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NARKA, THE NIHILIST.

By KATHLEEN O'MEARA.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Narka was very miserable after this first meeting with Sibil, that she had looked forward to so longingly. She would not confess to herself that she attached any importance to that story of Basil's engagement; still it haunted her and poisoned her peace of mind. She could not sleep. In the middle of the night she got up and struck a light, and by way of calming herself read over Basil's letters. They were few, and they were generally short, and always guarded in expression; cold love-letters, most lovers would have called them; but to Narka listening to catch every word he says. This, she knew, was why he had not written now to tell her of his immediate arrival. Still he might have contrived to make her a sign somehow. Then, again, she remembered how necessary caution was at such a crisis, how fearful he must be of exciting suspicion. She took out her ring, and the sight of it seemed to berke and reassure her. She kissed it, and blew out her candle and went back to bed.

"I am like that woman," she said to herself, "who declared she did not believe in ghosts, but that she was mortally afraid of them."

Two days elapsed. Narka was at her piano when the door opened and let in a sudden puff of violet light. The violet announced Sibil before she had time to announce herself by a joyous exclamation. "He will be here on the 15th! In seven days! Can you believe it? Can you believe it?"

She kissed Narka, and sank down on the sofa and pulled off her gloves; the first thing Sibil did when she wanted to talk was to pull off her gloves. Those nervous, dimpled, bejewelled, little hands played a language of their own, without whose help much of her speech would have been incomplete.

"Narka, put on your bonnet and come off with me. I can't enjoy my happiness fully unless I have you to share it. Gaston is an angel; but he is a man; he can't understand. No one but you can sympathize with me, and I feel that I will be able to tell you Basil's news, and married, and safe out of mischief. I have been to the Krinsky's. Marie is radiant. But we have no time to lose to get ready the soiree for the 15th. It falls on a Wednesday, which is unlucky, as that is my day. It will be a bore if he comes in the afternoon. But he will most likely arrive by the evening train. You know the 16th is Marie's birthday. I am going to the 16th to order my dress. Put on your things and come with me. It will amuse you, dearest. Come!"

Narka did as she was told: fate seemed to be making sport of her, making her play comedy in spite of herself. She was in no mood to be amused, and yet Sibil was right, the ordering of the dress did amuse her. It amused her to see the mobility with which her companion sprang away from Basil and into the carriage, and the question of toilette. It amused her to see the devout attention which the man dress-maker bestowed on the matter. The consultation lasted half an hour, and was conducted on both sides with the gravity befitting the importance of the subject.

"Madame la Comtesse may rest satisfied; her dress will be the event of the season," Worth remarked, with quiet assurance, as he flung aside the costly stuffs he had been coiling and looping to illustrate his idea.

Sibil was flushed, but cheerful and confident. "And now, dearest," she said, in Russian, to Narka, "you must order a dress;" and without giving her time to answer she turned to Worth: "Mademoiselle is in mourning, as you see, but she wants you to make her a white dress that can be worn at a soiree de contrast. The potentate of fashion fixed his eyes on Narka, as if to take in the characteristics of line and color that were to guide him. He called for white tissues, and proceeded to roll out velvets and gazes round Narka as if she had been a statue. He then made notes and lines on his carnet, and handing it to her, "I think, mademoiselle, something in this style will suit you," he said, in French. Narka uttered an exclamation of surprise. It might have been taken from the garment she had invented for herself at Yrakov.

"It will require a little relief," observed Worth: "a gold buckle here on the tunic, and a clasp on the shoulder fastening the long sleeves. Would that be too great a concession to ask?"

"Not the least," interposed Sibil. "Your Russian gold ornaments will suit beautifully," she said, turning to Narka. "You must bring them when you come to try on the dress."

When they got out on the stairs, Narka said: "How foolish of you, Sibil! My white casimere would have done perfectly. This is only a second edition of it, and will cost a hundred times more."

