

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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Neslerov came and presented a young officer, a member of a noble family, and she asked Olga for a waiver. She thanked the colonel, and they did not meet again. The dancing continued till a very late hour, after which there was a supper served with the true Russian prodigality. Olga was becoming weary, but she maintained her usual spirits. She chanced to pass near the governor and heard a young officer speaking.

"Lieutenant Dermansky is not present. Whom will you name as the lieutenant of the palace guard?"

"None will be necessary," answered Neslerov. "It will be at his post. As it is nearly morning, no more will be necessary. Dismiss the guard, take them to the banquet hall and give them supper."

Soon after that Olga found occasion to cross the hall to the offices of police. People were passing to and fro, and she could think it strange that the princess went where she pleased. She found at the end of the suit of rooms devoted to police affairs a small apartment, the door of which was closed. Turning, to see that Neslerov was not in the hall—she did not care for the ghost—she entered. Sitting there in a lonely state was a man. He was not particularly agreeable looking and seemed to be of a stupid order.

"Are you not being feasted with the others?" asked the princess.

"No; they forget poor Itzig," was the reply.

"What is your duty here?"

"To guard the door to the passage you see. Stupid! No one could enter. The key never leaves the pocket of the superintendent of police."

Jansky had been constant in his attendance at the bottle and already showed the effect of his heavy potations.

"You shall not be overlooked," said Olga. "I will send you some refreshments."

She first went to her room and returned to the banquet hall. She ordered one of the servants to open a fresh bottle of wine, which was done. Then a tray was prepared, and she ordered it taken to Itzig. Quietly, without a second's delay, a small vial in her hand was emptied into the wine.

"Take this also," she said.

When she returned to the throne, the guests were leaving. They came in throngs to bid her adieu, and she saw the last one leave. Jansky, Neslerov and the servants were left.

"I am exhausted," said Neslerov. "I feel completely worn out. And you, cousin, must be weary also."

"I am," she answered. "I shall not be long getting to sleep."

"Nor I. I hope you enjoyed your ball."

"Very much. I thank you for the kind attention. And now good night."

"Good night."

"I'm going, but I shall first make a round of inspection," said Jansky. "There being no guard this morning, it will do no harm. It will not be daylight for two hours."

They parted, and Olga went to her room, but not to sleep. Therese was asleep in a chair, waiting for her mistress.

"Therese," said Olga.

"Oh, pardon me! I was asleep," said Therese, starting up.

"Hush! I do not wish any one to hear us. I have work for us both to do."

"I am ready. Command me, princess."

"I know, faithful Therese, but this is work that will require all your nerve. Listen. The ball is over and the guests have gone. Chance has favored us tonight. It has enabled me to plot and plan for what we are to do. Neslerov dismissed the guard, and

there will be in a short time no one awake in the palace. The superintendent of police carries the key to the dungeons, and he is now half drunk. The door to the dungeons is guarded by a stupid fool named Itzig. I found him at his post, and sent him a bottle of wine and tray of food. Into the wine I poured that vial of toothache medicine I obtained from you. It is enough to make any one sleep for hours. Where Jansky sleeps I do not know; but we must find him. We must wait—It is too soon—but in half an hour it will be safe to descend. Jansky said it would not be daylight for two hours. That will give us an hour and a half to work."

"And that work?"

"To release the American and Vladimir from the dungeons and send them to old Paulpoff to get him to safety. He must not be harmed, for we want his testimony."

"Good!" said Therese, with a shiver. "It is grand—but dangerous."

Olga opened a traveling bag and took therefrom a silver mounted revolver.

"I do not wish to kill," she said; "but if we are discovered there will be trouble, and I must succeed. Come now, for the honor of the Neslerovs and the house of Graslov."

The princess opened her door and peered into the corridor. The lights were still burning as brightly as during the ball, but no one was in sight.

"Come—all is silent as the grave," she said. "Even if we meet some one, it will not cause suspicion."

She led the way, and Therese, shivering with terror, followed. The great stairway and hall were deserted, but from the little guardroom at the end of the police quarters there came the sound of curses.

"Stupid blockhead!" said the voice of Jansky. "Drunk! Who brought him this bottle of wine?"

