

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRINCE IS PUZZLED

His excellency turned. The intruder's eyes were bloodshot from the glare of the furnaces, his face black, unrecognizable, from the soot. "What the dev--" began the nobleman, as if doubting the evidence of his senses.

He must have relaxed his hold, for the girl tore herself loose. She did not pause, but running swiftly to the inner door she had just turned toward, she hastily closed and locked it behind her. As she disappeared Mr. Heatherbloom stopped an instant to gaze after her; but the prince, with sagging jaw and amazement in his eyes, continued to regard only him.

"Who the--" he began again furiously.

The intruder's reply was a silent one. His excellency would have stepped back but it was too late. Mr. Heatherbloom's fist struck him fairly on the forehead. Behind the blow was the full impetus of the lithe form fairly launched across the spacious cabin. The prince went down, striking hard.

But he was up in a moment and, mad with rage, made a rush. The other,

quick, agile, evaded him. The prince's muscles had lost some of their hardness from high living and he was, moreover, unversed in the great Anglo-American pastime. He strove to seize his aggressor, to strangle him, but his fingers failed to grip what they sought. At the same time Mr. Heatherbloom's arms shot up, down and around, with marvelous precision, seeking and finding the vulnerable spots. The prince soon realized he was being badly punished and the knowledge did not serve to improve his temper. Had he only been able to get hold of his opponent he could have crushed him with his superior weight. A stationary table, however, in the center of the room assisted Mr. Heatherbloom in eluding the wild dashes, the while he continued to lunge and dodge in a most businesslike manner.

Panting, the prince had, at length, to pause. His face revealed several marks of the contest and the sight did not seem displeasing to Mr. Heatherbloom. A quiet smile strained his lips; a cold satisfaction shone in the bloodshot eyes.

"Come on," he said, stepping a little from the table.

The prince did not respond to the invitation. His dazed mind was working now. Through bruised lids he regarded the soot-masked intruder--a nihilist, no doubt! His excellency had had one or two experiences with members of secret societies in the past. There was a nest of them in New Jersey. Though how one of them could have managed to get aboard the Nevski, he had no time just then to figure out. The nobleman looked

over his shoulder toward a press-button.

"Come on!" repeated Mr. Heatherbloom softly.

The nobleman sprang, instead, the other way, but he did not reach what he sought. Mr. Heatherbloom's arm described an arc; the application was made with expert skill and effectiveness. His excellency swayed, relaxed, and, this time, remained where he fell. Mr. Heatherbloom locked the door leading into the dining salle--the other, opening upon the deck, he had already tried and found fastened--and drew closer the draperies before the windows. Then returning to the prince, he prodded gently the prostrate figure.

"Get up!" His excellency moved, then staggered with difficulty to his feet and gazed around. "You'll be able to think all right in a moment," said Heatherbloom. "Sit down. Only," in crisp tones, "I wouldn't move from the chair if I were you. Because--" His excellency understood; something bright gleamed close.

"Are you going to murder me?" he breathed hoarsely. His excellency's cousin--a grand duke--had been assassinated in Russia.

"I wouldn't call it that." The prince made a movement. "Sit still." The cold object pressed against the nobleman's temples. "If ever a scoundrel deserved death, it is you."

Plain talk! The prince could scarcely believe he heard aright; yet the thrill of that icy touch on his forehead was real. His dark face showed growing pallor. One may be brave--heroic even, but one does not like to die like a dog, to be struck down by a miserable unclean terrorist--hardly, from his standpoint, a human being--unfortunately, however, something that must be dealt with--not at first, under these circumstances, with force--but afterward! Ah, then? The prince's eyes seemed to grow smaller, to gleam with Tartar cunning.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Several things." Mr. Heatherbloom's own eyes were keen as darts.

"First, you will give orders that the Nevski is to change her course--to head for the nearest American port."

"Impossible!" the prince exclaimed violently.

"On the contrary, it is quite possible. We have the fuel, as I can testify."

