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THE RISING TIDE.

A STORY OF NIHILISM.

By JOHN E. BARRETT.



HE CLUNG TO THE HORSES HEADS FOR HIS LIFE.

"STAND BACK!" SHOUTED LEO. "WHAT HAS THIS FEEBLE OLD MAN DONE TO BE HOUNDED UPON IN THIS BRUTAL FASHION?"

THE RISING TIDE.

A Story of Nihilism.

By JOHN E. BARRETT.

CHAPTER I.

A RUSSIAN VILLAGE.

The wealthy manor-house of Michael Kirsanof was glowing with lights and expectation.

His daughter, Vera, whom the villagers called Vera the Beautiful, was coming home from Paris, where she had been attending a convent school, and an absence of five years gave added zest to the welcome in store for her.

She was but fifteen when, with many sighs and tears, she bade her father good-by at the convent gate. Now she was coming home in the full flush of womanhood, and the family anticipations regarding her were great.

The fame of Vera's beauty had preceded her to the village, and indeed for some days before the date of her arrival she was the theme of the neighborhood.

It was well known that she did not go to a French convent for the sole purpose of acquiring an education, but that her absence was, in a measure, a banishment to prevent a threatened *mesalliance* with Leo Rollins, a mere boy, the son of an old French shoemaker, for whom she had formed a passionate girlish attachment, regardless of the social chasm between them. The little people read Paul and Virginia together, and were actually about to run away when their intentions became known to Leo's father, who communicated the fact with fear and trembling to the mighty Michael Kirsanof, who immediately locked his daughter in her room, and packed off with her to Paris the following day.

But five years had gone by since then, and many changes had taken place. Leo Rollins still lived in the village of Alexis, and was the handsomest, as he also was the bravest, young man in the place. He had picked up music and some other accomplishments in a fragmentary way from his old godfather, Peter Karnovitch, a remnant of nobility with a meager income and a great boast of blood.

At the time our story opens, Leo Rollins, the organist of St. Nicholas Church, was a handsome young man of twenty-three.

He walked to the church—a modest little building, in which a very small congregation worshiped—but Vera's family was among the number.

Leo took his place at the well-worn organ. The moonlight streamed through a stained window, and seemed to fill the place with a spirit congregation. The feeling of awe which crept over him was overpowering, so he left the place, and sauntered down the road. The moon was shining brightly, silvers the snow, and filling the white expanse with new beauty.

Presently a sound of bells burst upon Leo's ear. He looked back, and saw dashing down the road, at break-neck speed, a pair of horses, with a sledge. He heard the excited voices of the occupants, and a woman's cry of terror.

The next instant he saw the terror-stricken face of the woman. Like a spirit it seemed in the moonlight—the spirit of Vera—and Leo's heart leaped wildly. He had lost all self-control. He clutched at the reins of the runaways that came by like a thunderbolt, and clung to them for dear life. He was snapped off the road like a feather in a whirlwind, and dragged on in the blinding mist of snow, which the foaming horses sent flying all about them.

The sledge swayed violently from side to side, and now the driver was flung from his seat into a deep drift, quickly followed by one of the men. A man and woman still held their places, and after a wild run, the jaded animals settled down to a trot, and then a walk.

Then Leo, who sprang to his feet unhurt, brought the animals to a stand-still, and spoke soothingly as he stroked them on the hot and steaming manes.

Presently, Michael Kirsanof came running down the road, covered with snow, and looking like an exaggerated picture of Santa Claus. He was followed by the frightened driver, at whom he swore roundly for letting the horses run away.

"I hope no one is injured," said Leo, addressing the occupants of the sledge.

"Mercy!" said Vera; "it is Leo!" and her voice betrayed her joy.

"It is, indeed!" said Leo; "and you are Vera. How glad I am to see you back again. Are you injured?"

"Not at all," she answered, with an effort to compose her agi-

tated feelings; "but we are all very much frightened, and I fear for papa; but here he is."

Michael Kirsanof was not hurt, but he was very much astonished to find Leo at the horses' heads, and was almost rude in the way he thanked him. Then, taking his place in the sledge, he directed the frightened servant to lead the horses to the house, and the party moved on slowly, leaving Leo, somewhat stunned, in the road.

As they drove in the direction of the brilliantly lighted manor-house, that loomed up on the side of an elevation in the distance, Vera looked back, and smiled sweetly, but she was pained by the sad expression on Leo's face. He raised his cap, then turned away.

"There can be no doubt of it," he thought. "That distinguished man beside her is no other than her affianced. They have come home to be married from her father's house; but some other hands than Leo's will play the wedding-march. God help me now! Why did I see her again? The old love has been born once more—born to die a sudden death. I have seen the vision of delight, but it eludes me at the first glance. Oh, joy, so short-lived and so close akin to pain, why did you come to mock me—to bid me hail and farewell in a single breath? Now all is over, and I must leave this place, never, never more to return!"

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER.

Two liveried servants ran to take the frost-covered and foaming horses, as Michael Kirsanof halted before his manor-house.

Vera leaped lightly into her father's arms, and then, with a cry of joy, sprang to her mother, who stood in the porch with Natalie. The mother wept as she clasped her daughter to her breast, and Natalie could scarce restrain herself from leaping at the head of her beautiful sister. At home Michael Kirsanof was a stickler for propriety, but this affectionate outburst was entirely beyond his control, although he called out rather good-naturedly to Natalie:

"There, there now, restrain your joy and your tears until Vera gets the frost out of her voice, and don't forget that we have here another guest."

He presented the stranger as Count Rolof. The latter removed a huge fur cap, that not only enveloped his head but descended to his shoulders like a cape, and as he did so he showed a handsome face, strong features, small, penetrating eyes, a small mustache, and brown, curling hair. He stood about six feet in height, and appeared to be no more than twenty-five years old, and when he spoke his voice was musical and agreeable. Natalie thought him rather good-looking, but her mother regarded him with a feeling of awe. What was he? Who was he? Count Rolof, her husband had said, but who might Count Rolof be? Was he really the accepted suitor of her Vera? If so, his coming was ill-timed and inopportune. But then Michael Kirsanof would explain. He was wise and knew everything, she thought, and he made her the sharer of all his secrets.

"Now for dinner," said Michael Kirsanof, calling Andrei, whom he directed to show Count Rolof to his room.

Vera was already gone with her mother and Natalie, who were eager for a chat with her concerning her experience at school, and especially concerning the stranger who accompanied her home.

"I never saw him until he came with papa to the convent," said Vera. "He is certainly handsome and a noble, but that is all I know of him, except that I believe he is here for a purpose, and that papa and he understand each other.

"It is already rumored in the village that you and he are to be married," said Natalie.

Vera started back in surprise.

"This is certainly a shock," she said. "It was arranged on the way home, as a means of shielding the count from suspicion and for the good of the emperor, that in case any one made inquiry about the count, he should pass as my affianced. I did not like this, but was overruled by papa, who said it was absolutely necessary as an act of patriotism. Of course I could not as a loyal subject refuse so small a favor for my country, but I did not know that the report had already preceded me. Since it has, I presume it is part of the general plan to ward off the suspicions of the villagers from Count Rolof, and we must not complain."

"I don't care," said Natalie, indignantly. "I would not have it, if I were you; it will deprive you of all other attentions, and may be the means of preventing your getting a husband, unless," she added, archly, "this charade becomes real, in which case of course you will become a countess or a duchess."

Vera colored crimson. She had now removed her outer wrap-

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pings and stood forth under the light, showing her beauty in all its lovely proportions. A pure countenance of classic contour, a pair of "talking eyes," warm and winning, a crown of rich black hair, and a faultless figure, were among her peerless charms.

It would have been no wonder even if the count were dazzled. Natalie and her mother kissed Vera again as they beheld how beautiful she was, and it was not until the servant called to say dinner was waiting that they left the boudoir for the dining-room.

Michael Kirsanof was wealthy in this world's possessions. He was a retired merchant, who had in his time made large and profitable ventures, and his home lacked none of life's comforts.

His manner was brusque, and showed itself more prominently than usual in contrast with the calm demeanor of the refined Count Rolof, with whom he waited in the parlor to escort the ladies to dinner.

Vera and her mother walked together, and seeing Natalie alone, the count offered his arm. Michael Kirsanof led the way to dinner, and took occasion to inform his guest that they did not stand upon ceremony.

Count Rolof noticed that notwithstanding this announcement everything was rich and elegant, and he made up his mind to make himself as agreeable as possible. He was a capital raconteur, and told some capital stories of Paris and Parisian life, which had the additional merit of being very brief. Everybody was interested, but Vera was delighted.

At last the ice having been thoroughly broken, the conversation turned on Russian affairs.

"I see the Nihilists are still carrying on their wicked plots against the emperor with renewed zeal," said Michael Kirsanof. "But yesterday a dreadful explosive was found in the heart of an orange on the way to his table."

"Ungrateful people, all of them," said the count, with some warmth. Russia has never had so kind a ruler as Alexander III. His noble father was too good, and kindness is a quality never appreciated by the common herd."

That was the first expression of Count Rolof's that grated harshly on Vera's ear, and she responded quickly by saying:

"I think you are severe. The people as a rule regard the emperor with reverence. It is only the conspirators who seek to destroy him."

"Ah, but the movement is spreading. It has already infected the masses deeply," said the count, "and the time has come when those who love order, and look for stability in society, in domestic relations, in religion, and in all that we hold dear, must array themselves against the Russian Commune. Paris you know has been drenched with pure, noble, and saintly blood, and we all know it was not shed by those who uphold order, but by the terrible Anarchists, the Communists—the Red Republicans. It was the genius of sin and ignorance seeking to strike down the spirit of purity and progress. These forces are now fighting in Russia, and every man and woman in the empire must choose between them."

His small eyes sparkled as he spoke, and at the close of his remarks he looked furtively around the room.

In the society of Michael Kirsanof this gentleman felt secure, and he also reposed full confidence in his wife and daughters. Indeed there was no reason why he should hesitate to utter such loyal sentiments in any society were it not for the fact that he did not desire his real character to become known anywhere outside the house of his host.

Suddenly his eye rested on the face of Andrei, the servant who was waiting on table, and upon whose sallow countenance he thought he detected a trace of the displeasure. The servant, however, appeared fully occupied with his work, and moved about nimbly and noiselessly as a cat. He was discomfited somewhat by the stranger's steady glance, and, under pretense of going for something, quitted the room.

"One can scarcely tell whom to trust these days," said Count Rolof, lowering his tone, and indicating to Michael Kirsanof that he did not feel entirely free to speak on political matters before Andrei.

"Very true," said the other. "But what you have said is mild compared to what Andrei hears daily from me, and he will take it as a matter of course. Besides, I think he is loyal, and can be trusted, although he is the son of a serf."

"You cannot trust common blood," said the count.

Vera's Parisian training made her more free to talk than the other ladies, and she said:

"Some of our greatest heroes have sprung from the lowliest stations in life, count."

"In exceptional cases I grant, and after a process of severe mental and moral discipline, but the *cavaillon* has given this world the greatest traitors, and in a crisis like this none but men and women of honor can be intrusted with great affairs."

"Is it not true," continued Vera, "that some of the most desperate plotters are of the nobility to-day—ay, some even the same blood as the Czar himself?"

"Yes," said Rolof, "but these people belong to the great army of the dissatisfied. Heaven had its Lucifer, and why not Russia her rebels? There are among the nobles those who envy the emperor, whom Heaven spares from their machinations, but they are the disappointed, the envious, the men and women who have suffered their hearts to go astray. They have turned their backs on religion, on their God, and can it be expected that they could continue loyal to the Czar when they deny their Maker? Ah! I pity them. They are sowing the wind and they will reap the whirlwind. It is to such as they that the death of our lamented Alexander is due, but a day of reckoning is ripening."

Michael Kirsanof was delighted with the count's conversation. The dinner was over, and the little party lingered over the dessert and wine.

They were suddenly interrupted by a loud and boisterous commotion in the hall, and above it rose an angry, shrill voice:

"I must see Michael Kirsanof!"

"I will go and see this madman," said Michael Kirsanof, rising hastily.

In the hall he found Jules Rollins, the old shoemaker, father of Leo, scuffling fiercely with Andrei.

The old man trembled with excitement, and as he saw the wealthy merchant he cried:

"What have you done with my boy?"

"Your boy, Jules?" said Michael, calmly. "He is at home, is he not?"

"Ah, well you know he is not. You trampled him to death with your horses. Oh, *mon fils, mon fils!*" exclaimed the old shoemaker, "what have they done with you?"

"Be calm, Jules. You wrong me. Your brave lad stopped my horses, but he was not hurt."

"He was hurt. He is in this house dying or dead! For God's sake let me see him, if you have not buried him in the snow!"

"Stop this lunacy," said Michael. "Here are witnesses that your boy was unhurt."

"I won't believe them. I won't believe them!" said Jules, swinging his arms wildly about his head. "You have killed my Leo, but the curse be on you, and the curse will. It is the old story of the rich grinding the poor under their heels. My poor boy, I will be avenged for your sake, if it is the last act of my life!"

A strange light shone in the old man's eyes, and as he spoke he brandished a huge knife which he pulled from his breast, and with it he ran at Michael Kirsanof.

The count, who had been attracted to the door by the commotion, saw the movement, and saw also that the crazed old man was bent on committing murder. With a swift movement he drew his pistol. There was a sharp report, after which the shoemaker fell, with a cry of pain, on the floor, and the ladies, startled by the uproar, came rushing terror-stricken from the dining-room.

They saw the old man writhing on the floor; they heard Andrei exclaim, with an oath:

"You have killed him!"

And at the feet of Michael Kirsanof they beheld the long, glittering blade of the knife intended for his heart.

CHAPTER III.

FOR LIBERTY'S SWEET SAKE.

