

CHAPTER XIV

THE CRISIS

On the Nevski, the lookout forward walked slowly back and forth. Once or twice he shook his head. But a few moments before the yacht had run down a small boat, he had reported the matter, and--the Nevski had continued ahead, full speed. She had not even slackened long enough to make the usual futile pretense of extending assistance to the unfortunate occupant, or occupants. His excellency, Prince Boris, evidently did not wish, or had no time, to bother with blunderers; if they got in his way so much the worse for them. The lookout, pausing to stare once more ahead, suddenly started. Though apathetic, like most of the lower class of his countrymen, he uttered a faint guttural of surprise and peered over the bow. A voice had seemed to rise from the very seething depths of the sea. Naturally superstitious, he made the sign of the cross on his breast while tales of dead seamen who came back played through his dull fancy.

Once more he heard it--that voice that seemed to mingle with the wailing tones of the deep! The little swinging lantern beneath the bowsprit played on his bearded face as he bent farther forward, and, with growing wonder not unmixed with fear, now made out something dark clinging to one of the steel lines that ran from the projecting timber to the ship. It took the lookout a few moments to realize that this dark object that

had a voice--albeit a faint one--could not be other than a recent occupant of the small boat he had seen disappear. This person must have leaped upward at the critical moment, and caught one of the taut strands upon which he had somehow managed to hoist himself and to which he now clung desperately. It was a precarious position and one that the motion of the yacht made but briefly tenable.

Satisfied that the dark object was a reality and not an unwonted visitation, the lookout began deliberately to unloosen a gasket. Moments might be eternity to the man below, but Muscovite slowness is not to be hurried. The yacht's bow poised in mid air a breathless instant; chaos seemed leaping upward toward Mr. Heatherbloom, when something--a line--struck and rubbed against his cheek. He seized and trusted himself to it eagerly. The sailor was strong; he pulled in the rope. Mr. Heatherbloom came up, but his strength was almost gone. He would have let go when iron fingers closed on his wrists, and after that he remembered no more.

He awoke in a berth in a fo'castle, and it was daylight. Through a partly-opened hatch he could see the fine spray that came over the side of the yacht. Amid misty particles touched by the sun shone a tiny segment of rainbow. This Mr. Heatherbloom watched with a kind of childish interest; then stretched himself more luxuriously on the hard bunk. It was very fine having nothing more important and arduous to do than watching prismatic hues; his thoughts floated back to long forgotten wonder-days when he had possessed that master-marvel of toys,

a kaleidoscope, and on occasion had importantly permitted the golden-haired child in the big house on the top of the hill to--

The dream was abruptly dispelled by some one laying a tarry hand on his shoulder. Mr. Heatherbloom raised himself. The person had a characteristic Russian face. For a moment the young man stared at the stolid features, then looked around him. He saw the customary furnishings of such a place; hammocks, bags and chests, several of the last marked with Russian characters. A trace of color sprang to Mr. Heatherbloom's face; he realized now what boat he was actually on, and what it all meant to him. He could hardly believe, however, and continued to regard the upside down odd lettering, when the sailor, who had so unceremoniously disturbed him, motioned him to get out. Mr. Heatherbloom obeyed; he felt very stiff and somewhat light-headed, but he steadied himself against the woodwork. The sailor drew a dipperful of hot tea from a samovar and thrust it into his hand. He drank with avidity; after which the sailor made him to understand he was to follow.

The young man hesitated--a new risk confronted him. To whom would he be taken? The prince? He had once been standing in the area way of the Van Rolsen house when the nobleman had approached. Had the distinguished visitor then been so absorbed in the sight of Miss Dalrymple coming down the steps that he had utterly failed to observe the humble caretaker of canines? Possibly--and again possibly not. In the former contingency he might yet have a brief breathing-spell to think--to plan for the future, unless--There was another to reckon with--the woman he had met in the

park, whose automobile he had attempted to follow. She, too, was on the boat! He had been her dupe once. Was he now to become her victim?

The young man's jaw set. There was no holding back now, however; he had to go on--and he did, with seeming indifference and bold enough step. At the top of the ladder the sailor passed him on to some one else--an officer--who led him this way and that until they reached a secluded part of the deck, where, near the rail, stood a tall dark figure, glass in hand. Until the last moment Mr. Heatherbloom had hoped it might be only the captain he would be called on to encounter, and that that august person would summarily dispose of him, ordering him somewhere out of sight, below, to work his passage in the sailors' galley, perhaps. He would have welcomed the most ignominious service to have found now a respite--to be enabled to escape discovery a little longer. But the wished-for contingency had not arisen. He faced the inevitable.

"The man, your Excellency!"

His excellency looked. He had been scanning the horizon and his expression was both moody and preoccupied. Mr. Heatherbloom bent slightly forward; his lids fell to conceal a sudden glitter in his eyes; his hand touched something hard in his pocket. If his excellency recognized him--There was one way--a last mad desperate way to serve, to save her. It would be the end--all for him, but his life was a very small thing to give to her. He did not value it greatly--that physical self that had been such an ill servant. He gazed at the prince now with

veiled expectancy, his attitude seemingly relaxed, innocent of strenuousness. Would the prince's gaze flare back with a spark of remembrance? If in that tense instant it had done so, then--

But his excellency regarded Mr. Heatherbloom blankly; his eyes were emotionless.