His excellency's thoughts ran riot; it was difficult to collect them, with that aching head. The fellow must be crazy; people of his class usually are, more or less, though they generally displayed a certain method in their madness, while this one--

"I must remind your excellency that time is of every importance to me,"

murmured Mr. Heatherbloom. "Hence, you will do what I ask, at once, or--"

"Very well." His excellency spoke quickly--too quickly. "I'll give the order." And, rising, he started toward the door.

"Stop!"

The prince did. Venom and apprehension mingled in his look. Mr. Heatherbloom made a gesture. "You will give the order; but here--and as I direct." His voice was cold as the gleaming barrel. "That 'phone," indicating one on the wall, "connects with the bridge, of course. Don't deny. It will be useless."

His excellency didn't deny; he had a suspicion of what was coming.

"You will call up the officer in command on the bridge and give him the order to make at once for the nearest American port. You will ask him how far it is and how soon we can get there? Beyond that, you will say nothing, make no explanations, or utter a single superfluous word."

"Very well." The prince, seemingly acquiescent, but with a dangerous glitter in his eyes, moved toward the telephone.

"One moment!"

The nobleman stopped with his hand near a receiver. His fingers trembled.

"You will speak in French. A syllable of Russian, just one, and--" Mr. Heatherbloom's expression left no doubt as to his meaning.

"Dog!" His excellency's swollen face became the hue of paper. An instant he seemed about to spring--then managed to control himself. "But why should I not speak in Russian? My officers know no French."

"A lie! Nearly all Russian officers speak French. I happen to know yours do." A newspaper article had made the statement and he did not doubt it. "Anyhow, you give the order in French and we'll see what happens."

The blood surged in the nobleman's face. The fierce desire to avenge himself at once on this man who threw the lie at him--august, illustrious--mingled, however, with yet another feeling--one of bewilderment. The fellow had spoken these last words in French, and choice French at that. His accents had all the elegance of the Faubourg Saint Germain.

"Quick!" The decision in the intruder's manner was unmistakable. "I have wasted all the time I intend to. My finger trembles on the trigger."

The prince, perforce, was quick. The telephone of foreign design, had two receivers. His excellency took one. Mr. Heatherbloom reached for the

other and held it to his ear with his left hand. His right, holding the weapon, was behind the prince, as the latter poignantly realized. Ill-suppressed rage made his excellency's tones now slightly wavering:

"Are you there, M. le Capitaine?"

"Steady!" Mr. Heatherbloom whispered warningly in his excellency's free ear, emphasizing the caution with a significant pressure from his right hand. At the same time he caught the answer from afar--a deferential voice:

"Oui, Excellence." There was, fortunately, on the wires a singing sound that would serve to drown evidences of emotion in the nobleman's tone. "Excellence wishes to speak with me?" went on the distant voice.

"I do." The prince breathed fast--paused. "You will change the boat's course, and--" He spoke with difficulty. A warmer breath fanned his cheek; he felt a sensation like ice on the back of his neck. "Make for the nearest American port. How far is it?" Mr. Heatherbloom's prompting whisper was audible only to his excellency.

"Five hours," came over the wire.

Mr. Heatherbloom experienced a thrill of satisfaction. They were nearer the coast than he had supposed. He knew the yacht had been taking a southerly course; he had considered that when the bold idea came to act

as he was doing. Possibly the prince had been driven out of the last port by the publicity attendant upon Mr. Heatherbloom's presence there, before certain needed repairs had been completed. These, Mr. Heatherbloom now surmised, it was his excellency's intention to have attended to in some island harbor before proceeding with a longer voyage.

Only five hours!

"Good-by!" now burst from the nobleman so violently that Mr. Heatherbloom's momentary exultation changed to a feeling of apprehension. But M. le Capitaine had evidently become accustomed to occasional explosive moments from his august patron. He concerned himself only with the command, not the manner in which it was given.