The determination of Leo Rollins to leave the village forever was sadly shaken by the thoughts of his feeble father. Yet how could he live in the village to see himself despised by the object of his first love, and to bear the scoffs and jeers of the rustics. What would he do? His heart was beating wildly the rhythm of his conflicting emotions.

The moon looked down from a clear sky, filling the snow-clad landscape with a transitory glory, and the music of merry laughter from the manor-house of Michael Kirsanof floated on the clear, frosty air to Leo's ear, and quickened the tumult of his thoughts, bringing up a flood of old sweet memories of the lovely girl who had promised in the budding spring-time to love him all the time, but who was now another's. Would he stay and see her marriage consummated? Could he bear to see the object of his love united to another? No. He had great courage, but that was one of the things he could not endure, and therefore he must leave the place.

He was wondering which road to take when a footfall in the snow attracted his attention, and he turned sharply around. As he did so he was slapped on the shoulder by a brawny hand, and a gruff but familiar voice said:

"Hallo, Leo! Why do you stand mooning here? Why not go and greet your pretty sweetheart who has just returned home?"

"True," said Leo, "she has; but she is no longer sweetheart of mine."

"Ho, ho! How is this?"

"Ah! Peter, need you ask knowing the social chasm that divides us. The daughter of a wealthy retired merchant, and I the son of a poor shoemaker, you might say a beggar. Besides, Vera is engaged to be married to a noble. She will mate with one worthy of her station in life."

"As to that," said Peter, "it is quite natural and you should not suffer it to destroy your piece of mind. But you know when Vera was a little one she was not a bit proud, and I doubt very much whether education could spoil a nature so sweet and gentle. How know you that she weds this noble? I have heard it gadded about as gossip, but gossip you know may sometimes be nothing more substantial than chaff that blows with every vagrant breath."

"I am as certain of it now, Peter, as that I know the moon shines. I saw them but a few minutes ago sweep by in a sledge to her father's house and the noble with them."

"Know you who this noble is?"

"Not I."

"Or where he comes from?"

"No, indeed."

"Humph!" said Peter, thoughtfully. "We must ascertain who he is. But I am glad that you are now free, and that you know at least that to hope for Vera's love would be folly."

"And why are you glad, my friend?" said Leo. "I counted on you, my old godfather, as my friend, and now when you find me wounded and distressed beyond utterance you are glad. Oh, is there not such a thing in the world as friendship, even if love is a myth?"

"Come, come, Leo, you wrong me," said Peter, taking him by the hand. "Indeed you do. I have nobler work for you than sighing after fickle woman's favors. Give your heart to your country. She needs your love, and she will not spurn you for a titled thing. Oh, I conjure you in the name of your dead mother, who was indeed one of the people, to forget this transitory passion; tear it from your heart, and with all the devotion of a strong man give yourself and all that you are to your stricken, tyrant-ridden country."

Leo looked dazed. Although his father was a Frenchman by birth, his lot in life was cast in Russia at an early age, and he married the daughter of a patriot who was banished to Siberia.

"What would you have me do, Peter?" the young man asked.

"Why, become one of us. The cause must win as sure as Heaven bends above us, and you are fitted for just such service as we now stand in need of. We have a mission to Paris. It is one of great honor, and would just suit you because you talk French. If you come with me I may secure it for you this very night."

"But you would not intrust a stranger with such an important task?" said Leo, who brightened at the prospect of a trip to Paris.

"Not generally," said Peter. "But my head shall be the forfeit of your fidelity, and if I can, you shall be selected for the task."

Leo dashed away his tears. Then reaching out both hands to old Peter, he said:

"I go!"

"Well done, well done!" said the other, enthusiastically. "I knew your heart was right."

"But my poor father. Should I not see him before going?"

"That would spoil all. Besides, I will see that he is all right, and plead a proper excuse with him in good time. Now let us hasten for the train. I fear we have delayed too long, as I must reach St. Petersburg to-night."

Leo assented to Peter's propositions, and gladly accompanied him. The thought of some new adventure to arouse him from his melancholy was gratifying, and nothing could suit him better than the idea of going to Paris.

A few minutes' walk brought them to the railway station, and they were "whirled" with all the speed of a proverbially slow Russian railroad to St. Petersburg.

Peter whispered in the ear of his companion:

"I'll talk to you when we reach St. Petersburg. We are watched."

Leo understood and merely nodded.

Even this movement was observed by a sharp-faced peasant, who eyed them closely.

Peter tried to affect indifference, but his frequent glances at the peasant betrayed his anxiety. He noticed that, although coarsely clad, the keen-eyed rustic was more self-composed than persons of his class generally are.

Presently the lights of the city came in view, and thrilled the heart of Leo with indescribable sensations. He was entering

upon a new life, and this seemed a new world that glittered before him.

On getting out at the great station in St. Petersburg, Peter and Leo hastened through the throng with lively strides; but the peasant, who carried a light bundle, followed close behind them. Then they turned a corner sharply, and Peter led the way into a beer-shop. The peasant followed and took a light drink.

"He's a spy," whispered Peter.

Leo paid no heed to the fellow; but his companion was an old fox, and had been hunted before in his time, so that he was sensitive to surveillance. A drunken Cossack staggered up to Peter with some derogatory remark concerning the emperor. The eyes of the peasant watched Peter closer than before; but the latter, with a laugh, merely remarked to the bibulant:

"I don't know you, sir. You would do well to give your confidence to some one else."

The drunken fellow grew foully abusive, and denounced Peter as a traitor; but Peter made no reply, and hastened from the place with his companion.

They walked quickly down the street, but had not gone far before the peasant was seen hastening in the same direction.

"That clod of a fellow is no peasant at all," whispered Peter, "but a detective—one of the Holy League—and he suspects us."

"Does he know anything against you?" queried Leo.

"Not he. The fellow is simply acting on instinct, but you will soon see how I can foil him."

They turned into another street, and, before going far, Peter looked back.

The peasant was not visible, but a man dressed like a mechanic was keeping up the pursuit.

"Ha! they have changed hands," said Peter. "Now our pursuer is a mechanic."

"How?"

"Why, the peasant saw that we detected him, and he has called into his service another member of the League. This fellow is a mechanic in appearance. How fast he walks! He is anxious to keep track of us. After following us for a short distance, if he sees that we notice him, he will probably put another on the trail. I know all their tricks. They represent every trade and profession, and one of their number is stationed at every corner. When the peasant dropped out of the pursuit, he took the place of this mechanic at the last corner we turned, and he in turn may have been replaced by another member of the League, by this time on the track of some other suspect. The mechanic is close now. Say nothing. Keep a quick step."

Leo did as directed. Presently Peter turned suddenly into a low, narrow door leading to a beer saloon. Three men were drinking beer. Peter did not halt, but crossed to the opposite side of the room, and into what seemed a narrow closet.

"We are bagged," whispered Leo.

"Follow me," was the reply.

The opposite wall suddenly yielded to old Peter's touch, and they passed through, after which it was speedily closed as tight as ever.

A few steps more, and they were in the open street.

"We have left the mechanic in a hole," said Peter, with a low chuckle. "He will mark that saloon, and report it as a suspicious place, but the authorities will never find anything there but a loyal beer-seller, his wife, and a little stock of drink. Now listen for our next plan. It will not do for us to be seen going in together where we propose meeting the council. I must go ahead to pave the way. In the meantime I will leave you at the house of our old friend Nicholas, where you will remain till a young woman calls for you. Follow her instructions, and fear nothing."

"A young woman! Do women attend your meetings?"

"Sometimes. We could do nothing without them. Woman is the great force in the rising tide."

"The rising tide! What is that?"

"I will explain later. But here we are."

Peter turned without ceremony into a private house, and with his companion, who thought the proceeding somewhat rude, walked into a neatly furnished parlor.

An old man with a wooden leg bade them welcome.

"This is a young friend, Nicholas," said Peter.

Nicholas shook Leo by the hand, and complimented him on his good looks, adding:

"Will you take something? The night is cold."

Peter nodded assent, and a glass of wine was quickly produced for each.

Tossing it off hastily, Peter said to Leo, "I will send for you soon," and was gone.

Half an hour went by. It seemed to Leo half a day. He wondered whither he was going, and what he would have to do. He had a general idea that he was about to engage in the great

movement that would revolutionize the world, and the thought, like the first rapture of love, was thrilling.

Then his mind wandered back to the village, and Vera's face, as it seemed in the moonlight, haunted him. He was dozing to sleep, when a light footstep on the carpet roused him, and he saw standing before him a lovely girl, plainly clad, and of the type of beauty peculiar to the prettiest Jewish women.

"Leo," she said, "I have come for you."

"Ah, you know my name, then," answered Leo, scarcely realizing what he said.

She smiled, showing her white and perfect teeth, saying as she did so:

"You surely did not think I came for Papa Nicholas?"

"True enough," said Leo. "How stupid I am. But I hope I shall learn better."

Then the young woman gave him instructions as to what he should do when she left him at the entrance to the subterranean council-room.

"I will turn back just in front of the door which you must enter. Without any ceremony whatever, you must go ahead. Having once passed in you cannot turn back. Cross a narrow hall, at the end of which you will find a small black cord hanging from the wall. Pull this and a stair-way will appear, down which you must descend, and then go forward."

She spoke with great earnestness. Leo looked straight in her eyes. They were large, eloquent, and sincere. The slightest tinge of color came to her cheeks under Leo's steady glance. There was youth in each face, and this seemed to form a bond of instant friendship between them.

"Our acquaintance is certainly abrupt," he said, whereupon she answered:

"We shall meet again."

Then a look of resolution asserted itself in her countenance, and leading the way she stepped into the street and took Leo's arm. They walked slowly along like lovers, to thwart the detectives that might be watching, and after going a little way the fair chaperon disengaged her hand with a low "good-night," and was gone, leaving Leo in front of a door.

At first he was bewildered, but having received his instructions, he proceeded to act promptly. With a quick glance at the door, he darted in, and it closed behind him with a spring. Then passing along the narrow hall, he saw the black string which he was told would appear. It hung carelessly from a nail in the wall, as if it had been used to hold up something and was broken off.

Leo pulled it gently. It disappeared as soon as he let it go, and at his feet a stair-way suddenly opened, leading downward. He stepped cautiously down, and as soon as he reached the bottom the steps vanished. For the first time a queer sensation of fear crept over him. He found himself entirely alone in a dimly lighted corridor, but he was naturally courageous, and remembering the words of the pretty woman who had conducted him to that place, he went forward.

He expected to meet somebody, but no one appeared, and he did not hear the sound of a human voice. After walking for some distance he began to wonder if he was not in the wrong place, and seriously contemplated going back. The sound of his own footsteps was oppressive, and he came to a sudden halt, and listened eagerly, but he heard nothing. He was about to despair when a faint light flickered far in the distance like a will-o'-the-wisp, and gathering new courage he made up his mind to follow it, lead where it might.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEST OF NIHILISTS.

Leo Rollins hastened with all speed toward the glimmering light that had inspired hope in his breast, but just as he had advanced within a few paces of it, the fickle flame died out, and all was dark.

This caused him increased anxiety. The terrors of the subterranean situation were intensified by the impenetrable gloom. His imagination conjured up scores of shadowy hands with daggers. Had he blundered into some trap? Did he go the wrong way after descending the stairs would he ever get out again?

His train of thoughts was interrupted by a voice close to his ear. It said:

"Brother, do you desire to become a child of liberty?"

Leo never before felt such a yearning for liberty as he did at that moment, and he answered:

"I do."

"Your name?"

"Leo."

"And your hand?"

"At your service."

The unseen questioner then took Leo's hand, and bade him be of good courage, adding that it was necessary he should not look upon the light again until his character was passed upon as a true and faithful child of liberty.

"You must therefore go masked to the council-room," he said.

As he spoke he placed a heavy mask upon Leo. It completely enveloped his head, fitting closely at the neck, making it a difficult matter to breathe.

The mysterious sentinel then, taking Leo's right hand, admonished him to move cautiously, and commenced the descent of a narrow flight of stairs.

On reaching the foot they turned to the right, and walked briskly for some distance without exchanging a word.

At last Leo, through the delicate perforations in the mask, became conscious of the presence of light. He also heard voices, and was overjoyed on hearing his old godfather, Peter, pronounce his name.

"Leo, my boy, I am glad you are here. Sentinel, remove the mask, his character is already approved."

The heavy mask was then removed, much to the relief and satisfaction of Leo, who noticed that it was made of steel, and that its mechanism was complicated and curious. It was so contrived that it would lock like a vise upon the wearer's neck, and suffocate him in a short time. He shuddered to think he had worn it so long, and that in all probability it had snuffed out many a young life. It was the mask of death.

Leo found himself in the presence of six men. The room was narrow. The occupants of the room were Herman Aurbach, Basil Merkoreloff, Peter Kamakoff, Demitrieff, the blacksmith, and the editor and chemist of the division.

The center of the floor was occupied by a small table, littered with documents.

A small spirit-lamp stood on the table, emitting a bluish flame, and adding to the weird aspect of the apartment. Leo divined at once that he was in the presence of important persons.

Old Peter came forward and took him by the hand, saying as he did so:

"My brothers, I stand sponsor for this lad. I am his godfather, and I stake my life on his loyalty. It needs no oath to pledge his life and service to the people, yet I will ask him if he is now ready to take such a pledge."

He took up the mask of death as he spoke, and the sight of the machine sent a shudder through Leo's frame. He understood what it meant, just as well as though Peter had said:

"If you cannot pledge yourself to the order now this will be your fate."

Peter made no reference whatever to the mask, but addressing Leo, said:

"Leo, do you believe in the everlasting cause of liberty?"

The young man answered in a firm voice:

"I do believe."

"You renounce all despots, despotic governments, and cruel creeds."

"I renounce them all."

"Will you dare every danger, even death itself, for the people? Swear this by the eternal light of liberty."

"I swear it."

