

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE COUP

Mr. Heatherbloom, with fingers deft as a sailor's, secured the prince. The single silken band did not suffice; other cords, diverted from the ornamental to a like practical purpose, were wound around and around his excellency's legs and arms, holding him so tightly to the chair he could scarcely move. Having completed this task, Mr. Heatherbloom next, with vandal hands, whipped from the wall a bit of priceless embroidery, threw it over the nobleman's head and, in spite of sundry frenzied objections, effectually gagged him. Then drawing the heavy curtains so that they almost concealed the bound figure in the dim recess, the young man stepped once more out into the salon.

How still it suddenly seemed! His glance swept toward the door through which the young girl had vanished. Why had he heard no sound from her? Why did she not appear now? She must have caught something of what had been going on. He went swiftly to the door.

"Miss Dalrymple!"

No answer. He rapped again--louder--then tried the door. It resisted; he shook it.

"Betty!" Yes; he called her that in the alarm and excitement of the moment. "It's--it's all right. Open the door."

Again that hush--nothing more. Mr. Heatherbloom pulled rather wildly at the lock of hair over his brow; then a sudden frenzy seemed to seize him. He launched himself forward and struck fairly with his shoulder--once--twice. The door, at length, yielded with a crash. He rushed in--fell to his knees.

"Betty! Oh, Betty!" For the moment he stared helplessly at the motionless form on the floor, then, lifting the girl in his arms, he laid her on a couch. One little white hand swung limp; he seized it with grimy fingers. It was oddly cold, and a shiver went over him. He felt for her pulse--her heart--at first caught no answering throb, for his own heart was beating so wildly. The world seemed to swim--then he straightened. The filmy dress, not so white now in spots, had fluttered beneath her throat. He gazed rapturously.

"It'll be all right," he said again. "Darling!"

He could say it now, when she couldn't hear. "Darling! Darling!" he repeated. It constituted his vocabulary of terms of endearment. He felt the need of no other. She lay like a lily. He saw nothing anomalous in certain stains of soot, even on the wonderful face where his had unconsciously touched it when he had raised her and strained her to him one mad instant in his arms. In fact, he did not see those stains; his

eyes were closed to such details--and the crimson marks, too, on her gown! His knuckles were bleeding; he was unaware of it. He was not, outwardly, a very presentable adorer but he became suddenly a most daring one. His grimy hand touched the shining hair, half-unbound; he raised one of the marvelous tresses--his hungry lips swept it lightly--or did he but breathe a divine fragrance? By some inner process his spirit seemed to have come that instant very near to hers. He forgot where he was; time and space were annihilated.

He was brought abruptly back to the living present by a sudden knock at the door without, which he had locked after entering that way from the deck. Mr. Heatherbloom listened; the person, whoever he was, on receiving no response, soon went away. Had they discovered what had happened to the foreman of the stokers whom Heatherbloom had struck down with a heavy iron belaying-pin? The man had attacked him with murderous intent. In defending himself, Heatherbloom believed he had killed the fellow. The chance blow he had delivered with the formidable weapon had been one of desperation and despair. It had been more than a question of his life or the other's. Her fate had been involved in that critical moment. He had dragged the unconscious figure to the shadows behind a life-boat. They would not be likely to stumble across the incriminating evidence while it was dark. Nor was it likely that the foreman's absence below would cause the men to look for him. The overworked stokers would be but too pleased to escape, for a spell, their tyrannous master.

Mr. Heatherbloom, standing near the threshold of the dressing-room,

glanced now toward the little French clock without. Over four hours yet to port! How slowly time went. He turned out all the lights, save one shaded lamp of low candle-power in the cabin; then he did the same in the room where the girl was. No one must peer in on him from unexpected places. He looked up, and saw that the skylights were covered with canvas. Mr. Heatherbloom remained in the salon; he needed to continue master of his thoughts. In the dressing-room he had just now forgotten himself. That would not do; he must concentrate all his faculties, every energy, to bringing this coup, born on the inspiration of the moment, to a successful conclusion. Desperate as his plan was, he believed now he would win out. By the vibrations he knew the boat was still steaming full speed on her new course. The conditions were all favorable. They would reach port before dawn; at break of day the health officers would come aboard. And after that--

The telephone suddenly rang. Should he answer that imperious summons? Perhaps the man who had just knocked at the door had been one of the officers, or the captain himself, come in person to speak with his excellency about the unexpected change in the boat's course, or some technical question or difficulty that might have arisen in consequence thereof.

He looked toward the recess; between the curtains he caught sight of the prince's eyes and in the dim light he fancied they shone with sudden hope--expectancy. The nobleman must have heard the crashing of the door to the dressing-room. What he had thought was of no moment. A viperish

fervor replaced that other brief expression in his excellency's gaze.