With a quick motion Olga whisked Therese into the same room where she had crouched to listen to Jansky and Unsethoph. There came the sound of unsteady footsteps. Jansky, with the unfinished bottle of Itzig's wine in his hand, went drunkenly to his office.

"I'll finish this—then go to bed," he muttered.

He finished it and it finished him. It was not ten minutes before his own eyes closed in that terrible sleep from which he could not arouse himself until the effect of the drug had passed off.

"Come!" said Olga.

Nervously and quickly she rifled the sleeping man's pockets and found a bunch of keys. Swiftly, then, these two rushed to Itzig's room and, shutting the door, barred it on the inside.

"Now we can work without molestation," said Olga.

She tried several keys in the lock of an iron door that formed part of the rear wall, but without success. Finally she found one that turned the rusty bolt, and the door swung open. This door led into a small passage, in which there were various articles—lanterns, whips, chains and weapons. Olga quickly closed a lantern which showed it had been recently used and lighted it. At the end of the passage was an iron grating forming a door, and this, too, she unlocked with Jansky's keys.

Beyond this was a flight of stone steps leading downward, and then all was darkness. Olga, holding the lantern above her head, led the way down the steps. The stones were cold and damp and slippery as she neared the bottom. The dark atmosphere sent a chill through her, but the brave girl did not falter. Therese came creeping after her, shivering with fear. They did not count the number of steps, but knew there were many. At last they stood on a cold stone floor.

"Now, which way?" she asked, holding the lantern to flash its light as far as possible around her.

She could see that they were in a large chamber from which various passages broke away in every direction.

"We must not linger—to lose time would be to lose the game," she said. "Choose this passage and follow it to the end."

She turned into the nearest passage, and the gleams of the lantern were reflected from slippery walls. As she walked she examined these walls for doors. There were arches that led to other passages and smaller ones that opened into chambers that had evidently been once used for prison cells, for chains were hanging on the walls.

The lantern in Olga's hand flashed its light into every nook and cranny until at last she reached the end of that passage. Making sure Therese was close behind, she turned her steps into another passage, running apparently at right angles with the other. This she traversed in the same way until the very bigness of the place and its silence began to awe her.

The first courage that had led her to the desperate act gradually gave way to the awful gloom and mystery of the place. But in its stead there came a determination not to relinquish the search until she had found the unfortunate victims of Neslerov's hate or proved that they were not there. She walked on, gradually increasing her pace. A door at last greeted her vision—a real door that swung on hinges.

"At last, perhaps," she said.

She tried her strength against the door, and, though it was not locked, yet she could not open it sufficiently to enter.

"Therese, help me," she said, setting the lantern down upon the floor.

The two placed their shoulders against the door and pushed, and it suddenly opened. Therese was precipitated headlong into the chamber. A rush of foul air almost stifled Olga. There was a peculiar sound, as if Therese had fallen upon a heap of something. She was whispering in her terror.

Olga seized the lantern and dashed into the chamber. A cry of horror escaped her. She was in what seemed to be an old tomb. At least, there were heaps of bones scattered about, and into one of these poor Therese had pitched headlong.

Olga swung the lantern and, near to the spot where Therese lay, two skeletons hung on chains. One had lost its head, but the other, by reason of being fastened in a peculiar way, had retained its grinning top piece.

Therese was in a dead faint.

Olga was now in a terrible difficulty. She knelt by the side of Therese.

"Oh!" she said, "if I had but some water! She will never recover in this place!"

Setting the lantern down, she dragged the woman from the place of horrors and laid her down on the cold floor of the passage. Then she swung the door shut.

Again she began working over Therese. Olga saw that she was suffering a severe nervous shock, and the only hope of restoration of her senses was immediate removal from the place.

Swinging her lantern upon her arm, she seized hold of Therese and began dragging her along the passage, going backward in order to exert a greater pull on the unconscious woman.

In some way—she never knew how—she lost her bearings and came suddenly against a great stone pillar which stood in the center of a sort of court, from which passages ran like the spokes of a wheel.

For a moment she stood there half unwilling to believe the truth. Then, as the horrible fact was borne in upon her, she let the shoulders of Therese lie neglected on the floor while she stared helplessly around her. She could not discover the one through which she had come.

She was lost!

CHAPTER XIV.
OUT OF THE CHAINS.

THE horror of the situation was so great that Princess Olga's brain could not accept it all at once.