"Then in the name of the deathless spirit of liberty, I present you to this council and division, at whose pleasure you henceforth hold your life to be used exclusively in the service of your country, and to be held in readiness always to be surrendered at a moment's notice even as this flame is ready to yield up its light before the breath of man."

Saying this, old Peter, who seemed transfigured in the eyes of his young friend, took the tiny lamp from the table and placed it in Leo's hand.

Even as he did so it flickered a moment, and the light went out. A man came forward with a taper and restored the flame.

Leo was not superstitious, but he considered the sign somewhat ominous coming immediately after the solemn words he heard spoken. Still he was a man of iron nerve and great courage, and did not show in any degree that he had been affected by the incident.

While he held the lamp in his hand, with its light full in his frank, honest face, Peter introduced him to the other occupants of the room individually, and he was greeted cordially.

Herman Aurbach (who, judging by the deference shown him, appeared to be president of the council) remarked that Leo had a brave name, and hoped that he was equally brave in nature.

"We need lion-hearted men," he added, "for the deeds, the sacrifices our country demands. We need men at once unselfish and cruel—unselfish enough to give their lives, and cruel enough to take that of any man or woman who stands in the way."

"I have staked my life upon him," said Peter, enthusiastically;

"and the day Leo is false I will cheerfully put this old head into the mask of death."

"Such confidence is touching," said Leo; "but I trust it will never be shaken by act of mine. But without doubting the wisdom of your selection of this place of meeting, are you not in danger of discovery here?"

Herman Aurbach laughed.

"Not in the least," he said. "If the foes of liberty should find us, St. Petersburg will shake," and he pointed significantly to a little instrument close beside the wall. "A touch of that will thrill Russia."

Leo correctly understood that the instrument was connected with a powerful battery, and said:

"But will not that involve the sacrifice of your own life?"

"As for that," said Aurbach, "it is the last thing we take into account. What would such a swift and painless death as that little battery might bestow be compared with the lingering tortures of life in the Siberian mines, or the disgrace of being strangled like a dog on the gallows?"

"But if, through any mishap, the machine should fail to work," said Leo, "what then?"

"Listen," said Herman Aurbach, raising his forefinger to enjoin silence.

Leo applied his listening faculties, and heard a low, sullen sound like the roar of a distant flood.

"What is that?" he asked.

"That will not fail us, even if the lightning should," said Aurbach. "That is the voice of the river Neva speaking in the distance, and we are in friendly communication with it; so that, if overtaken here, we can flood the place in a minute, and perish with our enemies in the rising tide."

Leo listened again to the awe-inspiring sound. It seemed like the far-away warning of a coming storm when the first angry conflict of the clouds breaks upon the ear. He wondered whether the hiding-place was beneath or beside the flood, but did not ask just then, preferring to have Peter satisfy his curiosity at some future time.

The earnest manner of Herman Aurbach, his patriarchal face, sonorous voice, and flashing eyes affected Leo very much, and he felt as if under the spell of some magician.

"We have here a mission for you at the outset," said Herman. "It requires courage, tact, and judgment. You know the Holy League is growing desperate."

"And its numbers are constantly increasing," said Leo.

"Not so fast as rumor says, but too fast for our peace of mind. Our Parisian council reports that the league has an office in the French capital. It was established there by a man calling himself Prince Vladimir. He lives in grand style, doubtless upon the money of the Czar, and is working hard to thwart and find out all particulars concerning our next effort to depose the emperor. He stops at the principal hotel. We want some one who understands French to entrap him—a woman is the best, but her purpose can be accomplished much better if she is accompanied by a trusty man. We propose sending upon Prince Vladimir's track the shrewdest woman in St. Petersburg, and you must accompany her."

Leo pleaded lack of experience.

"Not at all. Experience is often our greatest obstacle. The trained detective can track treason in the movements of the experienced conspirator, but you can foil them. It is in your power to render great service, and no time must be lost in reaching Paris. This Holy League contemplates our assassination, if need be, and if its members could capture our leaders for Siberia or the scaffold, it would delight them still more."

"I accept the mission," said Leo, "even if it should lead to death."

He little expected what it would lead to.

"My Leo!" old Peter exclaimed. "I was not wrong when I staked my life upon you, and gladly will I place my head in the mask of death if dishonor overtakes my boy."

"Is this serious or merely a jest?" inquired Leo, in surprise.

"As serious as sunrise," was the reply, "but never was forfeit more safe. If this bleaching head is not removed from the stake until Leo Rollins plays it false, it will stand there forever."

"Ay, indeed, it will," and Leo clasped his old friend by both hands.

"You will be supplied with the necessary outfit, and prepare to depart the day after to-morrow, and ample provision will be made to see that you travel in a style becoming your rank as a prince."

Leo was startled, and shook his head, as he said:

"I fear I should make a sorry prince."

"Not at all; princes are quite numerous here; besides, your companion is posted, and will see that you commit no solecisms. Now you may retire with Peter, who will give you further de-

tails; but let me ask that you will both call at my house to-morrow evening for a social hour with your future companion."

Peter and Leo then left the place. The exit was much shorter and easier than the entrance. After passing up a narrow stairway they turned to the left, Peter holding Leo's hand the while, until they reached a narrow platform, upon which there was barely room for two persons by crowding together.

By a sudden movement on the part of Peter there was an opening overhead and a gleam of light from above which revealed them to each other.

The ascent was quick and noiseless by means of an elevator run by electricity, and in less time than it takes to tell it they were landed in the parlor of what appeared to be a private house.

As soon as they stepped off the elevator it shot back, leaving a neatly carpeted floor behind.

Leo was astonished to find himself in a well-furnished apartment, the walls of which were adorned with pictures of the most ultra type, illustrating religion and loyalty.

"Are we not in the wrong house?" he whispered.

"We are all right," said Peter, smiling.

At that moment an old man with a wooden leg hobbled into the room, and Leo recognized him as Nicholas, whom he had met earlier in the night.

It was the very house from which the pretty young woman had led him to the entrance of the subterranean council-room.

After a hurried greeting with Nicholas, Peter said to Leo: "Now, let us lose no time. I will go out by the front door; you take the door to the rear. Keep to your left on going outside, until we meet again."

CHAPTER V.

A MAN OF MYSTERY.

The day following the night in the council-room was a busy one for Peter and Leo, making preparations for the trip to Paris, and when night came, and they were together in the room of the modest little house where they lodged, Peter declared that he was fatigued.

Leo's brain was in a whirl.

"Are not these quarters rather paltry for a prince?" said Leo, looking around the threadbare room.

"Rather meager, I grant," said Peter, smiling; "but fully as good as our order thinks princes entitled to. I propose introducing you in a short time to where one of the people live."

"You mean Herman Aurbach?"

"Yes; and it is time we were going there."

They hastened into the narrow street, in which their lodging-house was situated. A brick walk brought them to the Nevskoi Prospekt, the principal street in St. Petersburg.

Peter had thus far kept the character of Aurbach's home a secret from his companion, so that the latter was naturally surprised when the grizzled old man halted before an imposing mansion in one of the most wealthy quarters of the city.

"Can this be the place," whispered Leo.

"Trust me," was the reply. "We will inquire."

A liveried servant answered the summons at the door, and as the visitors were ushered in, Herman Aurbach advanced to meet them, with a pleasant smile.

To Leo he seemed entirely different from the patriarchal personage of the night before, and his house was furnished in a style of oriental splendor. It was evident at a glance that this man was no common conspirator. His manner was affable, and he made his visitors feel entirely at home from the start.

"We are not the slaves of ceremony here," he said, leading the way to his library.

It was an elegant room.

Leo thought it strange that one so comfortably situated in life should be so ardent in the interest of Nihilism, but he did not know of the burning wrongs that made Herman Aurbach a hater of tyrants.

When but a mere boy one of those periodical outbreaks which result from bigotry and ignorance against the Jewish race, occurred in the little Russian town where he was living in poverty with his parents. He was then old enough to remember that the soldiers of the Czar, who were sent ostensibly to protect the persecuted people were worse than demons, and their devilry was all the more diabolical because it was quietly sanctioned by the governor of the province, and actively participated in by the Ispravnik of the district, who ordered the Jews to be scourged as common disturbers. Those who surrendered their property to the Ispravnik's agents were allowed to go unscourged on condition that they never returned to the district again, but those who had no property were flogged most unmercifully.

Herman Aurbach's father, a plain, pious man, was killed be-

fore the eyes of his family for no other reason than that the general in command of the Czar's soldiers coveted his beautiful wife. But the death of Herman's father did not expose his mother to disgrace, as she died defending her virtue from the royal ruffian who had caused the murder of her husband.

The boy Herman escaped from the terrible scene with a picture on his mind that was never effaced. He became a trader, visited foreign lands, grew rich, and might have settled elsewhere, but that a great fascination drew him to St. Petersburg, where he married a charming wife, who died shortly after giving birth to their only child Eliska.

This, in brief, is the cue to Herman Aurbach's leadership in the greatest conspiracy that ever threatened thrones. He was powerful. He owned ships on the Baltic, and he enjoyed the society of princes.

Herman Aurbach touched a silver bell. A servant entered noiselessly, received his order, and returned a few minutes later with some choice viands, the appearance of which gladdened the heart of Peter, who had a habit of rubbing his hands briskly whenever he felt particularly pleased.

Presently the sounds of music floated through the open door from another apartment.

"Ah!" said Peter, "that is Eliska. I drink to her—the bravest and most beautiful woman in Russia."

After clinking glasses and exchanging sentiments with his visitors, Herman Aurbach escorted them to the room from which the music came. A young woman of rare beauty, and elegantly attired, rose to greet them as they entered. Her throat was clasped with diamonds, and diamonds sparkled in her jet black hair, like stars in the depth of night.

"I am glad to see you, Peter," she said, in a cheery tone. The old man bowed low, and gallantly kissed her jeweled hand, saying with great earnestness:

"A blessing on you, Eliska, if such things can do any good. If the Goddess of Liberty is half so beautiful, I do not wonder the brave men make her a present of their lives."

"Ah, Peter! you flatter like a courtier," said Eliska, laughing. "When you last saw me in male attire, you wished for a hundred thousand soldiers like me."

"And so I did—but what a blunderer I am. Let me introduce my boy; our latest soldier," and as he spoke, he presented Leo, whose bewilderment increased with every movement at the gorgeous furniture, the evidences of great wealth, the surpassing loveliness of this captivating and queenly young woman, whom he had seen the night before under circumstances of a very different nature.

She it was who called for him at the house of Nicholas, and directed him to the secret council-chamber. He thought her pretty then, but now she was divine. Her face was superb in its classic contour, and love seemed to make its home in the lustrous depths of her eloquent eyes.

Leo felt strangely stirred in contemplation of such a lovely being. He did not refer to their former meeting, neither did she allude to it, but when he was presented, and she gave her hand, there was a tone of friendship in her voice as she said:

"Leo, you are welcome."

Then taking her place at the piano she sang, in compliance with Peter's request, one of Pushkin's touching little rhapsodies—a song illustrating the sorrows of the Russian peasant's life.

Her rich, full soprano voice matched the theme, and cast a spell over the listeners. Tears filled old Peter's eyes. Leo thought he had never heard a sweeter voice before, and as the last notes died away it seemed as if they left a nameless rapture in the room.

"And my Leo—he, too, plays," said Peter, adding, "Give us a flavor of your music, boy."

The young man, with the inspiration of Eliska's voice still stirring every fiber in his frame, sang, in a clear, baritone voice, a lyric full of patriotic fire and animation.

Then the conversation turned from music to matters more practical, Eliska retaining her place at the instrument, running her hand lightly over the keys, and playing in a whisper an entrancing melody, the air of a song written in praise of the river Neva:

"Child of the lake, bride of the sea."

Presently the servant entered and said there was a very poor man at the door who desired to speak on pressing business with Herman Aurbach.

"Don't you know that I have reserved this night to myself, and will not see anybody?" said Herman, authoritatively.

"I know," said the servant, "and I said so. but the fellow said it was a matter of life or death, and will not go away without seeing you if he has to wait until morning."

"What does he look like?"

"He looks like an old Jew with some trouble on his mind."

"Very likely he is in distress; I will go and see him."

A man, bowed under the weight of years and shabbily clad, made a profound salaam as Herman Aurbach entered the hall in which his persistent visitor stood.

"You want to see me very badly?" said Herman.

"I do," said the other, coughing as if in the last stages of consumption. "But I must see you alone."

He looked cautiously around as he spoke the last portion of the sentence.

"If you are in distress, I would prefer to relieve your wants promptly and let you go."

"It is not that, master. It is something else that I would see you about, and it concerns you."

Herman Aurbach's curiosity was aroused, and he said, with scant courtesy:

"Come into the library."

The old man followed, coughing violently and shaking as though he would fall to pieces at every step.

When they were alone, the visitor from his breast-pocket produced a paper on which the name of Herman Aurbach was traced in Arabic. The remainder of the document was in cipher, and as Herman's eyes fell upon it he changed color, and his pulses throbbed quickly. He saw that the eyes of the visitor were intent upon him, and recovering his composure, he said, with as much indifference as he could muster:

"Well, sir; what is that? How does it interest me?"

He could read it at a glance. He saw that it was a message from the Central Council of the Universal Republic in Paris; but he knew that there must be something wrong when it came by this old vagrant's hands, and he resolved upon not recognizing it.

"Don't you see it is for you?" said the old man, pointing to the name in Arabic.

"Yes," said Herman, "that is my name, but what are the other mysterious signs? Is it an order for merchandise, or a Chinese puzzle?"

Herman made up his mind to try whether the old man knew what the paper contained, and thought it quite possible he could read the name and nothing more. The dispatch was of considerable importance and genuine, but how it got into the hands of this straggler was a mystery. Such messages were never sent in that way.

"Don't you see that it is from the council in Paris?" said the other.

"What council?" Herman asked, with well-feigned astonishment.

