

## THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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Neslerov was carried to the car by the villagers. The backs of two seats were turned down, a bed was made for him, and he lay there quiet and seemingly content.

"Of course, I know that you are seriously wounded," said Denton to him, "and the possibility of your doing any mischief is small, but I want to tell you before we start that if I catch you at any tricks I will kill you as I would a dog."

Neslerov nodded, and Denton went on the engine.

It was an exciting start, though the audience was small. The villagers stared, then laughed as the little old engine puffed and screeched and scraped as it got under way.

But it had a man in charge of it who was accustomed to overcoming difficulties. And the way he made it glad the heart of the man who had abandoned it on the siding six months before.

In the car was silence. Neslerov was too weak to talk; Frances would not talk to him if he wished. She remained at her end of the car, save to go in mercy to him and offer him water at intervals. At such times he would look up at her with an earnest, inscrutable expression on his face. She would not speak, nor rise.

Suddenly at a siding toward which he had been aiming Denton turned the engine to the right and brought the little train to a standstill. They had been on the road sixteen hours and had traveled 210 miles.

Frances and Neslerov both looked up as the train stopped and saw the grimy engineer enter the car.

"There is a village near here," he said, "and just beyond this siding there is a small signal box. I have just visited it, and there is a train coming this way from Tomsk. Undoubtedly, as there is no regular train due, this is a searching party out after Frances Gordon. Now, I have no wish to start an international controversy. What story shall we tell?"

"Tell the truth," said Frances. "It does not, as a rule, harm any person who is innocent."

"No," said Neslerov; "not as a rule. But we are in a part of the world where customs are different from yours. If you tell the truth, you will never make the world believe you. But you will not understand; I cannot tell you."

"I know what you mean," said Frances scornfully. "You mean that your reputation is so bad that if it were known that you had that car left behind to come to me to marry you every body will be sure I am your wife. Is that it?"

"Yes; something like that," said Denton.

"Your story will be believed by your people, my story by mine," said Neslerov. "Let us each tell what we please, and let the world decide."

"I will not start," said Frances. "The whistle of a speeding locomotive was borne to him by the breeze. It came one engine and a car, the same as that he was on, but a modern locomotive of American make. Gordon was in the car with some officials from Tomsk."

"Hey! That you, Denton?" he gasped as the grimy bridgebuilder stepped into the car, which was stopped at the side of the construction engine. "My girl and the governor of Tomsk got left behind in a car. Seen?"

"I'm all right," said Frances as she emerged from her car and drew to her father's arms.

"Did Denton save you? What was it? Where is Neslerov?" asked Gordon.

"Oh, he is in there," said Frances.

coolly. "We've had a lively experience. I thought at one time we'd be killed by some savages. But Mr. Denton and the prince, oh, let's get on; I'm tired out and hungry."

Denton heard and wondered. In every new experience he had had with Frances Gordon he had been made more and more astonished by the uncertain moods, the whims, the strange turns her caprice would take.

"Hitch on to this train and haul her back to the Obl," said Denton. "If the road doesn't want this engine, I can use it at the Obl bridge."

This attachment was soon made, and Mr. Gordon, after visiting the prince and congratulating him upon his escape from the savages, assisted in



At the sight of the engine she understood, transferring to him some of the comforts to be found in the other car. The Russian officials swarmed around him and praised his courage.

"And that American! He is a brave one too!" they said.

"Yes; he is brave—braver than I," said Neslerov weakly.

The train started back toward Tomsk. It had about ninety miles to go to reach the Obl. During the journey Denton and Frances found themselves side by side in the rear car, with no one near enough to hear their low spoken tones.

"I cannot understand you," said Denton. "You first said tell the truth, then you yourself told the first deliberate lie. Why?"

Frances looked at him coolly. "Because I thought, if you were a good deal in what Neslerov said. Then, again, you and my father have work to do, a career to make, money to earn, and with the enmity of Neslerov you would be ruined. I studied it well. It is better as I said it. Let it pass."

"Here we are at Vashlov," he said. "For the time being you are home again."

"Yes," she replied, with the slightest tremor in her voice. "Thanks to you, I am home again—in my temporary home."

### CHAPTER X.

JANSKY, SUPERINTENDENT OF POLICE. NESLEROV lay in his palace in Tomsk, slowly recovering.

His heart was filled with rage, and he longed for vengeance. His closest confidant now was Jansky, who, owing to his meritorious conduct in the apprehension of so great a gang of conspirators as the Paulpoffs, was promoted at the request of Neslerov to a post where he could assist his superior in his plans and ambitions.

