

CHAPTER XXV

GAIETIES

They took her away the next day. The governor--Sir Charles Somebody--had heard of her and came and claimed her. His lady--portly, majestic--arrived with him. Their carriage was the finest on the island and their horses were the best. The coachman and footman were covered with the most approved paraphernalia and always constituted an unending source of wonder and admiration for the natives. The latter gathered in front of the best hotel on this occasion; they did not quite know what was taking place, but the sight of the big carriage there drew them about like flies.

Mr. Heatherbloom did not linger to speculate or to survey. He had seen but not spoken to Miss Dalrymple that morning; she had smiled at him across space, behind orchids. A moment or two he had sat dreaming how fine it would be to live for ever in such a courtyard, with Betty Dalrymple's face on the other side, then the hubbub below disturbed and dispelled his reflections. He went down to investigate and to retreat. Sir Charles and his lady were in the hall; they seemed to charge the entire hostelry with their presence. Mr. Heatherbloom walked contemplatively out and down the street.

His mind, with a little encouragement, would have flitted back to

courtyards and orchids, but he forced it along less fanciful lines. Mundane considerations were imperative and courtyards were a luxury of the rich. He calculated that, after paying his bill at the best hotel, he wouldn't have much more than half a dollar, or two English shillings, left. The situation demanded calm practical reflection; he strove to bestow upon it the necessary measure of orderly thinking. Yesterday, with its nickelodeon, or temple of wonder, was yesterday; to-day, with its problems, was to-day. He had lingered in the happy valley, or kingdom of Micomicon, but the carriage was before the door--the golden chariot had come to bear away the beautiful princess.

Mr. Heatherbloom asked for employment at the wharf and got it. The supercargo of the boat, loading there, had been indulging, not wisely but too well, in "green swizzles", an insidious drink of the country, and, when last seen was oblivious to the world. A red-haired mate, with superfluous utterance, informed the applicant he could come that afternoon and temporarily essay the delinquent one's duties, checking up the bags of merchandise and bananas the natives were bringing aboard, and otherwise making himself useful. Mr. Heatherbloom tendered his thanks and departed.

He wandered aimlessly for a while, but the charm of the town had vanished; he gazed with no interest upon quaint bits most attractive yesterday, and stolidly regarded now those happy faces he had liked so much but a short time before. He shook himself; this would not do; but the work would soon cure him of vain imaginings.

He returned to the hotel and settled with the landlady. Betty Dalrymple was gone. Of course, there could be no denying Sir Charles and his lady; one of the young girl's place and position in the world could not, with reason or good grace, refuse the governor's hospitality. Mr.

Heatherbloom was hardly a suitable chaperon. But she had left a hasty and altogether charming note for him which he read the last few moments he spent in the courtyard room. "Come soon;" that was the substance of it. What more could mortal have asked? Mr. Heatherbloom gazed at an empty window where he had last seen her (had they been there only twenty-four hours?), then he took a bit of painting on ivory from his pocket and wrapped the message around it. Before noon he had engaged cheap but neat lodgings at the home of an old negro woman.

Several days passed. After waiting in vain for him to call at the governor's mansion, Betty Dalrymple drove herself to the hotel; here she learned that he had gone without leaving an address; a message from Sir Charles for Mr. Heatherbloom, formally offering to put the latter up at government house, had not been delivered. Mr. Heatherbloom had failed to call for his mail.

"Really, my dear, such solicitude!" murmured the governor's wife, when Miss Dalrymple came out of the hotel. "An ordinary secret-service man, too."

"Oh, no; not an ordinary one," said the girl a little confusedly. She

had not taken the liberty of speaking of Mr. Heatherbloom's private affairs to her august hosts. His true name, or his story, were his to reveal when or where he saw fit. In taking her into his confidence he had sealed her lips until such time as she had his permission to speak.

"Well, don't worry about the man," observed the elder lady rather loftily. "There has been a big reward offered, of course, and he'll appear in due time to claim it."

"He'll not," began Betty Dalrymple indignantly, and stopped.

She had been obliged to explain in some way Mr. Heatherbloom's presence, and the subterfuge he had himself employed toward her on the Nevski had been the only one that occurred to her. A brave secret-service officer who had aided her--that's what Mr. Heatherbloom was to the governor and his better half. Hence the distinct formality of Sir Charles' note to Mr. Heatherbloom, indited at Miss Dalrymple's special request and somewhat against the good baronet's own secret judgment. A police agent may be valiant as a lion, but he is not a gentleman.