"Why, the Central Council to be sure. You wonder how it is I came with it in this way. Simply because there was no time to observe the ordinary methods of transmitting a document of such importance. I was the only messenger in a great emergency. When I asked for credentials I was told it was impossible to procure them in time, and that when I found you the paper itself would be my best credentials."

Herman was puzzled. Was this man an impostor? It was evident something had gone wrong. He might be a member of the Holy League. Thinking this, Herman Aurbach resolved upon repudiating himself and his paper, and he said:

"My friend, I neither understand you nor your peculiar document. You certainly have made some mistake, and it is possible the dispatch, whatever it may be, is intended for some other Herman Aurbach. You know there's at least a dozen of the name in St. Petersburg."

The visitor looked thoughtful. His eyes wandered from the placid man of wealth before him to the imperial pictures on the walls, and he felt that the place breathed an air of loyalty not consistent with a conspirator's home. Possibly he was mistaken. Herman was anxious to retain the dispatch, but that would betray him, and he tossed it back carelessly to the old man with the remark:

"You will excuse me for not giving you more attention now," and he rose and conducted the wheezing and somewhat perplexed Hebrew to the hall where a servant waited to show him the door.

Herman Aurbach was evidently very much disconcerted as he entered the room where Peter, Leo, and Eliska were talking of the proposed trip to Paris.

"You seem unhappy, papa," said Eliska.

"And well I may. That visitor of mine is in possession of an important dispatch from the Paris Council, and it bears my name. Either the council is very negligent in not observing proper precaution, or that man is a spy of the Holy League."

As he spoke there was a fierce uproar from without.

"A riot!" cried Leo.

All ran to the window.

They saw in the streets an old man of bent frame, coarsely clad,

and beset by a vulgar crowd, that roared, hooted, and hissed at him.

Some of the number shouted:

"Down with the Jew!"

Others, even more incensed, rushed forward to strike him.

The old man quailed before the storm of hatred, bigotry, and spite that was gathering about him.

He carried a stout cane, with which he menaced his tormentors, but they pressed closely upon him, and the rabble increased rapidly.

"Oh, poor old man! They will kill him!" cried Eliska.

Just then a glimpse was obtained of his face.

"Why, it is the very man who called on me with the dispatch!" said Herman Aurbach.

"I fear they will murder him!" said Leo, running to his rescue.

"I must get that dispatch, if it costs my life!" said Peter. "This is a good time," and he darted off.

Leo was already in the midst of the mob.

"Stand back!" he cried. "What has this feeble old man done to be hounded upon in this brutal fashion?"

"Ah, you are as bad as he! Who constituted you the champion of the Jew? Down with them both!" came the hoarse cry.

The arm of a burly rioter was raised to strike the old man in the face, but the blow was warded off by Leo.

The crowd surged like a storm, then moved at a rapid pace down the street to the quay on the side of the Vasileostrow.

Leo and the old man were swept off their ground, and threatened by an angry and desperate crowd.

To the intense astonishment of Leo, he saw that Peter was most anxious to reach the struggling Jew, and most vigorous in his threats against him. Leo was helpless to defend the old man, and, after receiving many blows, was finally torn away from him.

At that moment he saw Peter, his face glowing with excitement, fasten his hands in the hair of the hunted individual, and make a desperate effort to drag him to the ground.

But he merely plucked away his wig and whiskers, revealing, instead of the aged, decrepit Jew, the handsome face of a powerful and athletic young man. With an agile movement, the unmasked individual shook himself free from the crowd, and thrusting his tormentors right and left, he ran down the street, like a deer, closely pursued by old Peter.

As he escaped, Leo Rollins recognized the face. It was that of Count Rolof, whom he had seen in the sledge with Vera Kirsanof the night he stopped the runaways.

What could it mean? Was the nobleman a spy or a Nihilist? Leo had but little time to determine this fact. He was driven along the quay by the still angered mob, whose wrath he had stirred up because of protecting the persecuted Jew, and he expected every moment to be thrown into the river Neva.

He managed to pacify them, but by the time their fury had abated, and each was going his way, Leo was puzzled as to what direction he should turn.

He was a stranger in the great city, and did not know one street from another.

Old Peter had gone in pursuit of the mysterious count, Heaven only knew where, and how to get back to the house of Herman Aurbach was the mystery that puzzled Leo.

He traversed street after street in vain, and, wearied at last, when the gray dawn of morning came, he gave up the search for the house of the Nihilistic leader, and wondered what he should do next. He had neither money nor friends within reach, and his faithful friend, the ever-sanguine old Peter, was gone. What should he do?

At Herman Aurbach's house the anxiety over Leo's absence was intense, and old Peter, too, was missing. What could it mean? The mission to Paris must not fail on any account, and when Herman Aurbach asked, "What shall we do?" Eliska answered:

"I will go alone."

She was at the train in time, secured her place, and kissed her father good-by, and then looked through the window for a last word with him, when she saw hastening toward the cars Peter and Leo, both looking wearied. But they were too late. The signal was given, and the train moved off before they could reach it, to the great disappointment of all concerned.

Eliska was alone, but she took with her those twin guardians of every good, noble woman—a stout heart and an indomitable will.

CHAPTER VI.

A UNIVERSAL REPUBLIC—A SENTENCE OF DEATH.

Around a small table in the little back parlor of one of the most secluded inns in Paris, three men were seated, sipping their sherry, and chatting in subdued tones.

It was the dusk of evening, and the glimmer of the street lamps glinting through the small windows revealed the trio in a Rembrandt light.

In response to the tinkling of a tiny bell a small boy came in and turned on the gas, showing the features and forms of three conspirators, whose names have kept the tongues of the present generation busy, and worn out many a type in the daily papers.

There was a pack of cards at a little table, with which they made a pretense of playing while they discussed the killing of kings and blowing up of thrones. Frequently they played for such stakes as the Russian Empire, the Empire of Germany, and the British Kingdom, and there was great glee over the result.

All were well advanced in years, and each looked as if he had been hunted in his time.

Old foxes they were, who knew the tricks of their hunters, and who had learned to feel perfectly secure even when the storm howled its loudest about their ears.

Ivan was the oldest of the trio. His name pronounced him a Russian. Should he return to the empire he would be executed. His name was known in Russia as "Ivan the Outlaw." Near Ivan sat a keen-faced man of intellectual face, slightly marred by a sinister cast of the left eye, which was wholly forgotten, however, when he entered into conversation. He, too, was an outlaw. They called him Jacobus, and there was a standing reward for his capture anywhere in the dominions of the empress—Queen of England. His face in repose wore a haggard look, but he was capable of great enthusiasm; a man of courage and accomplishments, and no dread of death. He held his glass toward Ivan with a merry laugh, and pledged him a toast in the Russian language.

Ivan responded, saying:

"Jacobus, you talk our language like a courtier."

"Every conspirator should be able to talk every tongue in which tyranny is practiced," said Jacobus. "But I don't want to speak your language like a courtier. Rather say like a peasant. I hate courtiers—the perfumed puppets of kings. A courtier is but a slave in silk. He has not a thought of his own. His clothes are cut to suit his royal master's whims, and his joints are all on hinges. Faugh!" and the speaker with a sudden jerk of his glass, expressive of his contempt for courtiers, dashed its dregs against the wall.

"But you will admit that in the matter of language," said Ivan, "the courtier is the superior of the peasant."

"Not I, indeed," said Jacobus.

"Nor I," added Reinhart, the third of the party. "You might as well say that the perfumed odors of the palace are more health-giving than the bracing mountain breezes that fly away with your hat and play hob with your hair. No, Ivan, your peasant may be thick-tongued, and thick-headed for the matter of that, and heaven knows he is or he would not be under the heel of the despot so long; but give me his hearty speech suggestive of the breezy mountains before that of the slavish courtier whose phrases are redolent of sweet-scented palaces and the poll-parrot utterances of reprobate kings and pauper princess."

"Well," said Ivan, laughing, "I had no idea of precipitating this discussion; let us drink to the universal republic."

The men clinked their glasses.

There was a knock at the door, and the bell-boy entered with a black card, which he laid on the table before Ivan. The latter took it up hastily and dismissed the messenger.

There was nothing to indicate who it was from. It was but a square black piece of tin.

Ivan held it over the gas-jet, and upon contact with the flame, the word "Eliska" leaped through it in letters of fire.

"The daughter of Herman Aurbach!" exclaimed Ivan; "and she has come alone."

"A brave girl," said Reinhart.

The boy was called, and informed the trio that the lady who gave him the card was waiting in another room.

"I will escort her here myself," said Ivan; "lead me to her."

The lad led the way, and in a short time Ivan and Eliska returned. She was warmly welcomed by Reinhart and Jacobus, to whom Ivan had often spoken of her great beauty and courage. Eliska's name was venerated by the Universal Brotherhood throughout the world. She was looked upon as the second

Judith, who would yet sweep from power the Holofernes of Tyranny.

The men rose as she appeared, and were impressed by her striking beauty.

Ivan was the bosom friend of her father, whom he loved with more than a brother's devotion.

After Eliska's welcome was formally made, she accepted a glass of sherry from the hand of Jacobus, and sipped about half of it. Then taking her place in an easy-chair placed at her disposal by Reinhart, she produced a number of dispatches showing the progress of Nihilism in St. Petersburg. They were all in cipher, and presented a queer appearance spread out on the table, but they were well understood by the leaders, who scanned them with avidity.

The bell-boy entered the room with a letter addressed to Ivan, who immediately read it, then asked Eliska:

"Was not somebody to accompany you?"

"Yes, but by a curious mishap, which I cannot altogether explain, he was detained, and just as my train was moving out he came to the station with old Peter—too late."

"He is here," said Ivan. "Leo Rollins his name is?"

Eliska answered in the affirmative, and the boy was directed to show Leo to the room. He received a warm welcome, and from none more heartily than from Eliska, who was overjoyed to see him again.

"I took the next train," said Leo, "and here I am."

He then explained the adventures of the night he lost his way, and failed to find the mansion of Herman Aurbach again.

"It is a delight to meet you, young people," said Ivan, "but you must be wearied. Let us speak specially of the work for which you came. As you know already, the Holy League, which has sprung into existence to fight Nihilism, has quarters here to watch us. Recently a young nobleman of great wealth, who is said to be personally intimate with the Czar, appeared here, cut a dash in society, assumed various disguises successfully, and seemed to have supreme control. He is head center of the Holy League, and by his courage, cunning, and lavish use of money, as well as his Protean changes, he managed to obtain possession of some secrets, including a dispatch which I sent to Herman Aurbach."

"My papa!" exclaimed Eliska, the color forsaking her fair face, "who is this man?"

"He passed here as Prince Vladimir; but although he dazzled the giddy Parisians with that title, it is not likely to be his correct one. Our reason for sending for you was that you might entrap him at some of the grand receptions of this gay city, and learn something of importance regarding the antecedents and aims of so dangerous an enemy."

"I shall do my duty," said Eliska, "but I fear it is too late to save my papa. The dispatch this Protean prince obtained possession of was in St. Petersburg nearly a week ago, the night before we left, and was laid before my father by a person who tried to pass himself off as a poor Jew, but who turned out to be an active young man."

"Indeed, it may be Prince Vladimir himself," said Ivan.

"How," said Eliska, in astonishment. "Is he not here then?"

"We cannot tell where he is; but we can tell the direction he took. Knowing what a dangerous man he was, our council pronounced sentence of death upon him as soon as he obtained possession of my dispatch to your father, but he disappeared suddenly, and no trace of his whereabouts was obtained until the other day, when I learned by mere accident that he had left the neighborhood of St. Petersburg in company with a certain retired merchant of the first guild named Michael Kirsanof, who was accompanied by his daughter."

"With Michael Kirsanof?" said Leo, in amazement.

"Ay. Know you this Michael Kirsanof?"

Leo was thunder-struck. A terrible fact flashed through his brain. This Prince Vladimir was no other than Count Rolof, the affianced lover of Vera, who had driven in from the village of Alexis and made him a wanderer and an outlaw. Leo managed to say that he knew Michael Kirsanof, and could easily ascertain if Prince Vladimir was living there.

"Then," said Ivan, "your mission here is not a failure after all?"

"But this man may have ruined all before we get back," said Eliska. "He may have betrayed my poor father to the tyrants—to Siberia or to the scaffold."

"I don't think he can read the dispatch," said Ivan, "it was merely in signs."

Leo was seriously occupied with his thoughts, but did not make them all known. A terrible possibility loomed darkly up before his mind. If this Prince Vladimir was really the same person as Count Rolof—the affianced of his loved and lost, but still cherished Vera, what then? He might and yet he might not be that formidable person of whom Ivan had spoken so solemn-

ly. Leo kept a discreet tongue, but his heart throbbled wildly, and a swift thrill of pain shot through his frame when Ivan, the arch-conspirator, drew from a tiny drawer in the table which opened with a spring, a small piece of paper upon which various quaint characters were written in red ink, and passing it to the young man, said:

"Leo, this is Prince Vladimir's sentence of death. Submit it to your council when you reach home, and let it be executed without delay."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PALACE PRISON AT GATSCHINA.

"It was the only alternative," said Count Rolof, as the smoke of his shot cleared away, and he glanced with pallid face at the prostrate and writhing form of Jules Rollins, the shoemaker. "If I had not drawn upon him he would have murdered Michael Kirsanof," and as he spoke, he pointed to the long, glittering knife upon the floor.

Indeed, so it seemed. Rollins, goaded to madness by the jibes and jeers of the villagers concerning his son Leo and his love affairs, was not in his right mind when he sought the manor-house. Now he moaned with pain, and invoked malediction on his assailants in vigorous French, which the count and Vera well understood.

"You have not killed him, I hope," said Michael Kirsanof, "although the ruffian richly deserved it. Were it not for your timely shot he would have pinned me to the wall with his wicked weapon."

As he spoke, the prostrate and wounded man made a frantic effort to clutch the shining blade which lay several feet away, but Count Rolof calmly said:

"If you touch that knife, I shall send a bullet through your brain."