He had told Jansky the story of the ride from Moscow, and it was of course colored to suit his purpose. Jansky had received his commission—the first important one since his arrival at Tomsk—to watch the American and find an opportunity to wreak vengeance.

About twenty miles from the city of Tomsk was the village of Tivolofsky, a small mining town peopled by convicts. To this town the Paulpoffs had been sent. Vladimir was useful in the mines. With his tremendous strength he could do the work of two, and in his simple obedience to the mandates of his superiors he never uttered a complaint. The old people did menial work, cooking for the convicts who had no families or cleaning in the houses of the officers.

This new life came hardest upon the old people, and it was their sufferings that made Vladimir curse under his breath.

One day Jansky entered the room where Neslerov sat or half reclined.

"Well, what is it? I see you have something to say," said Neslerov.

"I have, your excellency," replied the superintendent of police. "It concerns him—your enemy."

"The American?"

"Yes. I have obeyed your commands—he has been constantly watched. And at present we are in a position to strike."

"What? Tell me at once."

"It is not yet revealed what the man's object is, but he and the Paulpoffs are plotting again."

"The Paulpoffs?"

"They and the American. He has visited them twice. It was overheard

that he and Papa Paulpoff had a long conversation about a picture."

Neslerov glanced at a painting that hung on the wall. It was the painting he had taken from the Paulpoffs' house at Perm.

"What can he know about the picture?" asked the governor.

"I do not know," said Jansky. "I do not yet reveal."

"Jansky," he said, "I know what the object is if you do not. Listen carefully now to what I say. It is quite possible the American has discovered the existence of the original of that picture you see there. It is a small medallion, probably in a locket. It was lost some years ago by a member of my family and bears relation to a great mystery—the mystery of Graslov."

Jansky shut his eyes and seemed to be thinking.

"Jansky, your life and mine depend on your action now. Do you understand?"

"I understand nothing."

"That picture, if it is the one I mean, must be brought to me. The American, if he proves to be interested in it, must know or suspect something I do not wish him to know. There are ways whereby even an American could disappear in Siberia. And Jansky, Vladimir Paulpoff is a most dangerous plotter even here. He ought to be placed where he can do no more mischief."

"I begin to understand," said Jansky grimly.

He bowed and left the palace and rode toward Tivolofsky.

Two days passed, during which Jansky watched and kept himself in readiness to act. Then, while Mamma Paulpoff was alone in her hut, she heard an imperative knocking at the door. Mamma Paulpoff and Vladimir had just gone to the mine. Denton, the American, had left the hut but a short time before.

"Mamma Paulpoff had been through so much trouble of late that the slightest sound jarred upon her. She turned white still and stopped backward as she saw the dark and forbidding face of Jansky. Behind Jansky were two of the Tomsk police."

"You are Mamma Paulpoff," said Jansky, slipping his foot in the door and working his way inside.

"I am; you know me; I was at Perm," faltered the trembling old woman.

"I am quite well aware that you were at Perm, old woman, and also that conspiring son of yours. It showed the mercy of the czar that you received no worse punishment. This is heaven compared to what you deserved."

"We had done nothing, your excellency."

"What! You still persist in that lie! You were all in the game, and you are still at it, let me tell you. You are a good deal in what Neslerov said. Then, again, you and my father have work to do, a career to make, money to earn, and with the enmity of Neslerov you would be ruined. I studied it well. It is better as I said it. Let it pass."

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"I will tell you. He came to conspire against the life of Neslerov, governor of Tomsk."

"No, no! I swear he did not."

"Good! Then if you know he did not, you must know why he did come here. Out with it, now. If you value your life."

"My life! Ah, you would not harm a hapless old woman!"

For answer Jansky brought his whip down on her long shoulders.

"Have mercy!" cried the unfortunate. "Will you tell why the American visited this house?"

"I know not."

"Take her to the her thumbs—there, over the door!" he commanded savagely.

His two gallant men needed no further bidding. The aged woman was seized, cords were fastened to her thumbs, and she was placed standing in the doorway Jansky had indicated, with her thumbs hanging above her head.

"Tear the rags from her back!"

A rude hand tore away her garments to the waist.

"Now, then, old hag," said Jansky, "understand I have come for the truth and will have it. If you do not give it to me, I will kill you. I will get the truth from Paulpoff, who has more sense than you. Now, what was the business that brought the American here?"

"I know not," whispered the woman, with a great sob.

"The lash!" roared Jansky.

One of his police swung his heavy whip, and the lash came down across the naked shoulders. A livid mark told the course, and Mamma Paulpoff cried out in agony.

"This must be known," said Jansky. "Either you or some one must tell. What brought the American here? Was it concerning a picture?"

