

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE NIGHT

A wayworn figure, some time thereafter, moved slowly along the deserted road, where it ran like a winding ribbon over the top of a great bluff.

A sea wind, coming in varying gusts, bent low the long grass and rustled in the bushes. The moon had escaped from behind dark clouds in a stormy sky and threw its rays far and wide. They imparted a frosty sheen to the wavy surface between road and sea and brightened the thoroughfare, which, lengthening tortuously, disappeared beneath in a tangle of forest or underbrush.

Mr. Heatherbloom gazed wearily down the road, then over the grass. In the latter direction, afar, a strip of ocean lay like an argent stream flowing between the top of the bank and the horizon. Toward that illusory river he, leaving the main highway, walked in somewhat discouraged fashion. It might avail him little, so much time had elapsed, but from the edge of the bluff he would be afforded a view of the surrounding country and the topography of the coast.

A vast spread of the ocean unfolded to his gaze before he had reached the brink of the prominence. His heavy-lidded eyes, sweeping to the right, rested on a heterogeneous group of dwellings scattered well above the sands and directly below a wooded uprising of land. Myriad specks of

light glimmered amid shadowy roofs. Brownville? Undoubtedly! A board walk ran along the ocean and a small pier extended like an arm over the water. On the faintly glistening sands old boats, drawn up here and there, resembled so many black footprints.

Not far from where Mr. Heatherbloom stood a path went downward, a shorter way to the village than by the road he had just left. He stared unthinkingly a moment at the narrow walk; then began mechanically to descend. A dull realization weighed on him that when he reached his destination the woman would be far away. He wondered why he had gone on, under the circumstances--why he had ever thought he stood a ghost of a chance of overtaking her? Only the hopelessness of the situation, in all its grim verity, faced him now.

The path zigzagged through the bushes. At a turn the village was lost to sight; in front was a sheer fall to the sea. As he kept on, projecting branches struck him and raising his hand to guard his face, he, tripped and almost fell. Recovering himself, he glanced down; something had caught on his shoe and he leaned over to loosen it. His fingers closed on a long strip of soft substance--a veil, the kind worn by women motoring! Mr. Heatherbloom's eyes rested on it apathetically, then with a sudden flash of interest; a faint but heavy perfume emanated from the silky filament. It was darkish in hue--brown, he should say; the Russian woman was partial to that color. The thought came to him quickly; he stood bewildered. What if it were hers? Then how had it come here, on this narrow foot-path, unless--Had the big car stopped at the top of the

promontory and discharged its passengers there? But why should it have done so; for what possible reason?

He could think of none. Other women came this way--the path was not difficult. Other women wore brown veils. And yet that odd familiar fragrance--It seemed to belong to a foreign bizarre personality such as Sonia Turgeinov's.

Crushing in his palm the veil he thrust it into his pocket. He would find out more below, possibly; if she had actually passed this way. A feverish zest was born anew; the authorities were looking for her as well as for himself, he remembered. She, apparently, had so far cleverly evaded them; if he could but lead them to her he would not mind so much his own apprehension. Her presence in the locality at the same time the Nevski had been in the harbor would fairly prove the correctness of his theory of Miss Dalrymple's whereabouts. If he could now deliver the Russian woman into the hands of the law, he would have a wedge to force the powers that be to give credence to at least the material part of his story--that the prince had left port with the young girl--and to compel them to see the necessity of acting at once. That he, himself, would be held equally culpable with the woman was of no moment.

Fatigue seemed to fall from his shoulders. He went along more swiftly, inspired with new vague hopes. Down--down! The voice of the sea grew nearer; now he could hear the dull thud of the waves, then the weird whistling sounds that succeeded. Springing from a granite out-jutting to

the sands, he looked eagerly, searchingly, this way and that. He saw no one. His gaze lowered and he walked from the dry to the wet strand. There he stopped, an exclamation escaping his lips.

A faint light, falling between black rocks, revealed fresh footprints on the surface of the sands, and, yes!--a long furrow--the marks of the keel of a boat. He studied the footprints closer, but without discovering signs of a woman's; only the indentations of heavy seamen's boots were in evidence. Mr. Heatherbloom experienced a keen disappointment; then felt abruptly reassured. The impress of her lighter tread had been eliminated by the men in lifting and pushing to launch the boat. Their boots had roughly kicked up the sand thereabouts.

He was fairly satisfied the woman had embarked. The seclusion of the spot favored the assumption; the fishing-boats were all either stranded, or at anchor, nearer the village. But why and whither had she gone? The ocean, in front, failed to answer the latter question, and his glance turned. On the one hand was the village; on the other, high, almost perpendicular rocks ran seaward, obscuring the view. It would not be easy to get around that point; without a boat it could not be done.