Jules Rollins turned and cursed him. The shoemaker's face was livid with rage, but he did not attempt to touch the weapon again, and it was picked up by Andrei, and put away to be used as evidence against the would-be assassin.

Rollins attempted to rise, but the effort made him howl with pain, and he fell prone upon the floor, and glowering at Count Rolof like a wounded bear, he cried, with an oath:

"I see you, and I shall yet be revenged. And you," he added, turning to Michael Kirsanof, "you, too, shall suffer. Not content with trampling my boy under your horses' feet, you have brought a butcher here to slay his father."

"Out with you, miserable beggar!" cried Michael Kirsanof, in a great rage.

"Ah, well you know I cannot move," was the reply.

"Then throw him out in the snow," said Kirsanof, addressing the servants.

"No, no, papa. That would never do. It would kill him," said Vera, who was deeply touched by the mental and physical agony of the poor wounded and half-crazed man.

"Ah, there is some of the angel left in your sweet nature yet, Vera, although you did betray my Leo," said the old Frenchman.

"Here, Andrei, carry him out, put him in the sleigh, and carry him home," said Michael Kirsanof; "and when you reach there, see that he has a surgeon and is properly cared for. I do not want the knave to cheat the law by dying now."

Andrei did as directed. Jules Rollins moaning, cursing, crying, was placed in a sleigh and taken to his wretched home. Then Andrei found a surgeon, who, upon the understanding that Michael Kirsanof would pay the bill, consented to attend the wounded man. The bullet could not be found, and it would be fatal to probe for it. The surgeon said it was far better not to touch it, as it would become encysted, and he might recover, although the case looked critical.

Andrei was kind to Jules Rollins, who raved incessantly, and expressed an earnest desire to see his old friend Peter. A search of the village failed to find that worthy, and nobody seemed to know where he had gone. A peasant was finally found who consented to remain by the bedside of Jules Rollins, Andrei assuring him that he would be well paid for his trouble.

Rollins was a restless patient, and when Andrei left him he was in the midst of a violent paroxysm.

When these facts were reported at the manor-house there was considerable consternation.

"It will destroy our plans," said the count.

"A plague on the luck!" said Kirsanof. "What fate could bring this beggar and his boy in our way the same night. By the way, Andrei, how does the son take the matter?"

"He has not been seen in the village since he stopped your horses," said Andrei. "And it is rumored that he was crushed to death under your sledge. I tried to contradict the absurd

story, but the peasants will not listen to anything else than that the boy was killed, and that the wounding of his father is another effort to extinguish the Rollins family."

"What motive do they give for this?" said Kirsanof.

"They claim that it is due to the fact that Leo dared to love your daughter."

Count Rolof laughed.

"What an absurdity! There is no disease worse than the plague of ignorant prejudice."

Michael Kirsanof relieved his feelings by uttering some vigorous Russian sentiment.

The count and Kirsanof then withdrew to an adjoining room for a serious chat.

When they were alone the former said:

"This does not promise to be a safe place for me. Confound this miserable Frenchman and his romantic boy! Now, if the son is half as passionate as his mercurial father, he would not mind taking my life, although I never performed a more disinterested act than when I prevented Rollins *pere* from committing murder."

"If he shows his temper, we can accuse him of Nihilism, and have him hustled off to Siberia."

"Ah! that might be too late. At any rate it will do for me to be found here to-morrow. I have important business both at Gatschina and St. Petersburg, and I may as well leave Alexis to-night. Before leaving Paris I came into possession of important facts concerning the doings of the Nihilists, and their designs upon the Czar. I also managed to intercept a dispatch addressed to one Herman Aurbach. What it says I cannot make out, and the name is in Arabic, but I should judge him to be Jewish."

"There is a rich merchant in St. Petersburg who answers to the name," said Kirsanof, "and I think he is of Jewish origin; but he is deeply engrossed in trade, and is not likely to be implicated in Nihilism. He has no time for such matters. I know him well—a most estimable man, even if his father was a Jew."

"My friend, it needs no such qualifying phrase. It is possible for Jews to be estimable men, and it is also possible for men of wealth and station to be conspirators. You know where this Aurbach lives?"

"I do," said Michael Kirsanof; "but I am certain this treasonable document cannot refer to him."

"At any rate you will give his address?"

"Of course I will; but why seek to annoy one of whose innocence I have not the slightest doubt?"

"You are friendly to this Jew?"

"Yes; he has often befriended me while I was in business in St. Petersburg. He lent me large sums of money, and many a time he had it in his power to crush me; but I found him lenient almost to a fault, and I may say to him more than to any other man am I indebted for my successful retirement from business with a life competence. If this is a treasonable document, it cannot refer to him. Besides, there are others of his name in the city."

"I see you hold him in high estimation," said the count. "But if he is implicated, he cannot be shielded even though he were your brother or your dearest child. No ties of friendship or of blood are too sacred to warrant members of the Holy League in protecting traitors from their just punishment. I shall remember, however, that this man is your friend, and see that he is not unjustly implicated; but my duty and my life belong to the Czar, and I must not halt at any barrier. This very night I must go to Gatschina and St. Petersburg."

"But there are no more trains."

"I shall expect you to let me have a conveyance. In the meantime I want the address of this Herman Aurbach before we forget it."

In giving it Michael Kirsanof felt as if he was betraying his best friend. But then he belonged to an order that had nothing to do with sentiment or friendship.

"I shall send Andrei to drive you," he said to the count, but the latter quickly interrupted:

"No, no—not Andrei; he has the eye of a conspirator. Did you note how tenderly he carried out the wounded Frenchman? There was that in the eyes of both which each understood, but it did not deceive me. You shall drive me yourself, Michael Kirsanof."

Michael Kirsanof's pride was pricked by the tone in which this was spoken, and he would have quickly resented it were it not for the fact that the count's authority was not to be questioned. Besides the circumstances under which Count Rolof had incurred this hasty exit made Michael Kirsanof his debtor, and he gave his man prompt orders for the sledge, with two of his best horses in the stable.

The moon was low in the horizon when they started out from the manor-house. Each was closely muffled for the long, cold

drive; and Count Rolof, who prided himself on his horsemanship, insisted on driving.

The moon had disappeared. The sky was overcast with white, straggling clouds, the road was deserted, and in the distance gleamed the lights of Gatschina.

Count Rolof halted the horses, and passing the reins to his companion, told him to hold them still. He then got out of the sledge, removed the bells, and threw them in a corner of the sledge, but as they continued to jingle after the horses started off again, he deliberately seized them and flung them out by the wayside.

"They make too much noise," he said. "And we need no such music."

Michael Kirsanof did not like it, but he held his anger between his firmly set teeth and said nothing.

The horses now sped noiselessly on, leaving the little town of Gatschina to the left, and turning into a broad thoroughfare, from which Michael Kirsanof and his companion could see the majestic outlines of the palace.

Count Rolof halted at a little postern some distance from the palace, and bidding the bewildered Michael Kirsanof to remain until he returned, he leaped lightly from the sleigh. With a whispered answer to the challenge of the armed guards at the gate, he passed into the barred and guarded inclosure, where he was quickly recognized and saluted by the soldiers, who treated him with the greatest deference.

Descending to the basement of the gate-house, the count took from his pocket a key with which he opened an iron door leading into a vaulted chamber where a light was dimly burning. The door was narrow, affording barely room enough for one to squeeze through, and the vault was low-roofed. It was so constructed that he could not go forward without closing the door at the entrance. On stepping inside, he not only closed but locked the door behind him. Then turning to a narrow shelf on which a telegraph instrument was fixed, he touched it and waited for an answer.

In a few minutes the metallic click, click of the machine replied. Count Rolof telegraphed once more. An answer was promptly sent this time. It was from the Czar of all the Russians—the representative of the royal house of Romanoff, with whose private apartments the wire connecting with the instrument connected. It commanded the visitor to advance.

Another door opened from the vault into a well-lighted corridor, through which the count hastened, until after a brisk walk he found himself at the foot of a flight of steps, down which a dazzling flood of light was poured. Looking up he saw two armed men in glittering uniforms at the head of the stairs, with muskets leveled at him. Their insignia proclaimed them members of the Holy League. Count Rolof threw aside his cloak and revealed the diamond cross on his left breast, at the same time giving a signal which the noble sentinels well understood. Then advancing, under aim of the muskets, he ascended the stairs, and passing through a marble hall-way, was at the door of the Czar's private room. Here he was confronted by an armed guard, who was also a member of the Holy League, and one of the noble defenders of the Czar's sacred and imperial person. He had no difficulty in satisfying this sentinel of his right to be there. He had often been seen there before at an unseasonable hour. In response to his summons at the door, a man resembling the Czar pushed aside the little slide and looked through a piece of glass closely barred with steel. If a messenger of death succeeded under any pretext in making his way that far this sentinel, who resembled the Czar in face and figure, was intended to deceive him and receive the punishment of his royal master.

But Rolof was no messenger of death, and after a short parley he was admitted to the imperial presence.

The Czar gave him a cordial welcome, waiving all formality. Alexander's weary eyelids and blanched face told of sleepless nights and days of trouble.

"My prince," he said, "you come late, but you are none the less welcome."

"It is only by such unseasonable visits that I can hope to escape the prying eyes of the Nihilistic herd," said the count, who had a new title every time he visited the palace. "To-night I am a count," he said, with a smile.

"On the occasion of your last visit you were a prince," said the Czar, adding: "Since you are at present the maker of your own titles, you need not be economical of their use. A time will come, however, when you shall have a title which the proudest in Russia would be glad to own."

Rolof bowed his acknowledgment and then said:

"My next title will be that of a poor Jew. I am on my way to St. Petersburg, where I hope to start some game for the executioner. While in Paris I learned some of the most important plans of the conspirators, their haunts and habits, and I hope to

gather a few of their leaders into the net ere long. Many of them include nobles and officers in your majesty's service. The most important orders are issued by the Central Council in Paris, where they discuss the killing of kings with as much indifference as one would talk of shooting a deer. There is a plot on foot to assassinate you the day you take the crown."

The Czar shuddered.

"It is a disagreeable matter to talk of," said the count, seeing the evident distress of the emperor, "but we must face it with a brave, unflinching front."

"I am weary of it all" said the Czar. "I seem to walk in the shadow of death. Its terrors are in the air I breathe. The enemy lurks in everything—the food I eat, the fire I burn. There is poison in everything. I fear my food lest the most tempting delicacy should be the most terrible agent of death. Gladly would I relinquish this great responsibility were it not that the honor of the house of Romanoff is at stake; and yet what is all when the veriest slave may destroy my life. Our family has been haunted by assassination ever since the crime by which Peter fell, and I have had of late a premonition that I am the next victim. What does bravery avail under such circumstances? Could nature fashion a braver or gentler man than the late emperor, and yet what did all his grand attributes avail him? Were it possible I would gladly exchange stations with the poorest peasant so that my mind might not be constantly on the rack. But what of your discovery in Paris?"

"There are several attempts to be made," said the count. "One of the plans is to have a line of bomb-throwers stationed on each side of the route to the Cathedral; another contemplates sending up a balloon charged with dynamite to rain destruction upon you."

As he spoke he laid before the emperor papers giving details of the various plans of the Nihilists.

Alexander scanned the documents a moment. His brow darkened, and his hand that held the fragile papers upon which the plans were traced shook as one who feels an abject terror.

"Their desperation is formidable," he said, with an effort at composure, although his powerful frame was agitated violently, and large drops of perspiration stood upon his forehead. "Gladly would I forego this fatal honor were it possible to do so. I am weary of this wretched life. Oh, cannot something be done to stem the rising tide of treason?"

"The Holy League is gaining power daily, and the announcement that we propose to fight these demons with their own weapons is a great check upon them. We propose to make unceasing war upon the Nihilists, arrest, try, and hang them by dozens, and thus strike terror to the hearts of the terrorists. The people are growing impatient at the delay in your coronation, and I think if you were to come out boldly and overawe the conspirators with a strong military display it would conquer and crush them. Let us make one grand appeal for the glory of the law, and if need be inspire the people with the enthusiasm of war, give them Skobeleff for a leader and he will plunge thousands of them into that river of blood which must come before Russia has peace at home."

"But should I go to my coronation where does safety or security rest. Should bomb-throwers and aeronauts fail, I am to be struck down by the hand of a noble who is to officiate at the ceremony of coronation, and slay me at the altar steps."

"Impossible! impossible!" said the count, impetuously. "It cannot be that treason will lift its hideous front in God's temple."

"But it is true," said Alexander, taking from his desk a letter, which read as follows:

"Moscow.

"MOST MIGHTY CZAR:—A terrible and sacrilegious plot has been revealed to me which I hasten to apprise you of. On the day and in the hour of your coronation the hand that helps you to the crown will also strike you dead upon the altar steps. More than this I cannot let you know, but should you, or one of your trusted advisers, grant an interview, I shall tell you all.

PETROVITCH."

"Do you wonder that I hesitate to take the crown and meet my death? I feel that in putting off my coronation, I am postponing the day of my execution, and what should be the glory of my life has become a base and haunting specter. Oh, God! what plague is this that has entered the minds of men and made them demons. Russia! Russia! would that I were forever at rest rather than one of your children should add another dark spot to the blood-stained history of your rulers!"

"Nay, do not despond. This Petrovitch may be an impostor. Besides, if he is loyal he will tell the name of the traitor, and the action can be averted. I will interpose my own life between yours and death."

"Ah, generous friend. But Petrovitch is no impostor. He is one of my trusted friends, but it is not in my power to know the

name of the assassin who intends the sacrilege. He is endeavoring to ascertain, and could profit by your aid."

Saying this the Czar gave Count Rolof a token by which the latter could secure the confidence of Petrovitch.

Then quitting the scene of majestic misery Count Rolof returned to the postern outside the palace-gardens, where he found Michael Kirsanof still waiting patiently.

