

CHAPTER XX

INTO THE INFINITE

The midnight hour drew near, and, above deck, tranquillity reigned. It was, however, the comparative quiet that follows a storm. A threatening day had culminated in a fierce tropical downpour--a cloud-burst--when the very heavens had seemed to open. The Nevski, steaming forward at half speed, had come almost to a stop; struck by the masses of water, she had fairly staggered beneath the impact. Now she lay motionless, while every shroud and line dripped; the darkness had become inky. Only the light from cabin windows which lay on the wet deck like shafts of silver relieved that Cimmerian effect. The sea moaned from the lashing it had received--a faint undertone, however, that became suddenly drowned by loud and harsh clangor, the hammering on metal somewhere below. Possibly something had gone wrong with a hatch or iron compartment door inadvertently left open, or one of the ventilators may have got jammed and needed adjusting. The captain, as he hastened down a companionway, muttered angrily beneath his breath about water in the stoke room. The decks, in the vicinity of the cabins, seemed now deserted, when from the shadows, a figure that had merged in the general gloom, stepped out and passed swiftly through one of the trails of light. Gliding stealthily toward the stern, this person drew near the rail, and, peering cautiously over, looked down on one of the small boats swung out in readiness for the landing party at dawn.

"Mademoiselle," he breathed low.

"Is that you, Francois?" came up softly from the boat.

He murmured something. "Is all in readiness?"

"Quite! Make haste."

The person above, about to swing himself over the rail, paused; a cabin door, near by, had been thrown open and a stream of light shot near him. Some one came out; moreover, she--for the some one was a woman--did not close the door. The youth crouched back, trying to draw himself from sight but the woman saw him, and coming quickly forward spoke. She thought him, no doubt, one of the sailors. He did not answer, perhaps was too frightened to do so, and his silence caused her to draw nearer. More sharply she started to address him in her own native Russian but the words abruptly ceased; a sudden exclamation fell from her lips. He, as if made desperate by what the woman, now at the rail, saw or divined, seemed imbued with extraordinary strength. The success or failure of the enterprise hung on how he met this unexpected emergency. Heroic, if needs be, brutal measures were demanded. Her outcry was stifled but Sonia Turgeinov was strong and resisted like a tigress. Perhaps she thought he meant to kill her, and in an excess of fear she managed to call out once. Fortunately for the youth, the hammering below continued, but whether she had made herself heard or not was uncertain.

Confronted by a dire possibility, he exerted himself to the utmost to still that warning voice. In frenzied haste he seized the heavy scarf she had thrown around her shoulders upon leaving the cabin and wound it about her face and head. The sinuous body seemed to grow limp in his arms. His was not a pleasant task but a necessary one. This woman had delivered the girl to the prince in the first place; would now attempt to frustrate her escape. Any moment some one else might come on deck and discover them.

"Quick! Why don't you come?" Betty Dalrymple's anxious voice ascended from the darkness.

The youth knew well that no time must be lost, but what to do? He could not leave the woman. She might be only feigning unconsciousness. And anyway they would soon find her and learn the truth. That would mean their quick recapture. Already he thought he heard a footstep descending from the bridge--approaching--With extraordinary strength for one of Francois' slender build, he swung the figure of the woman over the side, dropped her into the boat and followed himself. A breathless moment of suspense ensued; he listened. The approaching footsteps came on; then paused, and turned the other way. The youth waited no longer. The little boat at the side was lowered softly; it touched the water and floated away from the Nevski like a leaf. Then the darkness swallowed it.

"How far are we from the yacht now, Francois?"

"Only a few miles, Mademoiselle."

"Do you think we'll be far enough away at daybreak so they can't see us?"

"Have no fear, Mademoiselle." The voice of Francois in the stern, thrilled. "There's a fair sailing wind."

"Isn't it strange"--Betty Dalrymple, speaking half to herself, regarded the motionless form in the bottom of the boat--"that she, of all persons, and I, should be thus thrust together, in such a tiny craft, on such an enormous sea?"

"I really couldn't help it, Mademoiselle"--apologetically--"bringing her with us. There was no alternative."

"Oh, I'm not criticizing you, who did so splendidly." The girl's eyes again fell. "She is unconscious a long time, Francois."

The youth's reply was lost amid the sound of the waters. Only the sea talked now, wildly, moodily; flying feathers of foam flecked the night. The boat took the waves laboriously and came down with shrill seething. She seemed ludicrously minute amid that vast unrest. The youth steered steadily; to Betty Dalrymple he seemed just going on anyhow, dashing toward a black blanket with nothing beyond. It was all very wonderful

and awe-inspiring as well as somewhat fearsome. The waves had a cruel sound if one listened to them closely. A question floating in her mind found, after a long time, hesitating but audible expression:

"Do you think there's any doubt about our being able to make one of the islands, Francois?"

"None whatever!" came back the confident, almost eager reply. "Not the slightest doubt in the world, Mademoiselle. The islands are very near and we can't help seeing one of them at daybreak."

"Daybreak?" she said. "I wish it were here now."

Swish! swish! went the sea with more menacing sound. For the moment Francois steered wildly, and the boat careened; he brought her up sharply. The girl spoke no more. Perhaps the motion of the little craft gradually became more soothing as she accustomed herself to it, for, before long, her head drooped. It was dry in the bow; a blanket protected her from the wind, and, weary with the events of the last few days, she seemed to rest as securely on this wave-rocked couch as a child in its cradle. The youth, uncertain whether she slept or not, forbore to disturb her. Hours went by.

