

## CHAPTER XIX

AND THEN--

Mr. Heatherbloom regained consciousness, or semi-consciousness, in an ill-smelling place. His first impulse was to raise his hands to his aching head, but he could not do this on account of two iron bands that held his wrists to a stanchion. His legs, too, he next became vaguely aware, were fastened by a similar contrivance to the deck. He closed his eyes, and leaned back; the throbbings seemed to beat on his brain like the angry surf, smiting harder and harder until nature at length came to his relief and oblivion once more claimed him.

How long it was before he again opened his eyes he could not tell. The shooting throes were still there but he could endure them now and even think in an incoherent fashion. He gazed around. The light grudgingly admitted by a small port-hole revealed a bare prison-like cell.

Realization of what it all meant, his being there, swept over him, and, in a semi-delirious frenzy, he tugged at his fastenings. He did not succeed in releasing himself; he only increased the hurtling waves of pain in his head. What did she think of her valiant rescuer now, he who had raised her hopes so high but to dash them utterly?

Some one, some time later, brought him water and gave him bread, releasing his wrists while he ate and fastening them again when he had

finished. The hours that seemed days passed. During that time he half thought he had another visitor but was not sure. The delirium had returned; he strove to think lucidly, but knew himself very light-headed. He imagined Sonia Turgeinov came to him, that she looked down on him.

"Mon Dieu! It is my canine keeper; the man with the dogs. What a lame and impotent conclusion for one so clever! I looked for something better from you, my intrepid friend, who dared to come aboard in that thrilling manner--who managed to follow me, through what arts, I do not know. How are the mighty fallen!"

Her tone was low, mocking. He disdained to reply.

"Really, I am disappointed, after my not having betrayed who you were to the prince."

"Why didn't you?" he said.

She laughed. "Perhaps because I am an artist, and it seemed inartistic to intervene--to interrupt the action at an inopportune moment--to stultify what promised to be an unusually involved complication. When first I saw and recognized you on the Nevski, it was like one of those divine surprises of the master dramatist, M. Sardou. Really, I was indebted for the thrill of it. Besides, had I spoken, the prince might have tossed you overboard; he is quite capable of doing so. That, too,

would have been inartistic, would have turned a comedy of love into rank melodrama."

Rank nonsense! Of course such a conversation could not be real. But he cried out in the dream: "What matter if his excellency had tossed me overboard? What good am I here?"

"To her, you mean?"

"To her, of course." Bitterly.

The vision's eyes were very bright; her plastic, rather mature form bent nearer. He felt a cool hand at the bandage, readjusting it about his head. That, naturally, could not be. She who had betrayed Betty Dalrymple to the prince would not be sedulous about Mr. Heatherbloom's injury.

"Foolish boy!" she breathed. Incongruous solicitude! "Who are you? No common dog-tender--of that I am sure. What have you been?"

"What--" Wildly.

"There! there!" said half-soothingly that immaterial, now maternal visitant. "Never mind."

"How is she? Where is she?" he demanded, incoherently.

"She is well, and is going to be, very soon now, the prince's bride."

"Never."

"Don't let his excellency hear you say so in that tone. He thinks you only a detective, not an ardent, though secret wooer yourself. The Strogareffs brook no rivals," she laughed, "and he is already like a madman. I should tremble for your life if he dreamed--"

"Help me to help her--" he said. "It will be more than worth your while. You did this for--"

She shook her head. "I have descended very low, indeed, but not so low as that. Like the bravos of old"--was it she who spoke bitterly now?--"Sonia Turgeinov is, at least, true to him who has given her the little douceur. No, no; do not look to me, my young and Quixotic friend. You have only yourself to depend upon--"

"Myself!" He felt the sharp iron cut his flesh. That seemed indubitable--no mere fantasy of pain but pain itself.

"Let well enough alone," she advised. "The prince will probably put you ashore somewhere--I'll beg him to do that. He'll be better natured after--after the happy event," she laughed. "Perhaps, he'll even slip a little purse into your pocket though you did hurt a few of his men. Not

that he cares much for them--mere serfs. You could find a little consolation, eh? With a bottle, perhaps. Besides, I have heard these island girls have bright eyes." He could not speak. "Are you adamant, save for one?" she mocked. "Content yourself with what must be. It is a good match for her. The little fool might scour the world for a better one. As for you--your crazy infatuation--what have you to offer? Très drôle! Do dog-tenders mate with such as she? No; destiny says to her, be a grand lady at the court of Petersburg. I am doing her a great favor. Many American families would pay me well, I tell you--"

She paused. "You will smile at it all, some day, my friend. You played and lost. At least, it was daringly done. You deceived even me over the telephone. 'Go to sleep,' forsooth! You commanded in a right princely tone. And I obeyed."

