled Miller's dagger out of the post, and raised it before Palkin's eyes with the words:

"Die! then you will betray no one!"

At the same moment, however, a strong hand seized him from behind. An officer of Cossacks held him. A troop of soldiers rushed in now and occupied the hut.

"Do not let that traitor escape you," cried Palkin gathering all his remaining strength. "Arrest that woman also!"

Overcome with pain and fury, the colonial