Something of this axiomatic truth the excellent hosts strove to instill by means, more or less subtle, in the mind of their young guest; but she clung with odd tenacity to her own ingenuous point of view. Whereupon Sir Charles figuratively shrugged. Reprehensible democracy of the new world! She, with the perversity of American womankind, actually spoke of, and, no doubt, desired to treat the fellow as an equal.

She found him one morning, a day or two later. She came down to the wharf, alone, and on foot. He held a note-book and pencil, but that he had not been above lending physical assistance, on occasion, to the natives bearing bags and other merchandise, was evident from his hands which were grimy as a stevedore's. His shirt was open at the throat, and his face, too, bore marks of toil. Betty Dalrymple stepped impetuously toward him; she looked as fresh as a flower, and held out a hand gloved in immaculate white.

"Dare I?" he laughed.

"If you don't!" Her eyes dared him not to take it.

He looked at the hand, such a delicate thing, and seemed still in the least uncertain; then his fingers closed on it.

"You see I managed to find you," she said. "Who is that man who stares so?"

"That," answered Mr. Heatherbloom smiling, "is my boss."

"Well," she observed, "I don't like his face."

"Some of the darkies he's knocked down share, I believe, your opinion," he laughed. "Excuse me a moment." And Mr. Heatherbloom stepped to the

dumfounded person in question, handed him the note-book and pencil, with a request to keep tab for a moment, and then returned to the girl.

"Now, I'm at your command," he said with a smile.

"Suppose we take a walk?" she suggested. "We can talk better if we do."

A moment Mr. Heatherbloom wavered. "Sorry," he then said, "but I've promised to stick by the job. You see the old tub sails to-morrow for South America and it'll be a task to get her loaded before night. Some of the hands, as well as the supercargo, have been bowled over by fire-water."

"I see." There was a strained look about her lips. Before them heavily laden negroes and a few sailors passed and repassed. The burly red-headed mate often looked at her; amazement and curiosity were depicted on his features; he almost forgot the duties Mr. Heatherbloom had, for a brief interval, thrust upon him. Betty Dalrymple, however, had ceased to observe him; he, the others, no longer existed for her. She saw only Mr. Heatherbloom now; what he said, she knew he meant; she realized with an odd thrill of mingled admiration and pain that even she could not cause him to change his mind. He would "stick to his job", because he had said he would.

"I'm interrupting, I fear," she said, a feeling of strange humility sweeping over her. "When is your day's work done?"

"About six, I expect."

"The governor gives a ball for me to-night," she said.

"Excellent. All the elite of the port will be there, and," with slow meditative accent, "I can imagine how you'll look!"

"Can you?" she asked, bending somewhat nearer.

"Yes." His gaze was straight ahead.

The white glove stole toward the black hand. "Why don't you come?"

"I?" He stared.

"Yes; the governor has sent you an invitation. He thinks you a secret-service officer."

Mr. Heatherbloom continued to look at her; then he glanced toward the boat. Suddenly his hand closed; he hardly realized the white glove was in it. "I'll do it, Betty," he exclaimed. "That is, if I can. And--there may be a way. Yes; there will be."

"You mean, you may be able to rent them?" With a sparkle in her glance.

"Exactly," he answered gaily, recklessly.

Both laughed. Then her expression changed; she suppressed an exclamation, but gently withdrew her hand.

"How many dances will you give me, Betty?" He had not even noticed that he had hurt her; his voice was low and eager.

"Ask and see," she said merrily, and went. But outside the shed, she stretched her crushed fingers; he was very strong; he had spoiled a new pair of gloves; she did not, however, seem greatly to mind. As for Mr. Heatherbloom, for the balance of the day he plunged into his task with the energy of an Antaeus.

* * * * *

Sir Charles regarded rather curiously that night one of his guests who arrived late. Mr. Heatherbloom's evening garments were not a Poole fit, and his white gloves, though white enough, had obviously been used and cleaned often. But the host observed, also, that Mr. Heatherbloom held himself well, said just the right thing to the hostess, and moved through the assemblage with quite the proper poise. He didn't look bored, neither did he appear overimpressed by the almost palatial elegance of the ball-room. He even managed to suppress any outward signs of elation at the sight of Miss Dalrymple with whom he had but the opportunity for a word or two, at first. Naturally the center of attraction, the young girl found herself forced to dance often. He, too,

whirled around with others, just whom, he did not know; he dipped into Terpsichorean gaiety to escape the dowager's inquisition regarding that haphazard flight from the Nevski and other details he did not wish to converse about. But his turn came with Betty at last, and sooner than he had reason to expect.

