

you—a secret, perhaps. It is my secret, and, strangely enough, it is the hag's secret at the same time. The only difference is, she thinks she has kept me from knowing some things that she knows,——things of some importance to me."

Paul looked interested.

"To be over with it, I'll begin at the first and tell it all," said Nickolai, settling down more comfortably in his chair. "Something over fifteen years ago, nearly eighteen, when I think of it, a man named Mazurink was found guilty of taking a hand in an outbreak in St. Petersburg. He had really never taken any part in it, but a young man who had an eye to business found out that Mazurink was proprietor of a nice little estate in the neighbourhood of Moscow. The estate was not large, but it looked comfortable to our young gentleman, who, by the way, had military ambitions, and he played his hand so well that Mazurink was given fifteen years in Siberia."

Paul sat back slowly and looked at Nickolai without speaking.

"Then what did our enterprising young soldier do?" continued Nickolai. "Going to Moscow, he learned that Mazurink had left a wife and two children, a boy and a girl. When he found the woman, she had disposed of both children, being unable to manage the estate to her own profit, and was reduced to poverty and forced to look for work to keep herself alive. Now our young gallant, true to his calling, approached her in a time of need and found her quite amiable,—do you understand? He reasoned things out coolly to himself. One thing was clear—she must live, but just how to live in Moscow was a little difficult for a woman to decide in terms of her own modesty. The consequence was that money was taken in exchange for virtue, and the woman was kept from starvation for a month or so. At the end of that time word was received that Mazurink was dead.

"The way being thus opened up, nothing was to hinder the youth in realizing his ambitions. At his request, the woman produced a false heir in the person

of a ragged youngster from the street. Through him the ambitious youth gained control of the property and the woman lived under his support until he became tired of her and passed her into the hands of an obscure acquaintance who has her yet. Then the lucky young devil married a pretty little maiden more of his own age and choice."

Nickolai paused and smiled serenely as he took the pipe from his mouth slowly and looked at Paul.

"Now," he said, "don't be startled when I throw some light upon it all. The wife of Mazurink has become—the hag."

Paul started, but an odd smile lighted the face of the speaker.

"The lucky young devil of a soldier was your friend, Nickolai Nataroff," and he gave a confident little chuckle. "And you, Paul Nataroff, are the false heir whom the hag produced. Your real name was never known to me, and doubtless never will be, but you couldn't wish a better than Nataroff, and I have been a pretty good old uncle to you."

Paul lowered his eyes and sat in silent meditation while Nickolai continued.

"And now for the muddle out of which you are to help me. The hag seems to have lost all trace of her son. I have good reason to think he is dead. At any rate she no longer makes any mention of him as she once did. So you see there is no cause for alarm from that quarter. Not one here knows her real name,—she may have forgotten it herself, but we can give her a name easily enough that will serve for all practical purposes.

"Another difficulty has arisen, however. While she seems to have lost track of her son, she has kept her eyes upon her daughter who has lately come of age. Now, the rub comes here. While I have reaped the profits, the hag has never really surrendered the proprietorship of the estate, and my game has been played successfully thus far through virtue of the fact that she has been kept in hiding. Once she becomes known as the real owner of the estate, I am done for."

He looked rather serious, and shuffled uneasily in his seat.