Mr. Heatherbloom began to walk briskly toward the village; the moon threw his shadow in odd bobbing motions here and there. Once he stopped abruptly; some one on the beach afar was approaching. A fisherman? Mr. Heatherbloom crouched back among the rocks, when the person came to a halt. Clinging to the shadows on the landward side of the beach the

young man continued to advance, but cautiously, for a single voice might now start a general hue and cry. Beyond, closer to town, he could see other forms, small dark moving spots. Not far distant, however, lay the nearest boat; to get to her he had to expose himself to the pale glimmer. No alternative remained. He stepped quickly across the sand, reached the craft and strove to launch her. But she was clumsy and heavy, and resisted his efforts. The man, whoever he might be, was coming closer; he called out and Mr. Heatherbloom pushed and struggled more desperately--without avail! He cast a quick glance over his shoulder; the man was running toward him--his tones now rang out loudly, authoritatively. Mr. Heatherbloom did not obey that stern command to halt; instead he made a wild abrupt dash for the sea. The report of a revolver awoke the echoes and a bullet whizzed close. Recklessly he plunged into the water.

The man on the shore emptied his weapon, but with what success he could not tell. A head amid the dark waves was not easily discernible. Another and larger object, however, was plainly apparent about a hundred yards from land--a fishing-boat that swung at anchor. Would the other succeed in reaching it, for that was, no doubt, his purpose, or had one of the leaden missives told? The man, with weapon hot, waited. He scanned the water, then looked toward the town. A number of figures on the beach were hastening in his direction; from the pier afar, a naphtha put out; he could hear faintly the sound of the engine.

Suddenly, above the boat at anchor near the man on shore, a sail shot

up, then fluttered and snapped in the wind. A moment later it was drawn in, the line holding the craft to the buoy slipped out, and the bow swung sharply around. Mr. Heatherbloom worked swiftly; one desire moved him--to get around that point before being overtaken--to discover what lay beyond. Then let happen what would! He reached for a line and hoisted a jib, though it was almost more canvas than his small craft could carry. She careened and plunged, throwing the spray high. He turned a quick glance back toward the naphtha. The sky had become overcast, and distant objects were not so easily discernible on the surface of the water, but he made out her lights--two! She was head on for him.

He looked steadily ahead again. The grim line of out-jutting rocks--a black shadow against the sky--exercised a weird fascination for him. He was well out in the open now where the wind blew a half-gale. His figure was wet from the sea but he felt no chill. Suddenly the hand gripping the tiller tightened, and his heart gave a great bound; then sank. Not far from that portentous point of land he saw another light--green! A boat was emerging from the big basin of water beyond. The starboard signal, set high above the waves, belonged to no small craft such as the woman had embarked in. The sight of it fitted a contingency that had flashed through his brain on the beach. The realization left him helpless now--his last opportunity was gone!

He shifted the tiller violently, recklessly. At that moment a shrill whistle from behind reminded him once more of the naphtha; he could have

laughed. What was the wretched little puffing thing to him now? The single green light--that alone was the all in all. It belonged to the Nevski he was sure; for one reason or another she had but made pretense of going to sea, and, instead, had come here--to wait. The woman was on her now, and, also--The thought maddened him.

Again that piercing whistle! The naphtha was coming up fast; amid the turmoil of his thoughts he realized this vaguely. He did not wish to find himself delivered unto them yet--not just yet! A wilder recklessness seized him. Clouds sped across the heavens like gripping furies' hands; the water ran level to his boat's gunwales but he refused to ease her. All the while he was drawing nearer the single green light--a mocking light, signal of a mocking chase that had led, and could lead, to nothing. Still he went on, tossed by the waves--sport of them. He had to play the play out. Oh, to see better, to visualize to the utmost the last scene of his poignant drama of failure!

In the naphtha some one's voice belched through a megaphone; he laughed outright now. Come and get him, if they wanted him! He would give them as merry a dash as possible. His boat raced madly through the water--nearer, yet nearer the green light. Now a large dark outline loomed before him; he would have to stop, to come about in a moment, or--A great wave struck him, half filling his boat, but he did not seem to notice.

A dazzling white glow suddenly surrounded him; from the naphtha a

search-light had been flashed. It fell on him fully, sprinkled over on the wild hurtling waves beyond, and just touched the side of the outgoing vessel. Mr. Heatherbloom looked toward the vessel and his pupils dilated. The light leaped into the air with the motion of the naphtha, and, in an instant was gone, but the impress of a single detail remained on his retina--of a side ladder, lowered, no doubt, for the woman, and not yet hoisted into place on the big boat.

The wildness of the sea seemed to surge through Mr. Heatherbloom's veins; he did not come about; he did not try to. Now it was too late! That ladder!--he would seize it as they swept by. Closer his boat ran; a swirl of water caught him, threw him from his course. He made a frantic effort to regain it but without avail. The big steel bow of the great boat struck and overwhelmed the little craft.