As the night wore on a few stars came out in a discouraged kind of way. Heretofore he had been steering by the wind; now, that scanty peripatetic band, adrift on celestial highways, assisted him in keeping

his course. When one sleepy-eyed planet went in, another, not far away (from the human scope of survey) came out, and Francois, with the perspicacity of a follower of the sea, seemed to have learned how to gage direction by a visual game of hide-and-seek with the pin-points of infinitude. Between watching the stars, the sea and the sail, he found absorbing occupation for mind and muscle. Sometimes, in the water's depressions, a lull would catch them, then when the wind boomed again over the tops of the crests, slapping fiercely the canvas, a brief period of hazard had to be met. The boat, like a delicate live creature, needed a fine as well as a firm hand.

His faculties thus concentrated, Francois had remained oblivious to the dark form in the center of the boat, although long ago Sonia Turgeinov had first moved and looked up. If she made any sound, he whose glance passed steadily over her had not heard it. She raised herself slightly; sat a long time motionless, an arm thrown over a seat, her eyes alternating in direction, from the seas near the downward gunwale, to the almost indistinguishable figure of him in the stern, the while her fingers played with a scarf--the one that had been wound around her head. Once she leaned back, her cheek against the sharp thwart, her gaze heavenward. She remained thus a long while, with body motionless, though her fingers continued to toy with the bit of heavy silk, as if keeping pace with some mercurial rush of thoughts.

A wastrel, she had been in many strange places, but never before had she found herself in a situation so extraordinary. To her startled outlook,

the boat might well have seemed a chip tossed on the mad foam of chaos. This figure, almost indistinguishable, yet so steadfastly present at the stern of the little craft, appeared grim and ghostlike. But that he was no ghost--His grip had been real; certainly that. He had been, too, perforce, a master of action. She leaned her head on her elbow. Strangely, she felt no resentment.

The tired stars, as by a community of interest and common understanding, slowly faded altogether. The woman bent her glance bow-ward. The day--what would it reveal? She understood a good deal, yet much still puzzled her. As through a dream, she had seemed to hear the name, "Francois"--to listen to a crystalline voice, fresh as the tinkling bells in some temple at the dawn. The darkness of the sky fused into a murky gray, and as that somber tone began, in turn, to be replaced by a lighter neutral tint, she made out dimly the figure of the girl. As by a species of fascination, she continued to look at her while the morn unfolded slowly. From behind a dark promontory of vapor, Aurora's warm hand now tossed out a few careless ribbons. They lightened the chilly-looking sea; they touched a golden tress--just one, that stole out from under the gray blanket. The girl's face could not be seen; the heavy covering concealed the lines of the lithe young form.

As she continued to sleep--undisturbed by the first manifestations of the dawn--the woman's glance swept backward to him at the helm. The shafts of light showed now his face, worn and set, yet strangely transfigured. He did not seem to notice her; beneath heavy lids his

quick glances shot this way and that to where wisps of mist on the surface of the sea partly obscured the outlook. Sonia Turgeinov divined his purpose; he was looking for the Nevski. But although he continued to search in the direction of the yacht, he did not catch sight of her. Only the winding and twining diaphanous veils played where he feared she might have been visible. An expression of great satisfaction passed over his features.

Then he swayed from sheer weariness; he could have dropped gladly to the bottom of the boat. Brain as well as sinew has its limitations and the night had been long and trying. He had done work that called for tenseness and mental concentration every moment. He had outlasted divers and many periods when catastrophe might have overwhelmed them, and now that the blackness which had shrouded a thousand unseen risks and perils had been swept aside, an almost overpowering reaction claimed him. This natural lassitude became the more marked after he had scanned the horizon in vain for the prince's pleasure-yacht.

His task, however, was far from over, and he straightened. To Sonia Turgeinov, his gaze and his expression were almost somnambulistic. He continued steering, guiding their destinies as by force of habit.

Luckily the breeze had waned and the boat danced more gaily than dangerously. It threw little rainbows of spray in the air; he blinked at them, his eyes half closed. In the bow the old dun-colored blanket stirred but he did not see it. A glorious sun swept up, and began to lap thirstily the wavering mists from the surface of the sea.

Sonia Turgeinov spoke now softly to the steersman. What she said he did not know; his lack-luster gaze met hers. All dislike and disapproval seemed to have vanished from it; he saw her only as one sees a face in a daguerreotype of long ago, or looks at features limned by a soulless etcher.

"Do you see it?" he asked.

"What?"

"Trees? Aren't those trees?"

"I see nothing."

"You do. You must. They are there." He spoke almost roughly, as if she irritated him.

"Oh, yes. I think I do see something," she said, and started. "Like a speck?--a film?--a bird's wing, perhaps?"

In the bow the blanket again stirred. Then, as from the dull chrysalis emerge brightness and beauty, so from those dun folds sprang into the morning light a red-lipped, lovely vision.

"Trees," repeated the steersman to Sonia Turgeinov. "I am positive--" he

went on, but lost interest in his own words. Fatigue seemed to fall from him in an instant; he stared.

From beneath her golden hair Betty Dalrymple's eyes flashed full upon him.

"You!" she said.

Mr. Heatherbloom appeared to relapse; his expression--that smile--vague, indefinite--again partook of the somnambulistic.