Not only was she lost, but there was a certainty that if she was rescued, she would also be discovered in this act against the rule of Neslerov. Powerful was her family, she was now absolutely at the mercy of the governor of Tomsk, whom she knew to be merciless. Who could ever know that Princess Olga, the rich and beautiful Neslerov, died in the dungeons under her cousin's rule?

To her vivid imagination already the horrors of starvation loomed up. To lie in that cold, dark place and suffer and slowly waste away, to lose her mind, to rave in madness—all these thoughts burned into her brain. Then, looking at poor Therese, the girl's heart was stirred with pity.

"I am not only a suicide, but I am a murderer as well," she said. "I should not have induced Therese to come."

Therese stirred.

"Ah, Therese! Good Therese! Speak to me, will you not?" pleaded the princess. "You should not have come. It was horrible, that death! And perhaps I brought you here to die!"

"I don't want to die!" exclaimed Therese, sitting upright as though the word had acted like an electric shock.

"I do not wish to die either; but we are lost, Therese."

"Lost? How can we be lost? Are we not under the palace?"

"Yes, we are under the palace, but we are nevertheless lost. I have lost the way. See all these passages? I do not know by which one we reached this terrible place."

"We seem to be almost at the center. They cannot all lead to the stairs."

"No, certainly not. And there is little chance of telling which does lead to the stairs. I do not even know in which direction the stairs lie. We are lost, Therese, and will perhaps die here of starvation."

"You must not! You shall not!" exclaimed Therese, made stronger now by the evident need of some one to assist the princess. She did not think so much of herself as she did of Olga.

"There must be a way out and close at hand," said Olga.

The terrible silence acted upon the shaken nerves of poor Therese, and

she began to scream hysterically.

"I will not die! Heaven help us both! Help! Help! Help!"

The screams of the distressed woman rang in weird echoes through the caverns.

"The echo's mock me!" she cried. "Is there no one to help?"

"Hark!" said Olga. "I think I heard a voice."

"A voice! I heard a sound of this kind—and they are all prisoners!"

"No, but this was a man's voice. Wait till I see it."

The caverns were still.

Olga's clear voice. "We are lost in the caverns—two women. Is there any one here?"

"Here, here, here!" came back the echoes.

"I am here—a prisoner!" came an answering cry.

"Here—prisoner—prisoner!" came the echoes.

"Where are you?" called Olga.

"You—you—you!" echoed the mocking caverns.

"I must be near you—the voices sound not far—follow the sound of my whistle!" came a louder voice.

"Whistle—istle—istle!" came the troubled echoes.

Immediately there began, not far from them, the tune of "The Star Spangled Banner." Olga knew it was an American tune and instinctively realized that the person who was guiding them must be the one who had been trying to solve the mystery of Graslov and had been imprisoned by Jansky.

After a few moments she managed to distinguish between the real sound

and the echoes, and began slowly to work her way toward it. Therese, trembling with weakness and terror, followed.

At last the whistle led her into one of the passages, and she swung her lantern high to see where there was a dungeon. It was not far away, and the gleams of the lantern went through the door of a gloomy cell. The light fell upon a man chained to the walls. One chain was around his waist, another held his feet, and each arm was extended and held to the wall by a smaller but stout chain. These chains were built into the wall and their ends locked together.

"Who are you?" asked Olga. "Why are you a prisoner here?"

"My name is Denton," was the reply. "I am an American, and my arrest is an outrage that will not go unpunished."

"I shall not, I promise that, if any of us ever gets out alive."

"But who are you, and what are you doing here?" asked Denton.

"I am a Neslerov and came to liberate you and Vladimir Paulpoff. In the light of her lantern she could see him stare.

"You a Neslerov! When did you come to Tomsk?"

"Two days ago. The governor is a distant relation of mine. I am here upon a mission that you will understand when I speak—the mystery of Graslov."

"You are trying, you are seeking?"

"I am a cousin of that Princess Neslerov who married the son of the Duke of Graslov. Is that sufficient?"

"It is. Then, if we work together, justice will be done."

"First we must work to get out of here," said Olga. "How were these chains fastened?"

"With a small iron key. It was on a long chain, so I presume it hangs in that passage at the head of the stairs. The stairs are not far from this spot. It was not a long distance when I was brought here."

