

CHAPTER XXI

AN ANOMALOUS SITUATION

The most unexpected and extraordinary thing in the world had happened, yet Betty Dalrymple asked no questions. Had she done so, it is probable that Mr. Heatherbloom would have been physically unequal to the labyrinthine explanation the occasion demanded. For a brief spell the girl had continued to regard him and she had seemed about to speak further. Then the blue light of her gaze had slowly turned and her lips remained mute. He was glad of this; of course he would later have to tell something, but sufficient unto that unlucky hour were the perplexities thereof. Sonia Turgeinov had been surprised, too, but it was Betty Dalrymple's surprise that had most awakened her wonder. "Why, didn't you know it was he?" the dark eyes seemed to say to the young girl. "Who else, on earth, did you think it was?" The mystery for her, as well as for Betty Dalrymple, deepened. Only for Mr. Heatherbloom there existed no mystery; it was all now clear as day. He had done what he had set out to do. She would soon be enabled to find her way back to civilization. His present concern lay with the occupation of the moment.

The tree was a tree; this was the most momentous immediate consideration; a few more miles had established that fact with positiveness. But distances on the water are long, and they three would have to journey together on the sea yet a while. He bethought him of his

duties, as host; these--his two passengers--were in his care.

"You should find biscuits in a basket and water in a cask," he said, speaking to both of them, and, at the same time, to immeasurable distance. "If you don't mind looking--I can't very well."

At that, a nervous laugh welled from Sonia Turgeinov's throat; she had to give way. Possibly the absurd thought seized her that all the tragedies and comedies might be simmered down to one thing. Were there biscuits in the basket? But Betty Dalrymple did not laugh; her eyes were like stars on a wintry night; her face was white as paper. It was turned now from the steersman--ahead. She saw the blur before them become a definite line of green; later she made out details, the large heads of small trees. The former looked like big overflowing cabbages; the trunks, beneath, sprawled this way and that, as the vagaries of the wind had directed their growth. In front of them and the vernal strip, a white line slowly resolved itself into moving foam. She--they all could hear it now, faintly--they were very near; no thunderous anthem it pealed forth; its voice seethed in soft cadences.

Mr. Heatherbloom, with sheet taut, ran his craft toward the sands but the boat grounded some little distance from the shore. It was useless to attempt to go farther so he let his sail out, got up and stepped overboard. The water was rather more than knee deep; he tugged at the boat and attempted to draw her up farther without much success. She was too heavy, and desisting from his efforts, he approached Miss Dalrymple.

The young girl shrank back slightly, but seeming not to notice that first instinctive movement, he reached over and lifted her out. It was done in a businesslike manner and with no more outward concern than a Kikuji porter might have displayed in meeting the exigencies of a like situation. The bubbles seethed around Mr. Heatherbloom's legs; unmindful of them or the shifting sands beneath foot, he strode straight as might be for the shore. His burden was not a heavy one but it seemed very still and unyielding. He released her at the earliest possible opportunity and in the same matter-of-fact way (still that of a human ferry on the banks of the turbulent Chania) he returned for his other passenger. Around Sonia Turgeinov's rich lips a mocking smile seemed to play; she arose at once.

"How charming! How very gallant!" she murmured. "First, you nearly strangle one, and then--"

Her soft arm stole about his neck, and her warm breath swept his cheek as, stony-faced, he trudged along. This time his burden was heavier, although there were men who would not have minded that under the circumstances. The dark eyes, full of sparkles and enigmas, turned upon his frosty ones. But she did not see very far into that so-called medium of the soul; she received only an impression one gets in looking at a wall.

He put her down--gently. Whereupon, her dark brows lifted ironically. He, gentle--to her? Did she dream? She felt again that fierce clasp of

the night before, and mentally told herself she would like to label him an artistic study in contrasts. Really the adventure began to be "worth while"; she felt almost reconciled to it. He had carried her off as the rough, old-fashioned pirates bear away feminine prizes from a town they have looted. From dog-tender to bucaner--he appealed to her imagination. She experienced a childlike desire to sit down where he had left her and play with the shells. But instead she looked toward Betty Dalrymple. That young girl, however, did not return her regard, though the golden head, a few moments before, had lifted once, with a swift, bird-like motion toward Sonia Turgeinov, en route beachward. Now the girl's features were steadfastly bent away; whatever gladness she may have felt in thus, after many vicissitudes, reaching land safely, she kept to herself.