"If Worth could hear you!" Sibil's laugh rang out clear on the staircase. "Nonsense! I want you to look your best. You are going to sing. I have decided for a concert instead of a ball, and it was chiefly on your account. I want you to shine out as a star to all my friends. Marie is going to sing with our cousin Henri de Beaurillon, and I shall have several good artists, but you will outshine them all. Mind, you are to be in splendid voice!"

They drove about giving orders at the shops for some hours. Narka had to go back with Sibil and spend the evening. After dinner she had to sing. Sibil declared her voice was finer than ever, but M. de Beaurillon remembered how that love song at Yrakov had melted the heart in his breast, and he felt that though the instrument was still beautiful, the passionate soul which had inspired it that night was absent or silent.

Every day for the next six days Narka was at the Rue St. Dominique almost from morning till night. There was no escaping from Sibil. "I can't do without you, dearest," she repeated; "I want your sympathy and your calm strength to support me through this nervous time."

Madame de Beaurillon's house was the apex of the world in which she moved; the domestic events which had closed it for a time had been bewailed as social calamities, and the announcement that it was going to be opened on so brilliant an occasion was received with general satisfaction. Sibil wanted Narka to take the management of the musical programme; but Narka refused; she knew it would bring her into immediate, perhaps intimate, contact with Princess Marie, and there were limits to what she could bear. She was in constant terror of meeting Marie at the Rue St. Dominique; but fortune spared her that trial, although Sibil had made more than one appointment to introduce them. She was presented to a number of other ladies, who assured her they were "ravished to make her acquaintance." It would have been pleasant enough to be welcomed by these high-bred French women if Narka had not felt that she was under false appearances. Would they have been ravished to make her acquaintance if they had known she was going to carry off the prize so many of them were coveting for a daughter or a sister?

Since that letter from the Prince announcing Basil's arrival for the 15th there had been no news from St. Petersburg. Narka would not own to herself that she was frightened, in fact, but she was. On Tuesday afternoon, the day before Basil was to arrive, she was with Sibil, when the servant brought in a telegram. It was from the Prince: "Expect Basil Wednesday."

"How delightful!" exclaimed Sibil; "he will come to find us all en fete to welcome him! If only my father had said 'morning' or 'evening'! It will be tiresome if he arrives in the evening just as the people are flocking in. Dear me, how dreadful the uncertainty!" She moved about, and sat down, and got up again, and was fluttered and ecstatic and alarmed and impatient all in a minute.

M. de Beaurillon thrust his hands into his pockets, and leaned against the mantel, and gazed with serio-comic gravity at his wife. "How you Russians do dramatize every crisis in life!" he said, putting his head to one side with a movement that resembled Marguerite, and he turned to Narka. The expression of her face said all that was in her mind. She was not dramatizing there, it was a poignant emotion that she was straining every nerve to keep under control. What need was there for this fierce effort at self-restraint?

"There is always something about that girl that I cannot understand," M. de Beaurillon said within himself, and he looked away.

At Sibil's request he took up the railway guide, and made it evident to her that Basil must come by a morning train, so that the excitement of the soiree would not be made too overpowering by the emotion of receiving him in the midst of five hundred guests. Sibil wanted Narka to come and sleep at her house on the eve of the concert; but Narka had a series of reasons—all foolish ones, Sibil thought—to prove that this would be a most inconvenient arrangement for her.

"Her secret soul she was convinced that Basil would arrive by the early train, and come straight to her before going to Sibil. The idea of meeting him in Sibil's presence was too dreadful to be contemplated. She could never go through the ordeal without betraying herself. And yet, after all, she reflected, did it matter so very much? A few days, a few hours probably, sooner or later, and the crisis must come."

When it came, how would Sibil meet it? This question kept perpetually recurring to Narka, and filled her with an anguish of uncertainty which even the joy of meeting Basil could not banish from her mind.

Wednesday morning dawned, and it found her watching. She rose feverishly and unrefreshed, and spent the morning combing and going from the window. Every cab that drove up the street made her heart leap. But the early hours went by, noon came, and no Basil, and no news from Sibil.