"It may not be far, but in what direction?"

"There was a stupid kind of fellow down here once after I was brought in. He brought me some food. I watched him and think I can guide you to the stairs. Count three passages to the left from that black stone in the wall."

"Yes; this is the third."

"Now go through that till you reach a heap of rubbish in a little court. I remember the rubbish heap, for I stumbled over it. At this rubbish heap the passage divides, and one lane leads to the left and the other to the right. The one on the right will lead you to the stairs."

"Come, Therese."

Taking her lantern, Olga again started, carefully following the directions of Denton. She found the rubbish heap and, taking the passage to the right, soon came to the stairs. She left Therese at the foot of the stairs while she crept softly up.

In the guardroom Itzig still lay snoring, and Olga glanced at the door to make sure the lock had not been disturbed. If a dozen Cossacks had been hammering at the door she would not have filtered now. She searched in the little passage and found a small iron key suspended from a peg by a chain.

"It must be the one," she said, and she seized it and sped below.

"Remain here," she said to Therese, "and if I am lost again you can guide me back to the stairs as the American guided us to him."

She wound her way through the passages and at last reached Denton.

"You are a lovely little woman," he said. "I did not think there was a woman like you in the world—except one."

"I suppose you mean Frances Gordon," said the princess.

"What! Do you know her?"

"I met her at the great fair in Moscow. She was very charitable."

While she talked she tried the key in the locks in the chains and one by one they dropped clanging against the wall, and Denton was free.

"Now, then," she said, "Vladimir Paulpoff is here. Do you know how to find him?"

"No; I do not know where they put him. I know it was not near me, for I have been calling him. I received no answer."

"We cannot remain here in safety much longer," she said. "The daylight will bring activity in the palace. Jansky, superintendent of police, is lying drunk in his office, and Itzig, the guard, is also unconscious. The superintendent will be discovered and there will be an uproar. It will spoil all if we are now discovered."

"We must make haste and find Vladimir," said Denton. "I do not feel that we can leave him. If they discover my absence, they may kill him."

"Find him if you can. If not, I must watch over his welfare till you return."

"Return! From Perm?"

"No. Perm is too far. I have worked to bring the denouement in the palace. I have sent a message to the governor general at Tobolsk. I have with me a woman whose testimony is worth millions. All we need now is what Papa Paulpoff can tell us. You must bring him."

"I will."

He tried to find some clew to the place where Vladimir was incarcerated, but there was nothing to guide him.

"I cannot find him, and I believe he is safer than you will be if Neslerov traps you here. Neither you nor I will ever get out alive. We must leave him."

"Then come, and may God give him his protection till we can give him justice!"

They hurried to the stairs. The door was unlocked, the iron key hung in its accustomed place and the door to the guardroom unbolted. The halls were still lighted by the brilliant lamps of the fete, though daylight was coming on. But there was no one stirring.

"Quick!" said Olga. "Let us understand each other. Therese, who is here as my attendant, is the widow of a servant of the Graslov household—loyal to the old duke. She is willing to tell the truth. Has Paulpoff spoken?"

"Yes. He told me all, and I was about to start for Perm with the portrait of Princess Alexandra when I was arrested by Jansky and brought here."

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"I will."

He tried to find some clew to the place where Vladimir was incarcerated, but there was nothing to guide him.

"I cannot find him, and I believe he is safer than you will be if Neslerov traps you here. Neither you nor I will ever get out alive. We must leave him."

"Then come, and may God give him his protection till we can give him justice!"

They hurried to the stairs. The door was unlocked, the iron key hung in its accustomed place and the door to the guardroom unbolted. The halls were still lighted by the brilliant lamps of the fete, though daylight was coming on. But there was no one stirring.

"Quick!" said Olga. "Let us understand each other. Therese, who is here as my attendant, is the widow of a servant of the Graslov household—loyal to the old duke. She is willing to tell the truth. Has Paulpoff spoken?"

"Yes. He told me all, and I was about to start for Perm with the portrait of Princess Alexandra when I was arrested by Jansky and brought here."

Continued on page 7.

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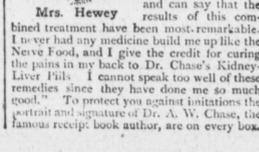
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