The deference shown to Count Rolof by the guards, together with the fact that he had been in the direction of the palace, impressed Michael Kirsanof more than ever with the importance of his companion, who on taking his place said:

"Now for St. Petersburg!"

The horses sped swiftly over the snow, and by the time the outskirts of the great city were reached, the east was ruddy with the smile of morning.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEATH-SENTENCE OF NIHILISM.

The discovery made at the Central Council in Paris was no less startling to Leo than to Eliska, who shuddered to think of the peril her father's life was placed in by the paper in Prince Vladimir's possession.

"This is the man," she said, "who visited my father in disguise the day before we left St. Petersburg, and if he can find some one to translate the intercepted dispatch, we are lost."

"And to think that I put my life twice between him and death," said Leo.

"How twice? I thought you never saw him but that night you ran to his defense when he was assaulted before our door."

Leo was not yet prepared to tell even so good a confidante as Eliska of his adventure in Alexis when first he saw Count Rolof. That would implicate Vera's father, the Vera who still occupied a tender place in his heart. True love will not betray the object of its affection no matter what estrangement may come between.

"I had reference to that night only when the angry crowd, after trying in vain to strike me down for defending this Prince Vladimir, almost drove me into the river."

The keen eye of Eliska was fixed upon her companion in a penetrating look of inquiry, and he fairly quailed under its strong, steady gaze.

"You never saw him before that night?" she said.

"Never that I know of."

He felt that this was a guilty answer, and feared that she was about to follow up the inquiry, when he was relieved by a friendly glance, and her voice dropping to a softer tone, she said:

"Leo, forgive me. How could I doubt your brave, frank, generous nature? But, brother, something tells me the danger so long defied is not far off, and I somehow fear that this man whose sentence of death you carry to our council is destined to destroy us all. I have undertaken many an important journey to Paris, London, and Berlin, but none from which I was more anxious to return than I am from this. I fear the thunderbolt may fall before we reach home."

The train had just started out from Paris on the return ride to St. Petersburg. Night had settled in, and the lights of the gay capital were flashing through the windows, making the glimmer of the car-lamp appear dim by contrast.

The young people were regarded as brother and sister by all who saw them, and they played their parts with consummate tact and judgment.

The journey was not an eventful one, and after the tiresome days and nights which it occupied, Leo and Eliska reached the Russian capital at the close of a dreary day, and proceeded at once by carriage to the little house of Nicholas, where they had first met.

Eliska said they might find the council in session, and it was best to lose no time in laying the result of their trip before the directors for immediate action.

She guessed aright. The council was in session, and anxious to know the news from Paris. The chemist, who was giving the meeting the result of his recent experiments with a terrible explosive, suspended his remarks while Eliska told, in a terse and graphic way, of their experience, and explained their abrupt return.

Her father, Herman Aurbach, regarded her with pride, and at the close of her statement she came to his side, and whispered:

"My dear, dear father, you are still safe!"

Leo looked around for his old friend, Peter, but was informed that he was unavoidably absent, and the members of the council exchanged ominous glances as they answered, or rather evaded, the young man's inquiries.

Leo noticed this, and asked if anything had happened to his old friend since they went away; but he was told that at last accounts Peter was all right, but he was unusually busy in the making of explosives.

"Our hasty return," said Leo, "is due to the departure from Paris of this Prince Vladimir, who has a new name for every town. Immediately upon intercepting a dispatch intended for Herman Aurbach, he left Paris, and the Central Council say that he is now in St. Petersburg."

"Then I have met him," said Herman Aurbach. "He is the man who tried to masquerade as a Nihilist, and endeavored to make me read the dispatch which he holds in his possession. I know what it contains, but I don't believe he will ever be the wiser. It recommends vigorous measures, including the tunneling of the palace at Gatschina. It also suggests that we change our haunts oftener than heretofore; but I defy the blood-hounds of the Czar to find us here."

"It was well for Prince Vladimir that he left Paris so soon," said Leo, "as sentence of death was passed upon him, and might have been carried out ere this had he remained. The sentence has been certified to this body, however, with orders that it be speedily executed. Here it is."

Saying this, he laid the document containing the death sentence on the table.

Hardened as the members of the council were, the appearance of the paper sent a thrill through every heart.

"It is mandatory," said Herman Aurbach, scanning the document coolly. "I see the Central Council consider it necessary as an act of war, and nothing now remains for us but to carry it into prompt execution. Itsoff will prepare the ballots."

The person indicated—a large, sluggish individual, with black, bushy hair and straggling beard—arose slowly. He prepared the ballots in a short time, and placing them in a hat, proceeded to pass them around.

As the uncooth Itsoff moved from man to man, a dead silence fell upon the meeting, and the dull distant roar of the river Neva was distinctly heard.

The hat was first presented to Herman Aurbach, who took out a ballot, and laying it on the table, said:

"It is not my turn to draw the prize to-night. I have drawn a blank."

Eliska, who watched the grim ceremony with a beating heart, was delighted to see that the choice did not fall upon her father. It was her turn next. She also drew a blank. Her eyes then turned to Leo, whose lips were colorless as Itsoff moved slowly toward him. Eliska hoped the lot might not fall on him. He was too young, she thought, for such a terrible task; besides it would be placing his own life in peril, and would, undoubtedly result in his banishment. She did not want that.

Three others drew blanks, and then Itsoff, like the spirit of evil, stood before Leo. How the young man's heart throbbed, despite his efforts to keep it still, as he envied the indifference of the sluggish fellow before him, and realized that in another minute he himself might be a chosen assassin.

"Why did not old Peter tell me it would come to this?" thought the young man.

It was terrible. He hesitated before putting in his hand, wondering if there was not some way to avoid it. At last Itsoff, with a grin, said:

"Brother, take one."

Leo thrust in his trembling hand. He would as lief thrust it in the fire. He drew forth a simple scrap of paper, and scanning it hastily, found that it contained the single word "Death!"

He glanced at it a minute, scarcely conscious of its ominous meaning, and then said as Itsoff moved away:

"Gentlemen, this ballot says death!"

Eliska was distressed beyond expression.

The others, with an air of satisfaction, looked at Leo, who was pale and pulseless, while Herman Aurbach announced, deliberately, in a husky voice:

"Leo Rollins, you have been honored by the fates to execute the decree of the Central Council."

Leo was dazed. The room seemed to swim before his eyes, and he would consider it a relief if the river Neva would break in and swallow him up forever in oblivion. The perspiration started from his forehead. He was dumb. This, then, was what old Peter had betrayed him into. It was horrible to think that he should be selected to kill this Prince Vladimir, or Count Rolof, the affianced of Vera Kirsanof, possibly her husband by this time.

From that sentence there was no appeal, and as he sat there, his hands still trembling with the scrap of paper which it held, Eliska pitied him.

Suddenly his eyes rested on the mask of death, and sent a fresh tremor through his frame. Ah, that would be his punish-

ment if he shrank from the fearful duty that had just devolved upon him.

The members of the council came forward in turn and congratulated him upon the great honor that had fallen so suddenly to his lot, but Leo would as lief they had locked the mask of death about his neck, and shut the light forever from his eyes, as to select him for such a task.

CHAPTER IX.

FACE TO FACE.

Leo spent but a day in St. Petersburg after the fatal ballot fell into his hands. He felt as if a millstone had been placed about his neck. Part of the time he passed at Herman Aurbach's house, where the sweet voice of Eliska, singing some of the wild songs of Tartary, fired his spirit to a martial pitch, and made him temporarily forget his misery. But when the thought of the task that lay before him entered his mind, driving out sunshine and hope, the gloom was terrible.

It was a little after eight o'clock that night when Leo Rollins with a sore heart walked down the road from the railway station in the direction of his old home.

The night was dark save for the light of the stars and the snow, but he recognized the spot in the road where he had seen Vera and her lover, Prince Vladimir, on that fatal night when he turned his back forever upon his peace of mind. If he should meet them now! Oh! it was too terrible. How could he look Vera in the face with his heart so black?

He passed on, wondering whether he should call at his father's house first, or go to see old Peter, and learn from him the state of affairs in the village since he went away. He concluded it was best to see Peter first. His father, who was of a hasty temper, might not be disposed to listen to an explanation of his abrupt departure and prolonged absence.

He went away to banish the thought of an idle trouble, and he came back borne down by a load of misery. He was better clad than when he left, and he had money in his pocket; but he felt that his heart was wrong, and he thought the villagers would shun him if they could look into his eyes. The idle barking of the dogs seemed to convey to his sensitive mind the unfriendly feeling of the village toward him.

He passed by the manor-house of Michael Kirsanof. It was brilliant with lights, and it rang with laughter. His steps were slow as he went by. Once he thought he heard Vera's voice.

"How happy she is," he thought, "with her husband beside her! How little they dream that a murderer listens while they laugh, and little they know that the murderer is Vera's old lover, her first love, the playmate of her childhood, to whom she vowed undying constancy."

The door was opened, and he, with averted head, hastened forward, lest his eyes should meet those of Count Rolof, whom he suspected of being there.

"I do not shrink from my duty, terrible as it is," he said, "but I will not stain her father's door-step with his blood."

Then hurrying through the village, he passed by his old home. It was dark as death.

"Ah! my poor father, weary after his day's toil, now sleeps. If he knew that his son's feet were so near his door, how it would thrill him with joy! but I will not disturb his peaceful, happy slumbers. I will see old Peter, and curse him for destroying my peace of mind."

Turning from the principal street down a narrow thoroughfare, Leo walked briskly, and was soon at the door of a one-story straggling building, which spread over considerable ground. This was the building occupied by Peter, who pretended that he was a shoemaker by trade, but whose real business was the manufacture of explosives for the Nihilists.

In the front room of this building were a bench and all the tools of the shoemaking trade, where several men worked at that calling; but when anybody asked for Peter, that worthy generally came from a back room with spectacles on his forehead, a shoemaker's apron in front of him, and an unfinished shoe in his hand. This unfinished shoe had done duty for a year.

Leo knocked at the front door, which was fastened.

The summons was answered by Peter. The old conspirator was thunder-struck.

"What, Leo!" he exclaimed. "Back already! Something has gone wrong, my boy. Tell me what it is."

Leo's face was as pale as death. He struggled in on the floor, and clutched Peter's arm for support. His eyes were weary, and his whole appearance was that of a haggard and woe-begone person. He seemed to Peter twenty years older than when he last saw him, and when the latter extended both hands for a friendly grasp, the young man shrank away from him, saying:

"Oh, don't touch me—I'm a murderer!"

"A murderer!" exclaimed Peter. "Impossible!"

"Well, I have drawn the fatal ballot to commit murder. I have been chosen to slay Count Rolof—Prince Vladimir, the affianced of Vera Kirsanof. Is it not terrible? Oh, Peter, why did you not let me know that it would lead to this? You only showed me the glory, not the shame of Nihilism."

"And this little matter vexes you?" said Peter, laughing; "tell me all about it."

They walked to Peter's workshop, where, amid explosives enough to shake every throne in Christendom into splinters, Leo unbosomed himself of his sorrows, giving a hurried account of his trip to Paris and the result.

"But why worry about it?" said Peter. "This young ruffian has been legally sentenced, and you have been honored by the fates to execute it. It is not half as cruel as the sentences the government minions pass daily on our bravest men and fairest women. Besides, this prince, count, or whatever he may be, deserves death at your hands."

"Oh, not at mine, not at mine, Peter!"

"But I tell you he does," said Peter, seeing his opportunity to strengthen the irresolution of his young friend and rouse him to hatred. Then, following up his opportunity, he exclaimed. "This man killed your father like a dog!"

"Great Heaven! Peter, what did you say?" cried Leo, springing from his seat and clasping his head with his hands to still the tumult of his stormy thoughts, while his eyes looked wildly into those of his old friend— "Speak to me, Peter, speak to me. I am going mad. Did you say he killed my poor father?"

"Ay, shot him down on the floor of Michael Kirsanof's manor-house the very night you went away, and he died in my arms, repeating your name, the day following my return from St. Petersburg."

"My father, my father, have you then left me, or is this some cruel dream? Peter, you say he died. Tell me again, so that I may know my fevered brain is not jesting with my senses."

"He died, Leo, blessing you in his simple way, and praying that you might be avenged upon his murderer."

"Now I hear aright, I understand. I am alone. Oh, for the hearts of ten thousand tigers in my breast, that I may follow and find this demon, the destroyer of my love, the slayer of my father, and tear him limb from limb!"

Leo threw himself on a bench and sobbed violently. Peter was silent. In his heart he pitied him, but as he watched the powerful frame of the young man shaken by the storm of grief and passion, he knew that he would need no urging to execute the decree of the Supreme Council on Count Rolof.

A knock at the door made Peter grasp his unfinished shoe. The visitor was Andrei, the servant from the house of Michael Kirsanof.

"Bless me, Peter," he said, familiarly, "will you ever finish that shoe?"

At sight of Leo, Andrei was overpowered.

"My God, Leo, is it you? How glad I am."

He grasped him by both hands.

"Ah, Andrei, I know your kind heart feels for me. I have been betrayed and badly sinned against. Were you at the manor-house when this butcher slew my father?"

"Yes, and it was I who helped him to his home. It was too bad. Your father was rushing upon Michael Kirsanof with a knife when the count fired the fatal shot."

"My father! Why?"

"Because he claimed you had been crushed to death under the master's sledge, and he wanted revenge. It was a fearful sight, such as I never want to see again. The poor man looked as if out of his reason."

"And all this for me?" cried Leo.

"Ever since his death Michael Kirsanof has been anxious to see you to convince you that he was not at fault."

Leo shook his head.

"I cannot, will not enter that fatal hall," he said, "unless I can meet the man who slew my father there."

"He has not been about in several days."

"But what of Vera?" Leo asked, eagerly. "Has she not become his wife?"

"No, and never will."