"He will come by the evening train, and I shall have to meet him before Sibil!" she thought. And then a terror seized upon her, and she resolved not to go. But this panic did not last. It was quickly followed by a feeling of defiance, and a longing to let Sibil and all the world know that she was Basil's fiancée, and ready to brave the whole world rather than give him up.

The day dragged heavily on till evening, and then it was time to dress. Narka rolled up her shining gold hair, and rebelled herself in the wonderful white draperies that Worth had combined out of soft and costly materials, and then clasped on her golden necklace and bracelets, and waited for the carriage to come for her.

As she beheld herself reflected in the long mirror of the wardrobe, her heart exulted, not from any sense of vulgar vanity—she was too proud and too chastened by sorrow for so mean a vice as vanity—but she rejoiced in her beauty and Basil's sake. "He will be glad to see me looking well amongst other women," she said to herself, with a soft thrill of happiness, and the flush of love and conscious power made her cheek glow.

When she reached the Rue St. Dominique, M. de Beaurillon had gone to meet Basil. Sibil was dressed, and sat watching impatiently for the return of the brougham. Narka, though outwardly calm, was trembling with excitement.

"You will be the Queen of Beauty tonight as well as the Queen of Song, my Narka," Sibil exclaimed, in frank admiration, when she beheld her. "How pleased Basil will be to find you looking so well! Come, and let us see how the rooms look lighted. It will help to pass the time while we are waiting. Stop! there is a carriage driving in." She flew to the landing, and called out, "Nonsense! messieurs!"

"The groom of the chambers answered from the hall, 'M. le Comte has returned alone, Madame la Comtesse.' The sight of the fortress will have a sobering effect."

Narka stifled a cry, and let the letter fall on her lap.

"Well," said Sibil, coming up and standing before her, "what do you say to this? The infatuated boy! It must be some woman he met in Italy. And with a foreign woman we are powerless. She can't be a Russian, or my father would have said so. If she were a Russian, it would be easy to deal with her. A threat of the knout would soon bring her on her knees." She shut her right hand with a quick inward movement that was too expressive to be mistaken; those soft, dimpled hands were itching for the knout to scourge the woman who had come between Basil and the pride of the Zorokoffs.

Sibil was horrible to look at; her white teeth showed between her parted lips; her words came hissing; her blue eyes glittered—they never flashed when she was excited, they glittered—her features were convulsed, her whole frame shaken with passion. Narka covered her face with her hands to shut out the sight.

"Oh, Sibil!" she murmured.

"Yes, it is too loathsome to contemplate," cried Sibil, misunderstanding the gesture and the exclamation; "could you have believed Basil such a weak fool? If we even knew who and where this creature is, we might buy her off. That is our only chance, as she is a foreigner. We must buy her off!"

"But if she loves Basil—" Narka ventured, hesitating.

"Love him! A creature like that! Allow me to say, Sibil, that you have sounded devilish. She looked like an incarnate devil, or some avenging pythoness, with her glittering eyes, and her small head reared, the blue sheen of her satin dress shimmering in snake-like folds round her tall figure. Narka could not believe her senses. Was this the Sibil she had loved all her life and worshipped as the type of all that was good and lovable?—the Sibil who was so tender to suffering, so generous to her peasants, so indulgent to their vices, so ready to forgive their lies and thefts and wrong-doings? What evil spirit had entered into her? And if she knew the name of the woman against whom this outburst of hate was directed would the knowledge be a welcome relief, or would it only turn the current of her scorn and anger toward the culprit?"

The gray and brilliant crowd kept streaming in, and soon the spacious suite of salons was filled. At 11 o'clock the concert began. It opened with a fine orchestral performance; then Marie Krinsky sang her duet; this was followed by several other pieces, vocal and instrumental; and then it was Narka's turn. The suspense of the day, culminating in the disappointment at the end of the night so excited and exhausted her that she felt incapable of singing a note; her tongue was parched, her throat felt as if it were paralyzed. When M. de Beaurillon went up and offered her his arm, she did not move, but looked up at him entreatingly.

"I can't sing!" she said.