"I know not," said the woman.

"The lash!" roared Jansky.

A white line and a red one marked the blows of the whip. Mamma Paulpoff screamed in her awful torture. Her limbs grew weaker, and she hung by the cords tied to her thumbs. The thumbs were black.

"You will learn," said Jansky. "The officers of the czar must take these steps to protect his empire. With the lesson you have had, tell the truth. What brought the American here?"

"I know not," answered the woman.

"Hell's fires upon her!" said Jansky, almost beside himself. "The lash! Three times!"

"Your arm is weak," said the police officer who had done no whipping. "Let me try."

A smile of horrible cruelty crossed his face as he stepped by the side of the woman. His whip whistled in the air. It fell—once—twice—thrice, and with a scream, her head fell back. Her eyes glazed.

"Hold! Quick! Release her and restore her to consciousness!" ordered Jansky. "She is unconscious and cannot feel our punishment."

They cut her down, laid her on the floor and poured liquor down her throat.

Groans came from her as they worked.

"God, take me from this awful pain!" she murmured.

"She feels again!" said Jansky in savage glee. "String her up!"

Again she was raised and the cords were fastened to her thumbs.

"Now, hag, tell me why the American came here? Was it to kill the governor or to kill the czar?"

"No, I do not know."

"You lie. The charge against him and Vladimir is that they are conspiring to kill both the American and Vladimir will be taken to the prison at Tomsk and shot. Tell the truth. It will save them and you."

"I know nothing," said the old woman, remembering her husband's warnings.

"The lash, both of you! Kill the old beast!" yelled Jansky.

"It was but a picture—to take a picture!" cried Mamma Paulpoff in tones that pierced the air.

Her weakness had come too late. Both whips coiled round her shrunken breasts. The withered skin was cut as with a knife. One scream came from her writhing lips, and she was still.

"Cut her down. Leave her," was Jansky's curt remark. He watched them lay the still form upon the floor and then led the way to their horses.

"It was a picture," he muttered. "Then Neslerov was right, and the American is on the trail. Both he and Vladimir must die!"

That night Vladimir came home from the mine with Papa Paulpoff. He was the first to step across the threshold.

"My God!" he said. "Who has been here?"

Papa Paulpoff stood stupefied, looking at the upturned face of his wife—dead—bruised—her breast covered with blood.

"The police!" wailed the old man, wringing his hands pitifully. "They have killed Mamma Paulpoff! They will kill you—and me!"

Vladimir's gentle, placid face became distorted with beating rage. He stooped over the dead body of his mother, touched her blood with the tips of his fingers and wiped them on his own brow.

"If this is Neslerov or the order of the czar," he thundered into the ears of the terror-stricken old man, "I will rend them all! From this moment I live for vengeance!"

He brought his clinched fist down on a wooden table and wrecked it completely.

"So will I crush them who have done this thing!" he cried. "So will I smash their hearts!"

While he raved Papa Paulpoff sank by the side of Mamma Paulpoff and died.



THE PRINCESS OLGA.

THE train from Moscow came snorting and screeching into the station, and among the passengers, mostly officers and convicts or men connected with the railway, were two women. One of these was about fifty years of age, thin and subsided in appearance, and her face bore the marks of suppressed anxiety. The other was scarcely more than a girl—twenty at most—but her carriage was noble, and her entire appearance that of one born to command. Her lovely face and well shaped head rose above a collar of ermine, although it was not winter.

"To the palace of Neslerov, governor of Tomsk," she said to a drosky driver, and she and her companion were soon on the way.

Neslerov was at dinner when a servant announced the Princess Olga. "What about the Princess Olga?" he asked.

"The princess is here—she has asked to see your excellency."

"Here! Olga Neslerov, here!" rising from the table. He had improved much in the last few days, and his face wore a calm look that had not been there since his meeting with Denton.

He found the princess in the reception room.

"Princess Olga," he exclaimed, kissing her hand. "Fair cousin, what happy circumstance brought you here? And why have you come unannounced and unattended?"

"I saw no reason to hefted my approach," she answered, "and I am not unattended. This is my attendant."

The woman courtesied and looked uncomfortable, but Neslerov paid her not the least attention.

"Well, since you are here, I am pleased to see you," said the governor. "Your branch of the Neslerov family and mine have not been too friendly. I am glad that at last one of you has had the grace to begin a reconciliation."

Princess Olga smiled.

"Whatever feeling my branch of the family may have for yours could scarcely be said to interest me," she said. "Remember, I have spent much of my time out of Russia, and it happened twenty years ago."

Neslerov turned to the door and then stopped.

To be Continued.

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