"Ours is the next?" she said, passing him.

Was it? He had ventured to write his name thrice on her card, but neither of the dances he had claimed was the next.

"I put your name down for this one myself," she confessed to him a few moments later. "Do you mind?"

Did he? The evening wore away but too soon; he held her to him a little while, only over-quickly to be obliged to yield her to another. And now, after a third period of waiting, the time came for their last dance. He went for it as soon as the number preceding was over; he wanted, not only to miss none of it, but he hungered to snatch all the prelude he could. The conventional-looking young personage she had been dancing with regarded the approaching Mr. Heatherbloom rather resentfully, but he moved straight as an arrow for her. At once she stepped toward him, and he soon found himself walking with her across the smooth shining floor, on into the great conservatory. Here were soft shadows and wondrous perfumes. Mr. Heatherbloom breathed deeply.

"But a few days more, and we're en route for home." It was the girl who spoke first--lightly, gaily--though there was a thrill in her tones.

He started and did not answer at once. "That will be great, won't it?" His voice, too, was light, but it did not seem so spontaneously glad as her own.

"You are pleased, aren't you?" she said suddenly.

"Pleased? Of course!"

A brief period of inexplicable constraint! He looked at one of her hands resting on the edge of a great vase--at a flower she held in her fingers.

"May I?" he said, and just touched it.

"Of course!" she laughed. "A modest request, after all you've done for me!"

Her fingers placed it in the rented coat.

"There!" she murmured in a matter-of-fact tone, stepping back.

His face, turned to the light, appeared paler; his eyes looked studiously beyond her.

"It will be jolly on the steamer, won't it?" she went on.

"Jolly? Oh, yes," he assented, with false enthusiasm, when a black and white apparition appeared before them, no less a person than Sir Charles.

The governor, as the bearer of particular news, had been looking for her. Mr. Heatherbloom hardly appreciated the preamble or the importance of what followed. Sir Charles imparted a bit of confidential information they were not to breathe to any one until he had verified the particulars. Word had just been brought to him that the Nevski had gone on a reef near a neighboring island and was a total wreck. A passing steamer had stood by, taken off the prince and his crew and landed them. Still Mr. Heatherbloom but vaguely heard; he felt little interest at the moment in his excellency or his boat. Betty Dalrymple's face, however, showed less indifference to this startling intelligence.

"The Nevski a wreck?" she murmured.

"It must all seem like an evil dream to you now," Mr. Heatherbloom spoke absently. "Your having ever been on her!"

"Not all an evil one," she answered. They stood again on the ball-room floor. "Much good has come from it. I no longer hate the prince. I only blame myself a great deal for many things--"

He seemed to hear only her first words. "Good come from it?' I don't understand."

"But for the Nevski, and what happened to me, I should have gone on thinking, as I did, about you."

"And--would that have made such a difference?" quickly.

She raised her eyes. "What do you think?"

"Betty!"

The music had begun. He who had heretofore danced perfectly, now guided wildly.

"Take care!" she whispered.

But discretion seemed to have left him; he spoke he knew not what--wild mad words that would not be suppressed. They came in contact with another couple and were brought to an abrupt stop. Flaming poppies shone on her cheeks; her eyes were brightly beaming. But she laughed and they went on. He swept her out of the crowded ball-room now, on to the broad veranda where a few other couples also moved in the starlight. On her curved lips a smile rested; it seemed to draw his head lower.

"Betty, do you mean it?" Again the words were wrested from him, would come. "What your eyes said just now?"

She lifted them again, gladly, freely--not only that--

"Yes; I mean it--mean it," said her lips. "Of course! Foolish boy! I have long meant it--"

"Long?" he cried.

"You heard what the Russian woman said--"

"About there being some one? Then it was--"

"Guess." The sweet laughing lips were close; his swept them passionately. He found the answer; the world seemed to go round.

But later, that night, there was no joy on Mr. Heatherbloom's face. In his room in the old negro woman's house, he indited a letter. It was brought to Betty Dalrymple the next morning as the early sunshine entered her chamber overlooking the governor's park.