Mr. Heatherbloom resumed the task of porter; his next burden--the water-cask--was the heaviest of all. He struggled with it and once nearly went down, so tired was he, but he got it ashore, and the basket of biscuits, too, and some other things. The boat, floating more lightly, he now pulled to the strand; then he took out the spar and the sail. This done, he gazed around; the place was deserted by man, though of birds and crabs and other crawling objects there were a-plenty. Mr. Heatherbloom stood with knitted brow; it was a time for contemplation, visual and mental. For the latter he did not feel very fit as he strove to think what was best to do next. The other two--he still forced himself to keep to the purely impersonal aspect of the case--were his charges. Being women, they were mutually and equally (the mockery of

it!) dependent on him. He was responsible for their welfare and well-being. In the sail-boat he had been captain; ashore, he became commandant, an answerable factor. He began to plan.

What kind of place had they come to?--was it big or small?--inhabited, or deserted? All this would have to be ascertained, later. Meanwhile, temporary headquarters were needed; he would erect a tent. The spar and boom served for the ridge and front poles, the sail for the canvas covering, the sheet and halyards for the restraining lines. Sonia Turgeinov again watched him; her interest was now of that vague kind she had sometimes experienced when the manager appeared on a darkened stage, with a fresh crackling manuscript. Then she had lolled back and listened to the first reading. She would have lolled back now--for the air was soporific--but, instead, she started suddenly. The old wound on Mr. Heatherbloom's head, heretofore concealed by the cap Francois had procured for him, had reopened as he exerted himself; he raised his hand quickly and seemed a little at a loss. She stepped to him at once.

"The scarf, Monsieur?"

"Thank you." He took it absently.

"It serves divers purposes," she murmured. And Mr. Heatherbloom, remembering the more violent employment he had found for it the night before, flushed slightly.

She added delicate emphasis to her remark by assisting him. With her own fingers she tied a knot, and rather painstakingly spread out the ends. He endured grimly. Miss Dalrymple appeared not to have observed the episode but, of course, it had in reality been all quite fully revealed to her. It was in keeping with certain circumstances of the past that the Russian woman should not be unmindful of him, her confrère in the conspiracy. That much was patent; but other happenings were not so easily reconciled. What had taken place on the deck of the Nevski in those breathless last few moments as they were escaping, was in ill conformity with those amicable relations which should have existed between the two. This man's presence in the boat, in the place of Francois, could be explained by no logical process with the premises she had at her command.

The bandage possessed a subtly weird and bizarre interest for the young girl. He had been injured. How? For what reason? Betty Dalrymple's mind swept, seemingly without very definite cause, to another scene, one of violence. Again she heard the crashing of glass and saw forms leaping into the cabin. Her thoughts reverted, on the instant, to the unknown helper she had been obliged to leave behind. Somehow, real as he had been, he seemed at this moment strangely apart, something in the abstract. Then all illusive speculations merged abruptly into a realization that needed no demonstration. Sonia Turgeinov possessed a certain outré attractiveness the young girl had never noted before. The violet eyes, shining through the long shading lashes, rested a moment on her; then passed steadily beyond.

"I'm off for a look around." Mr. Heatherbloom, having transferred their meager possessions to the tent, now addressed Miss Dalrymple, or Sonia Turgeinov, or an indefinite space between them. "Better stay right here while I'm gone." His tones had a firm accent. "Sorry there are only biscuits for breakfast, but perhaps there'll be better fare before long. If you should move around"--his eye lingered authoritatively on Betty Dalrymple--"keep to the beach."

"How very solicitous!" laughed Sonia Turgeinov as the young man strode off. "That was intended especially for you, Mademoiselle. As for me, it does not matter." With a shrug. "I might stroll into the wood, be devoured by wild beasts, and who would care?"

Betty Dalrymple did not answer.

"A truce, Mademoiselle!" said the other in the same gay tone. "I know very well what you think of me. You told me very clearly on the Nevski, and before that, on shore. In this instance, however, since it is through no fault or choice of mine that we are thrown thus closely together, would it not be well to make the best of the situation?"

"There seems, indeed, no choice in the matter," answered the young girl coldly.

