

THE MYSTERY OF GRASLOV

By Ashley Towne

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"Please do not," cried Frances. "He has stolen me from my father! He is a cruel monster! I cannot marry him!"

"He is his excellency, the governor," muttered the old man. "We must obey."

Neslerov seized her by the wrist and swung her toward the priest. The villagers crowded round, awestruck at the great name they had heard. They well knew the governor. Many of them had felt the knout at his command.

"It must be done," again muttered the priest.

"No, no!" cried Frances, trying to wrench away from Neslerov.

A boy slid quietly away from the crowd and ran.

"Stand there, curse you!" said Neslerov, grasping Frances by the hair. The pain of his rude hand on her lovely hair made Frances cry out in terror, pain and shame. "I'll kill you if you move again!"

There was the sound of a quick and stealthy tread. There was a swish in the air. There was a gasp, a murmur from the crowd, which fell back in consternation.

A heavy Russian riding whip swung through the air in an arc and, descending, cut the skin across the face of Neslerov.

"Curse you!" said a hearty American voice. "I'll have your life for this!"

"Jack! Oh, Jack!" cried Frances, and then, the last vestige of her strength deserting her, she fell unconscious into Jack Denton's outstretched arms.

CHAPTER VII.

A DUEL.

NESLEROV recoiled, and the writhing of his face in pain and fury, together with the long red cut made by the whip, gave him the expression of a demon.

"You! You!" he gasped.

"Yes, I!" said Denton. "Fortunately, I arrived in time to foil this dastardly attempt of yours to take advantage of a defenseless girl. I have been riding along the railway from stream to stream examining the bridges. I reached this place on my horse a moment ago. A boy saw me coming and hurried to tell me what was going on. I had no idea I should find a friend in need of help. But, thank God, I was in time."

"You will never leave this place alive!" said Neslerov.

He plucked a revolver from his pocket and aimed at Denton.

A woman standing near held out her hands and caught the form of Frances and bore it into her house. Denton, with flashing eyes, leaped forward and closed with Neslerov.

"It is a battle to the death between giants!" cried a man in the crowd.

The pistol fell from the grasp of Neslerov, and the whip before wielded by Denton dropped to the ground.

The iron fingers of Denton would close on the throat of Neslerov, and it seemed as though the struggle would end at that moment, but Neslerov would wrench himself free and leap at his enemy with a curse and growl.

"It is you or I! One of us must die!" cried Neslerov.

A swinging, crashing blow from the American's right hand sent the governor to the ground, where he lay as if stunned.

"Take care of him, somebody," said Denton in Russian. "I don't want to kill him."

He turned without a look at the fallen man and started toward the hut into which Frances had been carried.

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to see Frances, as if nothing had happened.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE INTERVIEW IN THE HUT.

FRANCES lay on a rude bed, scarcely conscious, and Denton stood a moment looking down solemnly upon the lovely upturned face. He bent over her, touched her brow and felt her pulse. All sense of his own injuries seemed to leave him as he saw her need of immediate care.

Frances felt his touch and looked up at him with about the same expression she might have worn had he been a stern and high priced specialist called in to make an examination.

"You are merely knocked out by the shock," he said, with assumed indifference. "You will probably be all right as soon as we get to Tomsk."

"Yes, if I could get there," she whispered. "My father will be anxious."

"We must relieve his anxiety as soon as possible. You must not worry."

"Never mind Neslerov now. Keep cool. You've got to be braced up a little. I wish I had some wine."

"There was some in the car," she answered. "Neslerov had it. He tried to make me drink, but I would not."

Denton went to the car, still on the main track, and brought from it the remains of the bottle of wine Neslerov had opened. This he took with him to the hut and offered some to Frances.

"I don't want it. I refused it before," she said.

"Oh, don't you want it?" he asked ironically. "I suppose in your own and subtle mind there is no distinction between a glass of wine offered by Neslerov when you were his prisoner and by me when you are ill?"

"I did not mean that," she said meekly. She reached out her hand, took the cup and drained it.

"Now, then," said Denton, coolly seating himself on a stool near her bed. "Tell me this whole miserable business from the beginning."

"I have told you yet, Jack," she said, with a return of color.

"Never mind thanking me. I did merely what any other American would have done, and, seeing you in danger, I would not have been manly, indeed, to stand off. I accept your thanks, but let's get to the business. How did you happen to be here—with Neslerov?"

"We were in Moscow," she said. "There was a meeting about the new railway."

"Yes, I know. That was what took Neslerov there."

"He had an interview with papa while in Moscow—"

"Why do you hesitate? It is not a new experience to have a man want to marry you, is it? You gave him the usual answer, I suppose."

"Oh, Jack! There was but one answer papa could give him. I do not like the prince, and papa knows I will never marry a man I do not love."

"Everybody knows that—who knows you," said Denton soberly.

"He told him about you—and about Vladimir—and the prince got angry."

"About Vladimir! Who is he?"

"Vladimir Pauloff, an ironworker, now sent."

"Never mind. We will get to that afterward. You started for the Obl, where Gordon is to take a house in Vashlov."

"No, not yet. I must tell you about Vladimir—"

"The force—in his shop—one day while the railway was being put through Perm. Papa and I went there. He is a marvelous man, Jack. You would think as much of him as I do if you knew him. He is so handsome and strong. He is!"

"Do you mean young Pauloff, the blacksmith of Perm?"

"Yes, Jack. Do you know him?"

"I've had him turn out some iron for small bridges. Well?"

"He is so intelligent, and was so anxious to learn, to improve, I helped him. I used to send him books, papers, magazines, scientific works—anything I could get hold of that would help him. He studied hard, poor fellow! He grew to—I think he loved me—"

"Of course you returned his affection. You've done it so—I mean it came quite easy."

Tears glistened in her eyes, and she turned away her head. She had quarreled with this man and had said she would never marry him, and their friendship had been almost cut asunder. But he had saved her from Neslerov. Now he was helping her.

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