"Darling: Forgive me. I am sailing at dawn on the old tub, for South America--"

Here the note fell from the girl's hand. Long she looked out of the

window. Then she went back to the bit of paper, took it and held it against her breast before she again read. She seemed to know now what would be in it; the strange depression that had come over her after he had left last night was accounted for. Of course, he would not go back to New York with her; he would, or could, accept nothing, in the way she wished, from her or her aunt. It was necessary for him still to be Mr. Heatherbloom; he had not yet "found himself" fully; the beginning he had spoken of was only begun. The influential friends of his father in the financial world had become impossible aids; he had to continue as he had planned, to go his own way, and his, alone. It would have been easy for him, as his father's son and the prospective nephew of the influential Miss Van Rolsen, to have obtained one of those large salaried positions, or "sinecures", with little to do. But that would be only beginning at the end once more.

Again she essayed to read. The letter would have been a little incomprehensible to any one except herself, but she understood. There were three "darlings"; inexcusable tautology! She kissed them all, but she kissed oftenest the end: "You will forgive me for forgetting myself--God knows I didn't intend to--and you will wait; have faith? It is much to ask--too much; but if you will, I think my father's son and he whom you have honored by caring for, may yet prove a little worthy--"

The words brought a sob to her throat; she threw herself back on the bed. "A little?" she cried, still holding the note tight in her hand. But after a spell of weeping, once more she got up and looked out of the

window. The sunshine was very bright, the birds sang to her. Did she take heart a little? A great wave of sadness bowed her down, but courage, too, began to revive in her.

"Have faith?" She looked up at the sky; she would do as he asked--unto the grave, if need be. Then, very quietly, she dressed and went down-stairs.

EPILOGUE

It is very gay at the Hermitage, in Moscow, just after Easter, and so it was natural that Sonia Turgeinov should have been there on a certain bright afternoon some three years later. The theater, at which she once more appeared, was closed for the afternoon, and at this season following Holy Week and fasting, fashionables and others were wont to congregate in the spacious café and grounds, where a superb orchestra discourses classical or dashing selections. The musicians played now an American air.

"Some one at a table out there on the balcony sent a request by the head waiter for it," said a member of Sonia Turgeinov's party--a Parisian artist, not long in Moscow.

"An American, no doubt," she answered absently, sipping her wine. The three years had treated her kindly; the few outward changes could be superficially enumerated: A little more embonpoint; a tendency toward a slight drooping at the corners of the mobile lips, and moments when the shadows seemed to stay rather longer in the deep eyes.

"That style of music should appeal to you, Madam," observed the Frenchman. "You who have been among those favored artists to visit the land of the free. Did you have to play in a tent, and were you literally showered with gold?"

"Both," she laughed. "It is a land of many surprises."

"I have heard es ist alles 'the almighty dollar'," said a musician from Berlin, one of the gay company.

"Exaggeration, mein Herr!" she retorted, with a wave of the hand. "It is also a komischer romantischer land." For a moment she seemed thinking.

"Isn't that his excellency, Prince Boris Strogareff?" inquired abruptly a young man with a beyond-the-Volga physiognomy.

She started. "The prince?" An odd look came into her eyes. "Do you believe in telepathic waves, Monsieur?" she said gaily to the Frenchman.

"Not to any great extent, Madam. Mais pourquoi?"

"Nothing. But I don't see this prince you speak of."

"He has disappeared now," replied her countryman, a fellow-player recently come from Odessa. "It is his first dip again into the gaities of the world. For several years," with the proud accents of one able to impart information concerning an important personage, "he has been living in seclusion on his vast estates near the Caspian Sea--ruling a kingdom greater than many a European principality. But have you never met the prince?" To Sonia Turgeinov. "He used to be a patron of the arts, according to report, before the sad accident that befell him."

"I think," observed Sonia Turgeinov, with brows bent as if striving to recollect, "I did meet him once. But a poor actress is forced to meet so many princes and nobles, nowadays," she laughed, "that--"

"True! Only one would not easily forget the prince, the handsomest man in Asia."

She yawned slightly.

"What was this 'sad accident' you were speaking of, mein Herr?" observed the German, with a mind trained to conversational continuity.

"The prince was cruising somewhere and his yacht was wrecked," said the young Roscius from Odessa. "A number of the crew were drowned; his excellency, when picked up, was unconscious. A blow on the head from a falling timber, or from being dashed on the rocks, I'm not sure which. At any rate, for a long time his life was despaired of, but he recovered and is as strong and sound as ever. Only, there is a strange sequel; or not so strange," reflectively, "since cases of its kind are common. The injury was on his head, as I remarked, and his mind became--"

"Affected, Monsieur?" said the Frenchman. "You mean this great noble of the steppe is no longer right, mentally?"