It seemed cruel to insist, but he felt that she could not help it. "You will be terribly disappointed," he said, after a moment's hesitation.

Narka stood up. The movement, the sudden resolution, seemed to say, "Then I will do it or die."

She took his arm and walked to the centre of the platform. Her cheeks were delicately flushed, her great lustrous eyes had a flame in them, her coral lips, clear out as a cameo against the ivory skin, were parted tremulously, while an air of incomparable dignity and modesty heightened the effect of her rare loveliness.

There was a profound hush through the crowded rooms; the orchestra played the opening accompaniment, and Narka lifted up her voice and sang.

M. de Beaurillon was right. She could sing. After the few notes assured her that she could sing, she sang with a voice, her voice poured out like a crystal stream, rising and swelling and trilling with as little effort as a bird's. The audience were quite carried away, and when the song was over they burst into a salvo of rapturous applause. Sibil drifted with her serpentine grace across the platform and kissed Narka, and other ladies, following this example, gathered about her, kissing and congratulating. All round her people were exclaiming, "What genius!" "How beautiful she is!" The gentlemen were clamoring for the honor of being presented. It was one of those moments that bring with them a kind of intoxication to the calmest and wisest.

Yet there was something timid in the glance of Narka's large dark eyes that seemed to depreciate this homage and admiration. If only Basil had been there to enjoy it and to justify it! Without him, she felt the triumph was not wholly hers; she was receiving it under false pretences.

M. de Beaurillon was charming. "Je suis tres fier de ma belle-soeur," he said, presenting her to a venerable duchess whose smile was social distinction in the great world.

Even in Basil's absence it was something to have been thus welcomed by the friends to whom he would soon present her as his wife. As she drove home, Narka was conscious that it had been a brilliant evening; Sibil had been perfect; everybody had welcomed and admired her; and she was Basil's affianced wife.

CHAPTER XIX.

Two days went by, and there was no news from Basil. On the morning of the third day the brougham came from the Hotel de Beaurillon with a message requesting Narka to come at once. Narka obeyed the summons, full of anxiety as to his meaning. She found Sibil walking up and down the library in a state of violent though suppressed excitement.

"There! read that," she said, drawing a letter from her pocket, and holding it out to Narka, without arresting her walk. Narka, sick with suspense, sat down and read the letter. It was from Prince Zorokoff. He had discovered on the very eve of Basil's departure that the boy had entangled himself in some promise of

marriage to a woman of low condition, and that this had been at the bottom of his desire to get out of Russia. "He tried to deny it at first," wrote the prince, "but I put the holy image before him, and he bade him swear the story was a lie. He did not dare do it, and he ended by declaring that it was true, and that he would never marry Marie K, or any other woman but the one he loved. I said if he married her I would curse him. I gave him three months to come to his senses and his duty. If that does not do it, I will have him circumscribed under surveillance of the police at Kronstadt. The sight of the fortress will have a sobering effect."

Narka stifled a cry, and let the letter fall on her lap.

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"I will go to Marguerite," she said, and she arose and dressed herself in the gray twilight of the winter's morning.

CHAPTER XX.

Narka was just starting for La Villette, when a vehicle stopped at the door. She looked out, and saw Sibil's brougham. Before there was time to consider how she should endure this new ordeal, it was made evident that Sibil was not in the brougham, for the footman jumped down with a note in his hand, and disappeared under the porte cochere. Presently there was a ring at the door. Endoxie had gone out. "I will not open," Narka thought. "I do not doubt asking me to go to her, and I can't go; I won't go."

The servant rang three times, and then gave it up. The brougham drove away, and Narka, after waiting a few minutes to make sure of its being at a distance, went down-stairs.

Passing the lodge, the concierge came out and handed her a note. "The footman rang at mademoiselle's door, but no one answered him," said the woman.

The note was from Sibil.

Come to me at once, darling. I am in a sea of anguish. Baby has the small-pox; I am half mad.

"Your own Sibil!"

"Poor little angel!" said Narka, with a pang. But his illness at this crisis was a boon to her, inasmuch as it would keep Sibil away, and absorb her, and draw her mind from the woman she wished to scourge.