An instant her hand lingered once more near the bandage. It was ridiculous, that tentative, almost sympathetic touch. Then, she--a figment of disordered imagination--receded; there was no doubt about his light-headedness now.

They sent again bread and water, and, after what seemed an intolerable interval, he found himself eating with zest; he was exceedingly hungry. He also began to feel mentally normal, although his thoughts were the reverse of agreeable. Days had, no doubt, gone by. He chafed at this enforced inaction, but sometimes through sheer weariness fell into a semblance of natural sleep despite the sitting posture he was obliged to

maintain. On one such occasion he was abruptly awakened by a light thrown suddenly on his face. He would have started to his feet but the fetters restrained him.

It was night; a lantern, held by a hand that shook slightly, revealed a face he did not know. He felt assured, however, of his mental lucidity at the moment. The new-comer, though a stranger, was undoubtedly flesh and blood.

"What do you want?" said the prisoner.

"A word with you, Monsieur." The speaker had a smooth face and dark soulful eyes. His manner was both furtive and constrained. He looked around as if uncomfortable at finding himself in that place.

"Well, I guess you can have it. I can't get away," muttered the manacled man.

"Miss Dalrymple sent me."

Mr. Heatherbloom's interest was manifest; he strove to suppress outward signs of it. "What--what for?"

"She wanted to make sure you were not dead."

The prisoner did not answer; his emotion was too great at the moment to

permit his doing so. She was in trouble, yet she considered the poor detective. That was like her--straight as a string--true blue--

The visitor started to go. "Hold on!" said Mr. Heatherbloom, whose ideas were surging fast. This youth had managed to come here at her instigation. Had she made a friend of him, an ally? He did not appear an heroic one, but he was, no doubt, the best that had offered. Betty Dalrymple was not one to sit idly; she would seek ways and means. She was clever, knew how to use those violet eyes. (Did not Mr. Heatherbloom himself remember?) Who was he--this nocturnal caller? Not an officer--he was too young. Cabin-boy, perhaps? More likely the operator. Mr. Heatherbloom had noticed that the yacht was provided with the wireless outfit.

"How long have I been here?" he now asked abruptly.

"It is three days since monsieur was knocked on the head."

Mr. Heatherbloom looked down. "Three days? Well, it cost me a fortune," he sighed, remembering the rôle of detective that had been thrust upon him. "I could have stood for the sore head."

The other had his foot at the threshold but he lingered. "How much of a fortune? What was the reward?" He strove to speak carelessly but there was a trace of eagerness in his tones.

"You mean what is it?" returned Mr. Heatherbloom, and named an amount large enough to make the soulful eyes open. "And to think," watchfully, "one little message to the shore might procure for the sender such a sum!"

"Monsieur!" Indignantly. "You think that I would--"

"Then you are the wireless operator?"

"I was." Francois spoke more calmly. "His excellency has had the apparatus destroyed. He will take no chances of other spies or detectives being aboard who might understand its use."

The prisoner hardly heard the last words; for the moment he was concerned only with his disappointment. A sudden hope had died almost as soon as it had been born. "Too bad!" he murmured. Then--"How did you get here?"

"The third officer has the keys and our cabins are adjoining. I seized an opportune moment, slipped in, and took a wax impression of what I wanted. Then with an old key and a file--Monsieur is a great detective, perhaps, but I, too," with Gaston boastfulness, "can aspire to a little cleverness."

"A great deal," said Mr. Heatherbloom, the while his brain worked rapidly. Betty Dalrymple must have paid the youth well for serving her

thus far. Thrift, as well as sentiment, seemed to shine from Francois' eloquent dark eyes. Could he be induced to espouse her cause yet further?

"Monsieur must not think I would prove disloyal to his excellency, my employer," spoke up the youth as if reading what had been passing through the other's mind. "There could be no harm in a mere inquiry as to monsieur's state of health."

"None at all," assented the prisoner quickly. "Though"--a sudden inspiration came to Mr. Heatherbloom--"contingencies may arise when one can best serve those who employ him by secretly opposing them."