"You mean the fellow we ran down?" The prince spoke as if irritated by the intrusion.

"The same, Excellency!" The officer stepped back. Mr. Heatherbloom did not move.

"What did you get in our way for?" The prince's voice had a metallic ring; he towered, harshly arrogant, over his uninvited passenger. "Don't you know enough to get out of the way?"

"It appears not, sir." Heatherbloom wondered at the sound of his own voice. It seemed to come, small and quiet, from so far off. His excellency had not recognized him, but was he suspicious? Maybe not. No one would be fool enough to get deliberately in the way of the fast-steaming Nevski. Small craft were numerous in the bay and accidents to them would happen. There was nothing so out of the ordinary for a big boat to run down a tiny craft. It was somewhat uncommon for any one in the wee boat to save himself, truly, but even in this feature of the present case the prince experienced but a mild interest.

"Who are you?" he said. "A fisherman?"

"Not exactly," answered Mr. Heatherbloom, "though sometimes I crab. I was crabbing yesterday."

As he spoke his gaze swept beyond to not far-distant cabin doors and windows. He and the prince were standing on the starboard side of the boat; it was this side that had faced the island when the young man had gazed down upon the yacht from the big sand-hill, and fancied he had seen--

"What am I going to do with you?" The prince seemed more out of temper now. "My crew are all Russians and I don't want any of your--" He stopped; shifting lights played ominously in his gaze; a few dissatisfied lines on his face deepened. "I didn't ask you to come aboard," he ended with an angry gesture.

"Sorry to intrude!" Mr. Heatherbloom spoke at random. "But I really couldn't help it, don't you know. No time to ask permission."

His excellency frowned. Did he suspect in these words an attempt at that insidious American humor he had often vainly endeavored to fathom? Mr. Heatherbloom gazed at him now with seemingly innocent but really very attentive eyes.

A superb specimen of over six feet of masculinity, the prince was picturesquely attired in Russian yachting-garb while a Cossack cap adorned a visage as bold and romantic as any young woman might wish to gaze upon. And gazing upon it himself--that rather stunning picture the prince presented on his own yacht--a sudden chill ran through Mr. Heatherbloom. This titled paragon refused by Miss Dalrymple? A feudal lord who made your dapper French counts and Hungarian barons appear but small fry indeed, by contrast! The light of the sea seemed suddenly to dazzle Mr. Heatherbloom. A wild thought surged through his brain. Betty Dalrymple, bewildering, confusing, made up of captivating inconsistencies, had sometimes been accused by people of a capacity for doing the wildest things. Had she for excitement--or any other reason--eloped with the prince? Were they, perhaps, married even now? He dismissed the thought quickly. All the circumstances pointed against this theory; his original one was--must be--correct.

"Well, now you are here, I suppose I've got to keep you." The prince had again spoken.

"I suppose so," said Mr. Heatherbloom absently. He was studying now the near-by cabin windows. One, with beautiful lace and glimpses of pink beyond, caught his glance.

"What can you do?" Sharply.

"Oh, a lot of things!" Had the curtain waved? His heart thumped hard--he

scarcely saw the prince now.

"Not manage a sail-boat, I'm convinced." He forced himself to turn again, as through a mist was aware of his excellency's sneering countenance. "Judging from your recent performance!"

"That was hardly a fair test," Mr. Heatherbloom replied anyhow. His thoughts were keyed to a straining-point; his glance would swerve; he strove his best to control it. She was there--there--Shrouds and stays seemed to sing the words. He would have sworn he caught the flash of a white wrist.

"Why not?" Was the prince still examining, questioning him? Again a primal impulse was suppressed, though his muscles were like whipcords. He yet compelled himself to endure the ordeal. What was the query about? Ah, he remembered.

"Well, you see, I must have lost my head." It was not a bright answer but he did not care; it was the best that occurred.

The prince strode restlessly away a few paces, then returned. "Were you ever at sea before?"

"I once owned a y----" Mr. Heatherbloom paused--with an effort resumed his part and a smile somewhat strained: "I once went on a cruise on a gentleman's yacht." Some one was in the state-room; was overhearing.

His head hummed; the refrain of the taut lines rang louder.

"What as? Cabin-boy, cook?"

"Why, you see--" The prince certainly did not see him--he was once more staring away, over the dark water--"I acted in a good many capacities. Kind of general utility, as it were. Doing this, that, and the other!"

"The other', I should surmise." Contemptuously.

Mr. Heatherbloom moved; the curtain had moved again. "Where are you going?" he asked a little wildly. "You see I might have important business on shore." Foolish talk,--yet it fitted in as well as anything.

The prince, for his part, did not at first seem to catch the other's words; when he did he laughed loudly, sardonically. "That is good; excellent! You have 'important business'!"

"Yes; important," repeated Mr. Heatherbloom. "I--" He got no further. His eyes met another's at the window, rested a moment on a woman's face which then suddenly vanished. But not before he realized that she, too, had seen him--seen and recognized. He had caught in that fleeting instant, wonder, irony, incredulity--a growing understanding! Then he heard a soft laugh--a musical but devilish laugh--Sonia Turgeinov's!