Andrei then explained what he suspected of the ruse to screen Count Rolof, while Leo listened in amazement.

"Vera often speaks of you to me when we are alone, and asks whether I have heard anything of your whereabouts. And, Leo, hers is no idle inquiry. I note her sighs and her distress when she says, 'I wonder, Andrei, if he will ever come back?'"

Leo's brain burned.

"And all this time I have been deceived," he said. "Think you, Andrei, that she would like to meet me?"

"Ay, indeed she would, most dearly."

"And with your aid I will meet her this very night!"

"It would be most imprudent," said old Peter. "A great mistake on your part, Leo. The Kirsanof family is now identified with the Holy League, and it will compromise you to hold communion with its members."

"I have no fear," said the young man. "You know it is one of the conditions of nihilism that none of its members shall be suspected, however serious the circumstantial evidence. If this girl consents to meet me, I will see her, and possibly learn something from her of where my father's assassin is now hiding. Andrei, will you carry a little note to Vera?"

"With all my heart."

Leo then wrote in pencil:

"DEAREST VERA:—For the sake of old times an old friend would like to meet you, if only for a few minutes, to-night, at such time and place as you may name. I may never have an opportunity to meet
LEO."

"Andrei," he said, "give this to your young [mistress, and I will await the result."

Andrei was delighted, and darted off like a flash.

Peter was displeased, and looked dark as a cloud.

"You place yourself in fresh peril," he said to Leo. "This girl, once your lover, is now the affianced of Count Rolof, a member of the Holy League, and she will merely insnare you."

"I am ready to risk every danger to learn from her where this Count Rolof is."

"Be on your guard," the old man said, "and beware of treachery."

After a short absence Andrei ran back in breathless haste, with a tiny note. Leo tore it open. It said that Vera would be glad to meet him; that Andrei would drive her out for a sleigh-ride; that they would stop where Leo designated, and that he could take the place of the driver if he wished them to be alone. "I long to see you," was the last sentence, which filled Leo's breast with a delightful impatience. The little message filled him with joy. The memory of other and happier days broke through the gloom of his gathering sorrows like sunshine through the mist, and he said to Andrei:

"Call for me here, and you can remain with Peter while I drive your mistress a few miles beyond the village."

Andrei saw with evident delight the pleasure this meeting would afford two young hearts, and he felt thrilled by the joy that thrilled them both, and of which he considered himself the medium. He moved with the rapidity of a lover, and Leo had not long to wait before the music of the sleigh-bells set his pulses throbbing wildly.

Andrei, enveloped in a great coat of wolf-skin and a huge fur cap, darted through the door.

Pulling off the coat and cap, he said to Leo:

"Quick! Put these on and take your place beside the loveliest woman in Russia."

Leo took the hint, and in the awkward wrappings he was completely disguised.

When he was leaving the room old Peter whispered:

"Beware that beauty does not betray you!"

"Have no fear," was the answer, and Leo rushed off and leaped lightly to the place awaiting him beside Vera. As he did so he whispered her dear name, in answer to which he heard his own repeated soft and low.

Old Peter and Andrei stood at the dingy little window watching. They saw Leo take the lines. The horses, impatient of restraint, leaped forward, and soon the lovers were lost to sight in a whirling cloud of snow.

"They are gone," said Andrei, "and if they are wise they will never return."

Old Peter was distressed over the occurrence.

The lovers, after the first thrilling salutation, did not speak until they had passed the outskirts of the village, when the horses settled down into a steady trot.

"I feared you would not come, Vera," said Leo.

"But I longed to meet you. How you have changed and grown!"

"And you," he answered, looking into her fair face, and feeling the force of her dark, enchanting eyes. "How the promise of childhood has been fulfilled! It awes me to think how bold I was as a boy, how reckless as a man, and how madly we promised what can never be realized."

"Why regret our promise, Leo?"

"Because you are now another's. Because you are the affianced of this Count Rolof, whom I hate."

"And you were deceived by that bit of stratagem," she said, laughing merrily. "Ah, Leo, you had little faith."

"Then it is not so?"

"How could it be? Don't you remember our promise before I went away to school? I have kept mine. What has become of yours?"

"Alas, mine has made me miserable. When they told me you were the affianced wife of another, it made me mad, and I flung myself down an abyss. Oh, Vera, why did I not know the truth?"

"And you would have known it had you not run away. My father planned this story of my engagement to Rolof for two reasons. One was to deceive you, the other I do not care to tell. But how have you flung yourself down an abyss? Have you given yourself to another? Tell me, I pray you, what it means. Is there anything more formidable than the antipathy of my parents between us?"

He was puzzled for an answer. Their lips were close to each other, and for want of a better reply he kissed her. But what should he say? How explain the depth of that abyss which made their union impossible?

The horses now having their own way jogged along slowly. Leo's bewilderment was complete. He was wretched in the moment of supreme joy.

But a sharp cry of "Look out there!" recalled him to his senses, and before he could turn his straggling horses aside a sledge coming in the opposite direction at a furious speed dashed against his, upsetting the lovers in the snow. There was a crash of timbers, a cry of terror, and some vigorous swearing.

As soon as Leo gathered himself from the wreck, he found himself face to face with Vera's father, who was accompanied by Count Rolof.

The sight of his father's slayer made Leo's heart leap. He was oblivious to everything else, and rushing upon the startled count, he exclaimed:

"Now for my revenge!"

CHAPTER X.

LOVE AND NIHILISM.

As Leo Rollins spoke, or rather hissed defiance in the face of his father's slayer, he made a quick movement to draw his pistol, only to learn in despair and disappointment that he had left the weapon in the pocket of the coat which he had exchanged with Andrei before starting out on his eventful ride.

Anger made him reckless. He did not stop to think that he had to deal with a cool-headed man of the world, a dead shot who never went about unarmed, and in his blind rage he rushed at the count and struck him a staggering blow with his fist on the head.

Count Rolof, agile as a tiger, sprang aside to avoid the second blow, and the fatal click of his revolver, the glitter of its silver mounting, and the determination of his eye flashed upon the senses of Leo as the swift premonitions of death.

With a piercing cry, coupled with Leo's name, Vera Kirsanof rushed between the deadly combatants just as the count was in the act of raising his pistol.

The sound of Leo's name from the lips of the terror-stricken girl had a strange effect on Count Rolof.

He was a man of great courage, and did not shrink from the threatening onset of his antagonist, whose brain glowed like a furnace under the influence of the hatred he felt; but the sound of that name made his hand tremble, as it recalled to his mind the picture of the wounded shoemaker writhing, raging, dying forfeit on the floor of the manor-house.

"For this lady's sake I spare your life, young man," he said; "but beware that a repetition of your reckless conduct does not forfeit it."

Vexed and humiliated beyond measure, Leo Rollins scarce knew what to say or do. Here he was at the mercy of the man whose life he had been commissioned to take, and he was disgraced in the presence of the woman he loved more than all the world.

"Ye gods!" he cried, in his rage, "this is more than flesh and blood can bear!" at the same time unclasping the great-coat in which he was enveloped and flinging it aside, while he bared his breast toward which he pointed, while he knelt in the snow, exclaiming:

"Count Rolof, dog of a murderer that you are, shoot at my heart. Let my blood mark this spot to show where we met. Strike here, for sooner or later one of us must kill the other!"

"Oh, patience, have patience!" said Michael Kirsanof, who ever since the death of Leo's father was anxious to meet the young man that he might explain the cause of the tragedy. He did not expect to meet him in Vera's company, however, and the crash which brought them together, as well as the utter recklessness of Leo's conduct, was aggravating.

"Before expending your rash wrath," he said, "wait until you hear the story of the tragedy which inspires your enmity toward this man, and then let your sense of justice assert itself. For

the present, I believe I am entitled to an explanation of this unexpected meeting."

"Suffer me to explain when we reach home, papa," said Vera. Leo was bewildered. He found himself burning with rage, yet powerless to be avenged on his father's slayer, who actually added to his torture and mental misery by an unexpected display of magnanimity. Leo Rollins would much rather fall by the hand of Count Rolof than receive a favor, or the semblance of a favor, from him, and the words of Michael Kirsanof, although intended to allay his passion, added to his anger and stung him to the quick.

"If one of us must kill the other sooner or later, as you say," said Count Rolof, "it shall not be until full explanation has been made to you of the unfortunate circumstances attending your father's death. He fell with the point of his knife at this man's breast, and was shot to prevent his becoming a murderer and making you a murderer's son."

Leo Rollins made no reply to this. He was dazed, and felt as if transfixed to the spot on which he stood.

Michael Kirsanof, seeing that the storm of passion was subsiding, made an examination of the sleighs, and found that although there had been a loud crackling of timber when they met, the danger was really slight.

"Come, come," he said. "Let us not stand here longer. Count Rolof and Vera will take this sleigh and go ahead, while Leo and I will occupy the second, as I have something of importance to tell him."

Vera urged Leo to accompany her father, adding, in a whisper, that she wanted to see him again, but he refused to do so, and in spite of the most earnest pressing on the part of Michael Kirsanof, he staid behind in the snow, and watched the party drive off to the village.

Leo did not have far to walk in getting back to Peter's workshop, where he related his experience to the bomb-shell maker, who shook his head, and said he knew no good could come of such a meeting. Andrei was horrified to learn that the plot in which he had played such a prominent part had culminated so disastrously.

"Mercy on me!" he cried. "What will Michael Kirsanof say to me? What will I do to get out of this scrape? It is very unfortunate, and I fear Count Rolof half suspects me of being a Nihilist."

"He certainly must know something of Leo's connection with the order," said old Peter; "and I think it wise for him to leave the village at once."

Andrei did not wait to hear more, but hurrying on his great-coat and cap was gone.

"It is dangerous for you to remain here an hour longer, Leo," said Peter. "Count Rolof now knows your intention, and it will be impossible for you to carry out the sentence of the council. If you stay you will fall into the toils."

Peter was fully as much afraid that his *protege* would fall under Vera's influence as into the hands of the authorities.

It was the desire to see Vera again that made Leo so reluctant to leave. The old love had returned with all the intensity of boyhood's first rapture, and he was tortured to know that when his heaven was so near he must leave it. His joy was unspeakable at knowing that Vera still loved him, but to be near her now was to incur the fatal penalty of the moth that hovers near the flame.

Peter saw that it would be impossible to expect from Leo the caution demanded by the situation. He knew the young man did not lack courage, but his want of discretion might prove fatal. The death of his father made him violent in his desire to kill Count Rolof, and robbed him of all ideas of precaution; besides there was constant peril in being so close to Vera Kirsanof.

After revolving these matters in his mind Peter insisted on going to the capital, and laying the situation before the council. Leo yielded reluctantly. The old bomb-shell maker was fixed in his resolution, and at the meeting of the executive committee the following evening, pleaded earnestly that the lots might be re-cast, so as to relieve Leo, who, by reason of his personal feeling against this man, was not in a fit frame of mind to execute the law with proper discretion.

To this Leo Rollins objected most strenuously, claiming that there was a special fitness in the fact that the fates had chosen him for the task of slaying his father's slayer. "And I shall insist on my right to blot this man from the face of the earth," he said, passionately.

Herman Aurbach decided that since Leo insisted on his right, and was disposed to carry his life so cheerfully into this perilous enterprise, the committee had no power to revoke the decision of the ballot by which he had been selected. He must, therefore, carry out the task assigned him. It might be wise for him to leave the neighborhood for a time, and the suggestion

came in good season, as he had just received a pressing communication from Madame Moravief in Moscow, asking for a few trustworthy volunteers to work in the mine which was being laid under the city for the purpose of blowing up the cathedral on the occasion of the Czar's coronation.

Herman Aurbach read the communication. It gave a general plan of the operations on foot to blow up the Czar at the moment of his coronation in the midst of the pomp and circumstance attending the ceremony. Madame Moravief also invited Eliska to Moscow to attend the forthcoming ball of the governor, where there would be an opportunity of rendering excellent service to the cause of the people.

"It is just the thing," said Peter. "Leo can go and work in that mine for a few days until his mind settles down from its present feverish pitch of excitement, and then he can carry out the sentence in his own way."

"Your theory is plausible enough, Old Explosion," said Itsoff, with an angry leer intended for a smile, "but suppose the young man in settling down to the condition of mind you describe should lose all taste for his task altogether, what then? I will undertake the task and won't ask any opportunities to beat about the bush."

"You won't, eh? Well, you are a born assassin. I have pledged my life on this boy's unflinching integrity, and if he fails it is I who have cause to fear, not you."

"It was a mere suggestion," growled Itsoff.

"And entirely unwarranted," added Peter.

"Come, come, brethren," said Herman Aurbach, "no acerbity is necessary. I'll decide this matter by sending Leo and Eliska to Moscow."

Peter was delighted, and rubbed his hands gleefully, but Itsoff was angry.

He did not like the idea of selecting this "fledgling," as he sometimes called Leo, for the best work, and throwing him so often in the society of this charming woman.

Itsoff, although ill-favored, thought Eliska ought to be more disposed to regard him kindly than any of the others, because of his accomplishments. He was the chemist, and he occasionally wrote for the revolutionary organ, but he had a supreme contempt for everybody else who could write. He was a dog of low origin, who persisted in showing his teeth just because nature enabled him to bite. His chagrin was accordingly great when Herman Aurbach announced that Leo and Eliska might go to Moscow. He was jealous, and with him jealousy was insanity of the worst type.

Leo did not know of this feeling. He only hoped that he might have an opportunity of meeting Vera Kirsanof once more before going away.

His opportunity came much earlier than he expected. The very next morning while strolling along the Nevaski Prospekt he saw something that set his heart a-flutter.

It was Andrei driving a sleigh containing two ladies. The ladies were Vera and her little sister Natalie.

After various efforts Leo managed to attract Vera's attention.

Vera ordered a halt and bade the driver to call their friend.