"I don't understand, Monsieur," said Francois cautiously.

"The prince is a madman. By incurring the enmity of his Imperial Master he would rush on to his own destruction. Suppose by this misalliance, the very map of Europe itself were destined to be changed?"

The words sounded portentous, and Francois stared. He had imagination. The beautiful American girl had told him that this man before him was a great and daring detective. He spoke now even as an emissary of the czar himself. The prince was a high lord, close to the throne. These were deep waters. The youth looked troubled; Mr. Heatherbloom allowed the thought he had inspired to sink in.

"What is our first port?" his voice, more authoritative, now demanded.

Francois mentioned an island.

"When do we get there?"

"We are near it to-night but on account of the rocks and reefs, I heard the captain say we would slow down, so as not to enter the harbor until daybreak."

Daybreak! And then? Mr. Heatherbloom closed his eyes; when he again opened them they revealed none of the poignant emotion that had swept over him. "What time is it now?"

"About ten."

"My jailer--the third officer, you say--visits this cell once every night. Do you know what time he comes?"

"I shouldn't be here, Monsieur, at this moment, if I didn't know that. He comes in an hour, after his watch is over, with the bread and water--monsieur's frugal fare. And now"--those apprehensions, momentarily dulled by wonderment seemed returning to Francois--"I will bid monsieur--"

"Stay! One moment!" Mr. Heatherbloom's accents were feverish,

commanding. "You must--in the name of the czar!--for the prince's sake!--for hers--for--for the reward--"

"Monsieur!" Again that flicker of indignation.

Mr. Heatherbloom swept it aside. "She has asked you to help her escape?" he demanded swiftly.

Francois did not exactly deny. There were no listeners here. "It would be impossible for her to escape," he answered rather sullenly.

"Then she did broach a plan--one you refused to accede to. What was it?"

"Mere madness!" Scoffingly. "Mademoiselle may be generous, and mon Dieu! very persuasive, but she doesn't get me to--"

"What was her proposal? Answer." Sternly. "You can't incriminate yourself here."

Francois knew that. The cell was remote. There could be no harm in letting the talk drift a little further. He replied, briefly outlining the plan.

"Excellent!" observed Mr. Heatherbloom.

"Mere madness!" reiterated Francois.

"Not at all. But if it were, some people would, under the circumstances," with subtle accent, "gladly undertake it--just as you will!" he added.

"Oh, will I?" Ironically.

"Yes, when you hear all I have to say. In the first place, I relinquish all claim to the reward. Sufficient for me--" And Mr. Heatherbloom mumbled something about the czar.

"Bah! That sounds very well, only there wouldn't be any reward," retorted Francois. "The prince would only capture us again and then--" He shrugged. "I know his temper and have no desire for the longer voyage with old man Charon--"

"Wait!" More aggressively. "I have not done. No one will suspect that you have been here to-nigh't?" he asked.

"Does monsieur think I am a fool? No, no! And now my little errand for mademoiselle being finished--"

"You can do as Miss Dalrymple wishes, achieve an embarrassment of riches, and run no risk whatever yourself."

"Indeed?" Starting slightly.

"At least, no appreciable one." Mr. Heatherbloom explained his plan quickly. Francois listened, at first with open skepticism, then with growing interest.

"Mon Dieu! If it were possible!" he muttered. South-of-France imagination had again been appealed to. "But no--"

"Remember all the reward will be for you"--swiftly--"sufficient to buy vineyards and settle down for a life of peace and plenty--" Francois' eyes wavered; any Frenchman would have found the picture enticing. Already the beautiful American girl had, as Mr. Heatherbloom suspected, surreptitiously thrust several valuable jewels upon the youth as a reward for this preliminary service. Having experienced a foretaste of riches, Francois perhaps secretly longed for more of the glittering gems and for some of those American dollars which sounded five times as large in francs. Besides, this man, the great detective, or emissary, inspired confidence; his tones were vibrant, compelling.

"And for you, Monsieur?--the risk for you--" Francois faltered.

"Never mind about me. You consent?"

The other swallowed, muttered a monosyllable in a low tone.

"Then--" Heatherbloom murmured a few instructions. "Miss Dalrymple is

not to know."

"I understand," said Francois quickly. And going out stealthily, he closed and locked the door behind him.