"Eh? Mon Dieu! Do I hear your excellency aright?" His accents expressed surprise, but not of an immoderate nature. He, no doubt, received many arbitrary and unexpected orders when his excellency went a-cruising.

"Repeat the order." Heatherbloom's whisper seemed fairly to sting the nobleman's disengaged ear.

The latter did repeat--savagely--jerkily, but the humming wires tempered the tones. M. le Capitaine understood fully; he said as much; his excellency should be obeyed--Mr. Heatherbloom pushed the nobleman's head

abruptly aside, covering the mouthpiece with his hand. Perhaps he divined that irresistible malediction about to fall from his excellency's lips.

"Hang it up," he said.

The nobleman's breath was labored but he placed his receiver where it belonged; Mr. Heatherbloom did likewise. Both now stepped back. Upon the prince's brow stood drops of perspiration. The yacht had already slowed up and was turning. His excellency listened.

"May I ask how much longer you are desirous of my company here?"

"Oh, yes; you may ask."

The boat had begun to quiver again; she was going at full speed once more. Only now she headed directly for the land Mr. Heatherbloom wished to see. Five hours to an American port! Then? He glanced toward the door through which the girl had disappeared. Since that moment he had caught no sound from her. Had she heard, did she know anything of what was happening--that the yacht was now turned homeward? He dared not linger on the thought. The prince was watching him with eyes that seemed to dilate and contract. A moment's carelessness, the briefest cessation of watchfulness would be at once seized upon by his excellency, enabling him to shift the advantage. The young man met that expectant gleam.

"Sorry to seem officious, but if your excellency will sit down once more? Not here--over there!" Indicating a stationary arm-chair before a desk in a recess of the room.

The prince obeyed; he had no alternative. The fellow must, of course, be a madman, the prince reiterated in his own mind unless--

"I told your excellency I had no wish for a long sea voyage." A mocking voice now made itself heard.

The nobleman started, and looked closer; a mist seemed to fall from before his gaze. He recognized the fellow now--the man they had run down. The shock of that terrible experience, the strain of the disaster, had turned the fellow's brain. That would explain everything--this extraordinary occurrence. There was nothing to do but to humor him for the moment, though it was awkward--devilish!--or might soon be!--if this game should be continued much longer.

Mr. Heatherbloom glided silently toward the hangings near the alcove. What now?--the prince asked with his eyes. Mr. Heatherbloom unloosened from a brass holder a silk cord as thick as his thumb.

"If your excellency will permit me--" He stepped to the prince's side.

That person regarded the cord, strong as hemp.

"What do you mean?" burst from him.

"It is quite apparent."

An oath escaped the prince's throat; regardless of consequences, he sprang to his feet. "Never!"

A desperate determination gleamed in his eyes. This crowning outrage! He, a nobleman!--to suffer himself to be bound ignominiously by some low polisson of a raffish mushroom country! It was inconceivable. "Jamais!" he repeated.

"Ah, well!" said Mr. Heatherbloom resignedly. "Nevertheless, I shall make the attempt to do what I propose, and if you resist--"

"You will assassinate me?" stammered the nobleman.

"We won't discuss how the law might characterize the act. Only," the words came quickly, "don't waste vain hopes that I won't assassinate you, if it is necessary. I never waste powder, either--can clip a coin every time. One of my few accomplishments." Enigmatically. "And"--as the prince hesitated one breathless second--"I can get you straight, first shot, sure!"

His excellency believed him. He had heard how in this bizarre America a single man sometimes "held up" an entire train out west and had his own

sweet way with engineer, conductor and passengers. This madman, on the slightest provocation now, was evidently prepared to emulate that extraordinary and undesirable type. What might he not do, or attempt to do? The nobleman's figure relaxed slightly, his lips twitched. Then he sank back once more into the strong solid chair at the desk.

"Good," said Mr. Heatherbloom. A cold smile like a faint ripple on a mountain lake swept his lips. "Now we shall get on faster."