Once more that metallic call--harsh, loud, as not to be denied! Mr. Heatherbloom made up his mind; perhaps all depended on his decision; he would answer. Stepping across the salon, he took down the receivers. The singing on the wires had been pronounced; he could imitate the prince's autocratic tones, and the person at the other end would not discover, in all likelihood, the deception.

"Well?" said Mr. Heatherbloom loudly, in French. "What do you want? Haven't I given orders not to be--"

His voice died away; he nearly dropped the receivers. A woman answered. Moreover, the wires did not seem to "sing" so much now. Sonia Turgeinov's tones were transmitted in all their intrinsic, flute-like lucidity.

"What has happened, your Excellency?" she asked anxiously.

"Happened?" the young man managed to say. "Nothing."

"Then why has the yacht's course been changed? I can tell by the stars from my cabin window that we are not headed at all in the same direction we were going--"

He tried to speak unconcernedly: "Just changed for a short time on

account of some reefs and the currents! Go to sleep," he commanded, "and leave the problems of navigation to others."

"Sleep? Mon Dieu! If I only could--"

Mr. Heatherbloom dared talk no more, so rang off. The prince might have been capable of such brusqueness. Sonia Turgeinov had not seemed to suspect anything wrong; she had merely been inquisitive, and had taken it for granted the nobleman was at the other end of the wire. Mr. Heatherbloom strode restlessly to and fro. Seconds went by--minutes. He counted the tickings of the clock--suddenly wheeled sharply.

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The young girl stood in the doorway--he had heard and now saw her. She came forward quickly, though uncertainly; in the dim light she looked like a shadow. He drew in his breath.

"Miss--" he began, then stopped.

Her gaze rested on him, almost indistinguishable on the other side of the salon.

"What does it mean? Who are you?" She spoke intrepidly enough but he saw her slender form sway.

Who was he? About to explain in a rush of words, Mr. Heatherbloom hesitated. To her he had been, of course, but a conspirator of the Russian woman in the affair. Miss Van Rolsen had deemed him culpable; the detective had been sure of it. Would Miss Dalrymple think more leniently of him than mere unprejudiced people, those who knew less of him than she? His very presence on the yacht, although somewhat inexplicably complicated in recent occurrences, was per se a primal damning circumstance. But she spared him the necessity of answering. She divined now from his blackened features what his position on the yacht must be. He was only a poor stoker, but--

"You are a brave fellow," cried Betty Dalrymple, "and I'll not forget it. You interfered--I remember--"

"A brave fellow!" It was well he had not betrayed himself. Let her think that of him, for the moment. A poignant mockery lent pain to the thrill of her words.

"You rushed in, struck him. What then?"

"He won't play the bully and scoundrel again for some time!" burst from Mr. Heatherbloom. His tones were impetuous; once more he seemed to see what he had seen during those last moments on the deck--when he had been unable to restrain himself longer--and had yielded to a single hot-blooded impulse. "The big brute!" he muttered.

She seemed to regard him in slight surprise. "Where is he? What has become of him?"

"He is safe--"

"You mean you conquered him, beat him--you?" Her voice thrilled.

"You bet I did," said Mr. Heatherbloom with the least evidence of incoherency. Her words had been verbal champagne to him. "I gave him the dandiest best licking--" He stopped. Perhaps he realized that his explanation was beginning to seem slightly tinged with too great evidence of personal satisfaction if not boastfulness. "You see I had a gun," he murmured rather apologetically.

"But," said the girl, coming nearer, "I don't understand."

He started to meet that advance, then backed away a little. "I've got him safe, where he can't move, or bother you any more." Mr. Heatherbloom glanced over his shoulder; but he did not tell her where he "had him".

"And the yacht's going back to the nearest American port," he couldn't help adding, impetuously, to reassure her.

"Going back? Impossible!" Wonder, incredulity were in her voice.

"It's true as shooting, Bet--"



She was too bewildered to notice that slight slip of the tongue. "It's a fact, miss," he added more gruffly.

"But how?" Her tones betrayed reticence in crediting the miracle. Yet this blackened figure must have prevailed over the prince or the latter would not have so mysteriously disappeared. "How did it happen?"

"Well, you see I just happened around."

"You, a stoker?"

Stokers, he was reminded by her tone, did not usually "happen around" on decks of palatial private yachts. He must seek a different, more definite explanation. He thought he saw a way; he could let her know part of the truth. "The fact is, I was looking for this boat at the last port she stopped at. I had cause to think you would be on her. Couldn't stop the yacht from going to sea, for reasons too numerous to mention, so I just slipped out and came aboard in a kind of disguise--"

"A disguise? Then you are a detective?"

"I think I may truthfully say I am, but in a sort of private capacity. When a really important case occurs, it interests me. Now this was an important case, and--and it interested me." He hardly knew what he was saying, her eyes were so insistent. Betty Dalrymple had always had the most disconcerting eyes. "Because, you see, your--your aunt was so

anxious--and"--with a flash of inspiration--"the reward was a big one."