"He is one of the keenest satraps in Asia, Monsieur. His brain is as alert as ever, only he has suffered a complete loss of memory."

Sonia Turgeinov's interest was of a distinctly artificial nature; she tapped on the floor with her foot; then abruptly arose. "Shan't we go into the garden for our coffee?" she said. "It is close here."

They got up and walked out. As they did so they passed a couple at one of the tables on the balcony and a slight exclamation fell from Sonia Turgeinov's lips. For an instant she exhibited real interest, then hastening down the steps, she selected a place some distance aside. A great bunch of flowers was in the center of the table and she moved her chair behind them.

"You see some one you know, gnädige Madam?" asked the observant Teuton.

"A great many people," she answered.

"There's that American over there who asked for the Yankee piece of music," said the Frenchman, with eyes on the two people Sonia Turgeinov had started at sight of, a moment before. "Mon Dieu! What charm! What beauty!"

"Der Herr Amerikaner?" blurted the surprised Berliner.

"No--diable! His belle companion!"

"Where?" said Sonia Turgeinov, well knowing. A face that her table companion regarded, she, too, saw beyond the flowers. The afternoon sunshine touched the golden hair of her she looked at; the violet eyes shone with delight upon bizarre details: of the scene--the waiters in blouses resembling street "white wings" in American cities, the coachmen outside, big as balloons in their quilted cloaks.

"Der Herr Amerikaner has the passionate eyes of an admirer, a devout lover," murmured the sentimental musician from Berlin.

"Or an American husband!" said Roscius from Odessa.

"Sometimes!" added the Frenchman cynically.

"I haf met him," observed the Herr Musikaner, "at the hotel. We haf talked together, once or twice. He has been in South America--Argentine, ich glaube--and has made a fortune there. And madam, his wife, and he are making a grand tour of the world. Their wedding trip, I believe. Sie kommt von einer der ersten Familien--the Dalrymples. Der Herr Direktor of the Russicher-Chinese bank told me. He cashes the drafts--Her Gott--nicht kleine!"

These prosaic details the Frenchman, pictorially occupied, hardly, heard. "Mon Dieu! What a chapeau!" he sighed. "No wonder he looks enchanted at that wonderful creation of the Rue de la Paix."

"He seems quite an exception to some husbands in that respect!" remarked the Berliner in deep gutturals.

Sonia Turgeinov lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke at the flowers. There was a resentful cynicism in the act; she leaned back with greater abandon in her chair. "After all, the unities have been observed," she said with an odd laugh.

"What unities?" asked Roscius, becoming keen as a young hound on the scent, at the sound of the trite phrase.

"Oh, I was thinking of a play." Stretching more comfortably. Suddenly

her cigarette waved; behind the flowers, her eyes dilated. Prince Boris Strogareff was coming down the steps; he passed the American couple they had been talking about and looked at them. A light of involuntary admiration shone from his gaze, but there was no recognition in it--only the instinctive tribute that a man of the world and a gallant Russian is ever prone to pay at the sight of an unusually charming member of the other sex. Then, once more impassive--a striking handsome figure--he moved leisurely down and out of the gardens. The couple, engrossed at the time in a conversation of some intimate nature or in each other, had not even seen or noticed the august nobleman.

Sonia Turgeinov drew harder on the cigarette; a laugh welled from her throat. "Oh, I wouldn't have missed it for worlds!" she said.

Young Roscius with the Tartar eyes stared at her. She threw away the smoking cylinder.

"I'm off!"

"Why--"

"Has not the curtain descended?" enigmatically.

"I don't see any curtain," said the Frenchman.

"No? But it's there." At the gate, however, once more she paused--to

listen, to laugh.

"Was jetzt?" asked the mystified Berliner.

She only shrugged.

The orchestra, having played a few conventional selections after Dixie, had now plunged into Marching through Georgia.

As Sonia Turgeinov disappeared through the gate, the golden head surmounted by the "wonderful chapeau", bent toward the clean-cut, strong-looking face of the young man on the other side of the small table.

"It's awfully extravagant of you, Harry,--twenty roubles, a tip for those musicians. But it makes it seem like home, doesn't it?"

"Yes, darling," he answered.

THE END