It was a miserable morning. The rain had been falling heavily all night. Every rut and channel was turned into a pool, and a cold, drizzly rain was still falling. Narka had used cabs, and freely enough, since she had been in Paris, but the stern reign of economy which had suddenly set in reminded her that omnibuses were a cheaper mode of conveyance; she asked her way to the nearest station, but when she got there it was so crowded that she had to push on to the counter for a number, and then she pushed her way out again. An omnibus was coming up, and she slipped a crowd trooped after it with their umbrellas spread, looking like a whole or some huge bird in the wake of a ship. They looked intensely ridiculous "making tail." Narka did not care to add her umbrella to the show; besides, she might be kept waiting an hour for a seat. Was it not better to take a cab on one's own account? As she was balancing the question in her mind, a gentleman close to her called out:

"Will this take me to La Villette?"

"No, monsieur," said the conductor.

"The blue omnibus there, with a corresponding," the gentleman hurried away, and Narka, with an inarticulate exclamation of thankfulness for her escape, crossed the street after him to where the blue omnibus was standing, empty; they got in almost together, and took seats opposite one another. The stranger was a tall, lean man, with a sallow complexion and marked features, carefully dressed, with a certain air of distinction. Narka more than once caught his eyes fastened upon her. It so happened that they stopped at the same place; the stranger got out first, assisted her to alight, touched his hat and went on his way.

Narka stood in the middle of the street, waiting for a break in the stream of carts and cabs to cross over. As she glanced eagerly right and left she described a little higher up, as usual figure in the costume of a Sister of Charity, waiting like herself to cross the busy thoroughfare. There are certain situations in which even Melpomene could not look dignified; for instance, hopping over the puddles with petticoats slightly kilted on a wet day; and yet as Narka watched Marguerite going in almost together, and took seats opposite one another. The stranger was a tall, lean man, with a sallow complexion and marked features, carefully dressed, with a certain air of distinction. Narka more than once caught his eyes fastened upon her. It so happened that they stopped at the same place; the stranger got out first, assisted her to alight, touched his hat and went on his way.

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"Narka!" exclaimed Marguerite, in glad surprise, when they met on the footpath. "How did you get here? Did you walk?"

"No; I came in the omnibus. Where are you coming from?"

"I have been to the Rue du Bac. I got an omnibus to the Madeleine, with a correspondence, but when I got out there was such a crowd I saw I should have to wait an hour for a place. So I started off on foot. Life is too short to be spent waiting for the omnibus. Oh, that horrid man!" she exclaimed, casting a glance full of something as near hatred as her sweet face could express at some one coming out of a shop. "I should like to see that man flayed alive."

Narka followed the direction of the glance, and to her surprise saw that the object of this murderous desire was the gentleman who had been her vis-a-vis in the omnibus.

"Who is that man?" she asked, as the stranger passed them.

"He is a Prussian; his name is Dr. Schenk. He stole away our dear old dog Tempete, and put him to death. Nobody saw him doing it, so we could not attack him, but there is no doubt he did it. His business is to bribe little boys—our boys—to catch dogs that he tries experiments on. He ties them down, and cuts them up, and tortures them alive. He is a fiend."

TO BE CONTINUED.

Sin Brings Suffering.

The lines of suffering on almost every human countenance have been deepened, if not traced there, by unfaithfulness to conscience, by departure from duty. To do wrong is the surest way to bring suffering; no wrong deed ever failed to bring it. Those sins which are followed by no palpable pain are yet terribly avenged, even in this life. They abridge our capacity of happiness, impair our relish for innocent pleasure, and increase our insensibility to suffering. They spoil us of the armor of a pure conscience, and of trust in God, without which we are naked amid hosts of foes, and are vulnerable by all the change of life. Thus, to do wrong is to inflict the surest injury on our own peace. No enemy can do us equal harm with what we do ourselves whenever and wherever we violate any moral or religious obligation.

Montreal, Que., Jan. 2, 1895.

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