"None, unless like those in the admirable play, we elect to pitch our

respective camps at different parts of the beach. But that would be absurd, wouldn't it? Besides, I have my punishment--no light one for Sonia Turgeinov who herself has been accustomed to a little adulation in the past. I am de trop."

"De trop?" There was a faint uplifting of the brow. "You should not be altogether that."

"You mean I should be very friendly with him, my colleague and confidant, n'est ce pas?" Sonia's dark eyes swept swiftly the proud lovely face. "In truth he proved an able assistant." Her voice was a little mocking. "What if I should tell you it was he who planned it all --devised the ways and means?" A statue could, not have been more immovable than Betty Dalrymple. "Or," suddenly, "what if I should say quite--au contraire." The girl stirred. Sonia Turgeinov seemed to ruminate. "Should I be so forgiving--after last night?" she murmured. "It would be inconsistent, wouldn't it?--or angelic? And I am no angel."

The girl's lips started to form a question but she did not speak. Afar, Mr. Heatherbloom's figure could be seen, almost at the vanishing point. He was toiling up an incline. Then the green foliage swallowed him. Sonia Turgeinov smiled at vacancy. "Though I do owe him a little," she went on, half meditative. "He was kind to me in the park. He was sorry for me. Think of it, and without admiring me. Other men have professed for poor Sonia Turgeinov a little interest or solicitude at divers times and places, but it has always been accompanied with something else. Is

that beyond the understanding of your pure soul, nourished in a hothouse, Mademoiselle?" There was a sudden hard ring of rebellion in her tones. "Am I handsome? Your eyes said it not long ago. Ma foi!" Her voice becoming light again. "It was Parsifal himself who talked with me in the park--that place for rendezvous and romances." Her thoughts leaped over time and space. "The first light of the sun revealed to you this day the last face you expected to see. It was as if a bit of miracle, or a little diablerie had happened. I, too, was in a haze, not so great--though on the deck the night before I little expected to encounter one I had last seen in chains, a prisoner--"

"A prisoner--in chains--he--" Betty Dalrymple stared.

"You did not know? What on earth did you expect? That the prince would give him the suite de luxe after the beating his excellency received--"

"The beating?" half-stammered the girl. "Then the man in the salon who claimed to be a detective was--"

"What? He claimed that?" laughed Sonia Turgeinov. "Très drôle!"

But Betty Dalrymple did not laugh. Her eyes, bent seaward, saw nothing now of the leaping waves; her face was fixed as a cameo's. Only her hair stirred, wind-tossed, all in motion like her thoughts. And regarding her, Sonia Turgeinov's eyes began to harden a little. Did the woman

regret for the moment what she had said, divining again some play within a play? Yet what could there be in common between this beautiful heiress and the gardeurde chiens? No! it was absurd to conceive anything of the kind. Nevertheless Sonia Turgeinov unaccountably began to experience a vague hostility for the young girl; this she might partly attribute to the great gaps of convention separating them. Her own life, in confused pictures, surged panorama-like before her mental vision: The garret beginning; the cold and hunger hardships; the beatings, when a child; the girl problems--so hard; the woman's--Faugh! what a life! Would that the flame of the artist had burned more brightly or not at all. She tried to imagine what she would have been, if she, too, had been born to a golden cradle.

A great ennui swept over her. How old she felt on a sudden! And how homesick, too. Yes; that was it--homesickness. She could have stretched out her arms toward her much beloved and, sometimes, a little hated, Russia. The bright domes of her native city seemed to shine now in her eyes. She walked in spirit the stony pavement of the Kremlin. Cruelty, intolerance, suffering--all these reigned in the city of extremes, but she would have kissed even the cold marble at the feet of dead tyrants, the way the people did, if she could have stood at that moment in one of the old, old sacred places. Her brief flight into the new world had led her to no pots of gold at rainbow end. The little honorarium from his excellency for her part in this adventure, she did not want now. She regretted that she had ever embarked upon it. What penalty might she not have to pay yet? The law, with dragon fingers would reach out--no doubt

was reaching out now--to grip her. Well, let it.

A crisp, matter-of-fact voice--concealing any agitation the speaker may have felt--broke in upon these varied reflections. Mr. Heatherbloom, rather out of breath but quiet and determined, stood before them.

"Miss Dalrymple!--Mademoiselle! There is no occasion for alarm but it will be necessary; for us to leave here at once!"