"The reward? Of course." Her voice died away. "You hoped to get it. That is the reason--"

He let his silence answer in the affirmative; he felt relieved now. She had not recognized him--yet. In the recess behind the draperies the chair in which his excellency was bound, creaked. Was he struggling to release himself? Mr. Heatherbloom had faith in the knots and the silken cords. The girl turned her head.

"Don't you think it would be better"--he spoke quickly--"for you to return to your cabin? I'll let you know when I want you and--"

"But if I prefer to stay here? May I not turn on the lights?"

"Not for worlds!" Hastily. "It is necessary they should not see me. If they did--"

He was obliged to explain a little of the real situation to her; of the stratagem he had employed. This he did in few words. She listened eagerly. The mantle of the commonplace, which to her eyes had fallen a few moments before on his shoulders, became at least partly withdrawn. She divined the great hazard, the danger he had faced--was facing now. Detective or not, it had been daringly done. Her voice, with a warm thrill in it, said as much. Her eyes shone like stars. She came of a

live virile stock, from men and women who had done things themselves.

"If only I, too, had a weapon!" she said, leaning toward him. "In case they should discover--"

"No, no. It wouldn't do at all."

"Why not?" the warm lips breathed. "I can shoot. Some one once taught me--"

She stopped short. A chill seemed descending. "You were saying--" he prompted eagerly.

But she did not answer. The sweep of her hair made a shadowy veil around her; his mind harked swiftly back. She had always had wondrous hair. It had taken two big braids to hold it; most girls could get their hair in one braid. He had been very proud, for her, of those two braids--once--with their blue or pink ribbons that had popped below the edge of her skirts. He continued to see blue and pink ribbons now.

Both were for some time silent. At length she stirred--seated herself. Mr. Heatherbloom mechanically did likewise, but at a distance from her. He tried not to see her, to become mentally oblivious of her presence, to concentrate again solely on the matter in hand. A long, long interval passed. Chug! chug! the engines continued to grind. How far away they sounded. Another sound, too, at length broke the stillness--a stealthy

footfall on the deck. It sent him at once softly to the window; he gazed out. She followed.

"Are--are we getting anywhere near port?"

He did not tell her that it was not port he was looking for so soon as he gazed out searchingly into the night.

"What is it?" She had drawn the curtain a little. Her shoulder touched him.

Suddenly his arm swept her back. "What do you mean"--he turned on her sternly--"by drawing that curtain?"

"Was any one there?"

"Any one--" he began almost fiercely; then paused. The figure he had seen in that flash looked like that of the foreman of the stokers. In that case, then, the fellow was not dead; he had recovered. Through a mistaken sense of mercy Mr. Heatherbloom had not slipped the seemingly lifeless body over the side. Now he, and she, too, were likely to pay dearly for that clemency. Bitterly he clenched his hands. Had the man caught a glimpse of him at the window? A flicker of electric light, without, shone on it.

The girl started again to speak. "Hush!" He drew her back yet farther.

Above, some one had raised the corner of the canvas covering the skylight. It was too dark, however, for the person, whoever it might be, to discern very much below. Neither Mr. Heatherbloom nor his companion now moved. The tenseness and excitement of the moment held them. The girl breathed quickly; her hand was at his sleeve. Even in that moment of suspense and peril he was conscious of the nearness of her--the lithe young form so close!

The creaking of the chair in the recess was again heard. Had his excellency caught sight of the person above? Was he endeavoring to attract attention? And could the observer at the skylight discern the nobleman? It seemed unlikely. The glass above did not appear to extend quite over the recess. Through a slight opening of the draperies Mr. Heatherbloom, however, could see his captive and noticed he seemed to be trying to tip back farther in his chair, to reach out behind with his bound hands--toward what? The young man abruptly realized, and half started to his feet--but not in time! The chair went over backward and came down with a crash, but not before his excellency's fingers had succeeded in touching an electric button near the desk. A flood of light filled the place.

It was answered by a shout--a signal for other voices. Fragments of glass fell around; a figure dropped into the salon; others followed. The door to the deck yielded to force from without. Mr. Heatherbloom, though surprised and outnumbered, struggled as best he might; his weapon rang out; then, as they pressed closer, he defended himself with the butt of

his revolver and his fist.

There could be but one end to the unequal contest. The girl--a helpless spectator--realized that, though she could with difficulty perceive what took place, it was all so chaotic. She tried to draw nearer, but bearded faces intervened; rough hands thrust her back. She would have called out but the words would not come. It was like an evil dream. As through a mist she saw one among many who had entered from the deck--a giant in size. He carried an oaken bar in his hand and now stole sidewise with murderous intent toward the single figure striving so gallantly.

"No, no!" Betty Dalrymple's voice came back to her suddenly; she exclaimed wildly, incoherently.

But the foreman of the stokers raised the bar, waited. He found his opportunity; his arm descended.