

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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"You refer to the unfortunate mystery of Graslov," he said soberly. "It was that, I fear, that ruptured the former friendship. Yet I have insisted and proved that our family was not to blame. It was either an accident or was done by our enemies. Pardon me! I was so glad to see you that I forgot that you must be weary after your journey. Let me have you shown your rooms, and I will order dinner for you when you wish."

"Thank you. We are both hungry. I will join you in ten minutes, and Therese will be ready to go to the servants' dining room in that time."

"You have become a regular cosmopolitan," laughed Neslerov. "Your visits to America and London have almost taken away the traces of our Russian habits."

"Some of them could be well dispensed with," she answered.

In response to his summons a servant appeared and conducted the women to their rooms.

"Now, what devilish luck could have brought her here at this time?" said Neslerov to himself. "I must be cautious. But it is so long she was not born—she can know nothing. But I must be discreet."

"Well, we are here," said the princess to her companion when they were alone. "Now, obey me; let me do the planning. Neslerov must not suspect us. It would ruin all, and there is no telling what he might do. The governor or of a province in Siberia is almost supreme."

Her attendant shuddered. "I lived in dread of Siberia for twenty years," she said, with a shudder. "And now you have brought me here."

"But not as a convict—as a friend, a woman, like myself, resolved to right a wrong."

The princess was soon ready and joined the governor in the dining room. "I have just been thinking, Olga," he said, his face wreathed with smiles, "that it is at least three years since we met. Your face has not changed much, but you are now a woman and were then a little girl. You are one of the most beautiful women in Russia."

"Thank you."

"And I might say, the richest." "Nearly so. But the wealth brings its responsibilities. It is difficult in Russia to do those things that are just and proper with our wealth."

"I never found it so," said the governor, with a laugh. "Perhaps," said Olga, "you are not interested in the question. To me it is a burning one. Our nobles have too much wealth and our lower classes have too little opportunity to rise. It is not so in England, France or America."

"You had better leave those questions for older heads, princess. You will become involved with the government before you know. You were not born to waste your beauty and talents in such matters. You were born to be admired, to enjoy your wealth."

"I do enjoy my wealth and do what good I can with it. As to being admired, I meet few from whom admiration seems to come with sincerity."

"Oh, as to that, you cannot expect to find the courtiers at beauty's court all as glib and outspoken as a drowsy driver."

"I have met some who were," she said, laughing pleasantly. "They are slowly changing the while."

"You have not quenched my thirst for knowledge," said the governor. "If I were in St. Petersburg and you did me the honor to ask me to visit you, it would even then surprise me. But that you have come to Tomsk, more than half way across Siberia, to visit me is, to say the least, amazing."

"My cousin, whom I have never seen," she exclaimed.

There are some barbarisms, but I presume you get accustomed to them in Siberia."

"Yes, in Siberia one gets accustomed to almost anything," he answered. She continued her inspection with interest and suddenly came to a stop before a painting. Neslerov's face became a shade paler.

"My cousin, whom I have never seen," she exclaimed, clapping her hands and gazing rapidly at the picture. Vladimir had painted. "Surely, Nicholas, that must be Princess Alexandra, who married your elder brother."

"I think you are mistaken," said Neslerov. "You surely must have seen Alexandra."

"Yes, when a mere infant. It is only from other portraits that I recognize her. She was very beautiful. Oh, what a terrible sorrow to her! To lose her child, heir to a fine estate and princely title, and then lose her own life, so young, with the horrible mystery still unsolved as to whether she died of grief and a broken heart or by the hand of an enemy. Oh, that mystery of Graslov! Will it ever be solved?"

"I fear not," said Neslerov solemnly. "I did not know you had this picture," said Olga. "It is much finer than any we have at home. It was done by a master hand."

"It was," assented Neslerov. The painting had saddened Olga, and she passed on, making no more of her laughing criticisms. She soon returned to her rooms, where her attendant was awaiting her. The woman's face was pale, and she seemed to be struggling with emotion. Olga stood before her, with a peculiar light in her eyes.

"Therese," she said, "an oil painting of my unfortunate cousin, Princess Alexandra, hangs in Neslerov's own room."

"What?" gasped the woman, starting up. "A strange terror overcame her, she shuddered, and with the whispering cry 'We are lost!' she fell to the floor unconscious."

CHAPTER XII. PRINCESS OLGA BEGINS TO ACT. NOW, Therese, tell me what you have learned. Why did the fact that the picture of Alexandra hangs upon the wall of Neslerov's room make you faint? You have learned something. Tell me."

Therese was sitting in a chair, her face white and drawn, and in her eyes was a bewildered look.

"It was not so much what I heard, princess, as what I knew and suspected," she answered.

"I know what you know. I suspect what you suspect. Tell me what you heard," she said sternly.

"It was in the secret hall," she said in reply to the princess. "I was waiting; no one seemed to ask who I was, and they talked as servants do. Vladimir Pauloff is in danger of his life."

Princess Olga gave a start, but recovered herself.

The princess gave her silvery laugh again.

"You are as conceited at any other nobleman I have met. I did not come to see you. I came, first, to ride on the new railway, second, to study the conditions existing in this part of the empire, and, third, to look into this new proposition of the czar to induce peasants to settle in Siberia along the line of the railway. It is a very good idea, if the country will support settlers."

"It will under proper help from the government at the start," replied Neslerov. "I am glad you came to me. We shall have a fine time making our investigations."

"I notice that you do not seem to have the free use of your arm," said Olga. "Have you been ill or injured?"

"A slight injury. I fell from an unruly horse."

"You must be more cautious. It must have been a wild beast! You have the name of being an excellent horseman."

When their meal was finished, they strolled together through the rooms of the palace.

"I am quite interested in your palace," said the princess. "It is not the finest I have seen, but it is excellent."

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