As Leo took his place in the sleigh beside the ladies at their earnest invitation, his joy was great. Natalie, always his friend, was much pleased to meet him, and wondered what had kept him away from the village. She knew of Vera's love for him, and longed to have him near them always.

What the lovers whispered the next fifteen minutes was heard by none but themselves, and when Andrei halted in front of a palatial building and said, "Ladies, here we are!" Leo and Vera felt that the time had passed all too suddenly. But their faces were brighter, and each eye was more radiant with happiness than when they met. They little knew that a deeper shadow than any that had yet fallen upon their path lay ahead.

To Leo's great astonishment, on looking around he discovered that they had halted in front of Herman Aurbach's mansion, and he thought he saw the face of Eliska at the window.

"We part here," said Vera, "but to meet again soon, I hope. I am anxious to see my dear friend, Eliska Aurbach."

Leo was thunder-struck, but said nothing.

"If we have taken you out of your way," she added, "Andrei will drive you back, and call for us in an hour."

And with a fervently expressed wish that they might meet soon again, the lovers parted.

"Your Leo is a Nihilist," said Natalie, in a whisper, as the ladies approached the door of Herman Aurbach's dwelling.

"He's a hero, Natalie, and I love him with all my heart and soul," was the reply, and then the merry voice of Eliska was heard in joyous welcome.

CHAPTER XI.

A RED SHADOW.

"Merciful powers! what can it mean?"

"It is awful. See the clouds, like banners of fire! What a wild and glorious picture they present!"

The first exclamation was uttered by Eliska Aurbach, who grasped the arm of Leo as they sat looking out at the window of a railroad car at the close of a bright and cheerful day.

They were on their way to Moscow and about midway between that ancient capital and St. Petersburg, when the slowly fading light of evening was suddenly superseded by a burst of all-pervading flame that filled the sky with its red shadow.

The startling spectacle thrilled the passengers with terror. The sky seemed a sheet of fire, and a brightness surpassing that of noonday lighted up the landscape in all directions.

The train was speedily whirled within sight of the source of this fiery apparition.

In the light of the destroying flames the passengers could see that the greater portion of the little town they were approaching was on fire and crowds of men danced like demons before the blaze.

Every heart beat wildly in contemplation of the frightful spectacle, and the engineer, hesitating to go forward, slackened speed.

Eliska saw the mobs pursuing women, and children and striking them down without mercy. It did not look like a riot, as those who were driven about and beaten to death offered no resistance. Instinctively she realized what it meant, and she said to Leo:

"Ah, I know now the meaning of this ghastly spectacle. It is an outburst of brutal passion against the Jewish people of this place."

"Perhaps it is a revolt of the residents against the authorities," suggested Leo.

"Oh, no. Cowardly ignorance is not so brave as that. It is only the weak and unresisting that these wretched superstitious hordes can attack. See how they strike down that poor old woman and drag her child away. Oh, God, for the strength of an army that I might sweep these wretches into oblivion!"

Her eyes flashed and her whole frame shook with passion as she beheld the brutal scene.

"See the gendarmes!" she cried. "Surely they will stop this butchery. But no! They, too, have joined in the bloody sport. Watch that hulking fellow following an old man, and followed by the old man's daughter. Ah, he strikes him down with his saber, and now he plunges the weapon into his victim's body!" With a low, pitiful cry of pain Eliska buried her face in her hands to shut out the horrible sight.

"And see, Eliska!" continued Leo, who had not noticed the effect of the shock upon his fair companion. "See how the girl with streaming hair kneels over the prostrate man and pleads with her father's butchers. He strikes her, too! God, must flesh and blood endure this?" and as he spoke the train halted at the station just outside the burning village, and Leo said:

"I will go to the girl's rescue if it costs my life!"

Eliska caught his arm and whispered in his ear: "My noble brother, stay! What would your life avail in this flame of fury. Reserve it for a greater work. Your going into that mob would be like leaping into a furnace; you could accomplish nothing but your own certain destruction."

The girl whose distress had aroused Leo's sympathies now rose and ran from her fierce assailant, who followed close behind.

"See! She comes this way!" said Leo, flinging open the window and thrusting out his head. "Run, run for your life!" he cried to the hunted creature. "Come this way, quick!"

The cry of the enraged mob arose on the night air like the roar of a storm and the burden of the cruel yell was:

"Death to the Jew!"

The frail girl, fleeing from this storm of passion, heard the ominous threat, and her white face told of the terror at her heart. She knew that the first who caught her would glory in killing her. Other Jewish girls had met with a worse fate in the doomed village that afternoon. The wrath of wild beasts is merciful compared to the wrath of a mob.

The girl saw the friendly face at the car window and ran to it with all her might. The cruel soldier who followed her was furious with rage because she had dared to escape his brutal blows.

Leo Rollins had both arms out of the car window to receive her, and as soon as the frightened girl, with hair flying all about

her face, came within reach he caught her up and was about to lift her in when the burly Cossack came rushing up all out of breath, and swearing that she should not escape him. It was a moment of intense excitement. The train began to move. The wild uproar of the burning village continued with all its ghastly incidents of brutality, and passengers and train hands were anxious to get away from such a horrible spectacle without asking any questions concerning the butchery and ruin of which they were the involuntary witnesses.

There was so much to engage attention that many did not see the struggle at the car window between Leo and the Cossack for possession of the fair fugitive.

The soldier had torn off most of the girl's clothing, and was about to drag her away, when Eliska drew from her pocket a tiny pistol, with which she fired full in the face of the brutal assassin, who relinquished his grasp and fell with a groan beside the wheels of the now rapidly moving train.

The action was lightning-like—as swift and as fatal as the sting of the rattlesnake.

Owing to the excitement the pistol-shot was not heard, and those who saw the Cossack fall attributed it to the motion of the train.

The girl, who had been snatched from his clutches like a dove from the claws of a hawk, was with readiness lifted into the car, her slender frame coming readily through the narrow window, and she was so overcome that she fell panting on the seat between her benefactors.

There she wept and sobbed a whole hour, while the train sped on its way to Moscow. Leo assumed all responsibility for her care, and Eliska with her own fair hand smoothed out the tangled tresses and caressed the beautiful face until the tempest of the girl's grief subsided, and the convulsions of her frame grew quieter, when she was able, among many heart-broken sobs, to tell her deliverers of the dreadful ordeal through which she had passed.

"My name is Esther Seligman," she said. "My father, mother, and myself lived happily near the synagogue, in the heart of the village, surrounded by good Jewish neighbors. The village constable frequently came to our store and borrowed money. He was a man of drunken habits, had a coarse face and big black beard. Oftentimes my father lent him large sums, which he was slow in paying. We did not have very much to spare. We worked hard, lived close, and saved all we could. We kept a little store. After my father had lent various sums to Karkof, the constable, he clamored for more.

"The Jews dreaded this official, and he was known among them as the little Czar. Whenever my father said he was too poor Karkof grew abusive and swore vehemently.

"Then my father, to appease him, said that he might obtain the money by furnishing good security. Karkof said he could not see what security was necessary from one in his position, and went away grumbling. At last he returned and gave security—a piece of property which he forfeited in default of payment. He never paid anything of late, and went about regularly raising money for his revelry among the Jewish people. He understood nothing of business methods, and had all his worldly possessions mortgaged for his debts. When he could not secure a small loan by regular methods he darkly hinted that the village would one day repeat the experience of Odessa. Every one understood what that meant, and many of those against whom the threats were uttered, knew by experience, because their relatives were slain in Odessa in 1871.

"As Karkof's possessions were vanishing one by one he grew desperate. He incited the villagers against the Jews, and said the poverty of the place was due to the presence of the Hebrews, who were skinning off the wealth of the people. The other day when my father asked him to pay some of the old debt which he owed, because we were embarrassed to meet our own obligations, he turned upon him savagely and exclaimed, with an oath:

"I will pay every dog of a Jew in this village before many days, and it will be such payment as they never received before!"

"My father was a peaceful, quiet, and kind man, and asked politely what that meant, whereupon the constable swore anew, and said we would be the first to know at the proper time.

"We little knew then that such a storm of hate and fire was preparing for us. The villagers, inspired by Karkof and their own ill-luck in life, regarded us with intense hatred. Some of the Jews, fearing what was coming, left the place last night, but my poor father said there was no danger, and refused to believe that men could be so base as to carry out the threats of this man. But all this forenoon the streets were full of drunken, threatening men, and as the shades of evening came the work of bloodshed, wreck, and ruin began. The portion of the village occupied by the Jewish people was first assailed, and a general raid was made on shops, and shores, and dwellings. Then the

torch was applied to the synagogue, and from that the fire extended to all the neighboring houses. Ours was but a short distance from the edifice, and was consumed among the first. Karkof and some of the soldiers who were sent to protect us carrying off all our property. Father, mother, and myself escaped to the house of a friend, and barred doors and windows. We were speedily driven out by the flames, however, and in escaping my mother was rudely assailed by an officer, who instantly struck her dead and turned away. Oh, my poor, poor mother!" And Esther burst into a fresh torrent of grief.

Eliska tried to soothe her by all the gentle arts at her command, and said:

"Hush, my dear child, and don't pursue this painful story now; we will hear it at a future time."

"There is not much more to tell," said Esther, adding, "When my mother's butcher moved away, father and I stooped by her side, but she never spoke a word to us again. While kneeling by her, forgetting all else that was going on, my father was kicked by a coarse fellow, who said, 'There is that Jew, Karkof. He wants his pay. Now let him have it with compound interest.' At that a Cossack rushed at him, and my father ran away. I followed, in the hope of being able to save him, but the bloody work was done before I could prevent it. I saw my dear father also cut down before my eyes, and I was next assailed. How I escaped you know, and how to thank my deliverers and my God is what bewilders me; but yet I feel that I have no right to live when my parents who were so fond of me fell in the sea of hatred and bigotry which we have left behind. Now I have told you all," and Esther, with clasped hands, buried her face in Eliska's lap, and sobbed as if her heart would break.

She was intelligent as well as pretty, and the impression which her simple story made on the minds of Eliska and Leo made each hope for the time when the rising tide would sweep away the despotism under which such deeds were possible.

"You shall remain with me," said Eliska to Esther, as soon as the party sighted Moscow, after a tiresome ride, "and I will see that you are clothed and cared for as you deserve."

The poor girl was at a loss for words to express her gratitude, but she felt that Heaven had sent her a friend whose kindness needed no compliments for its reward.

At the station in Moscow the little party was met by Madame Moravief's private carriage, and soon they were resting under the hospitable roof of her luxurious home. But Esther, the fugitive, slept little that night, thinking of the fearful fate of her parents. Leo's mind was filled with strange fancies when he found himself alone. He wondered what the mine was like where he was expected to work for the destruction of the Czar, and whether he should soon again stand face to face with his father's slayer. For a time Eliska's thoughts were of the brutal Cossack from whose grasp poor Esther had been torn, and then surrendered herself to thinking of the governor's ball, which Madame Moravief told her would be a grand affair, and at which she was expected to make a conquest of a prince from St. Petersburg.

CHAPTER XII.

THE GATHERING STORM.

Madame Moravief, the brilliant wife of General Moravief, whose valor commanded the admiration of his countrymen, was a leader of society in Moscow.

Her delightful parlors were constantly thronged with the nobles of the ancient capital, and her personal attainments eminently fitted her for the leadership of a gay circle.

Her pleasure at meeting Eliska was genuine, and the beautiful Nihilist reciprocated the feeling with a corresponding degree of sincerity, for she regarded this fascinating and accomplished woman with love and admiration.

Although Madame Moravief's home was the social shrine of a host of fashionable and wealthy devotees, politically she was regarded as a sphinx. Her husband being a general, her loyalty was taken for granted, although Nihilist and loyalist found equal enjoyment in her society.

When, a few nights after Eliska's arrival, both ladies were ready to attend the governor's ball, Madame Moravief surveyed her fair companion, she burst forth into an exclamation of delight at her dazzling beauty, and kissed her passionately.

"Ah, *mon Dieu!* how charming! I expect to be left entirely alone to-night. All my old beaux will fall at your feet."

The color in Eliska's cheek indicated her pleasure and embarrassment as she uttered a gentle protest.

"But I know it," said Madame Moravief, who, although no longer in the blushing time of life, was beautiful in a queenly and dignified way.

"Old Petrovitch will at once desert me when you dawn upon his restless vision; and between him and this expected prince from St. Petersburg, you are sure of a conquest."

"I wonder who this prince from St. Petersburg, of whom we hear so much, can be?" said Eliska.

"I did not learn his name, but we will soon set eyes upon him."

The ball was a grand affair

Madame Moravief and Eliska were observed by every eye.

They were chatting pleasantly together, when they were completely surprised by Petrovitch and another and much younger gentleman.

"Ah, Madame Moravief!" said the courtly iron-gray Petrovitch, who, although no longer young, flattered himself that he possessed all the graces of youth.

Madame Moravief was delighted, she said. Then Petrovitch presented his friend, Prince Vladimir, and Madame Moravief presented both gentlemen to Eliska.

At sound of Prince Vladimir's name, Eliska's cheeks glowed crimson, and her eyes were turned to the stranger, whose gaze she found fixed intently upon her. She saw a man of commanding presence, young, handsome, and of fine physique. Although she tried hard to hold every emotion in check, her heart beat wildly, responsive to the thoughts which the name had inspired.

"Prince Vladimir!" she thought. "I wonder if he can be the man? How did he get here?"

The soft, sweet smile almost faded from her lips as she honored the introduction.

Her mind was suddenly transported from that gay scene to her home in St. Petersburg, and the apprehension she felt for her father, who was to some extent in this man's power, caused a shadow to cloud the accustomed joy of her charming face.

Could it be that this was the man who held in his possession a document damaging to her father? Was this the Prince Vladimir upon whom the highest authority known to Nihilism had pronounced sentence of death, and whose executioner was now in Moscow?

The name was enough, and they said he was from St. Petersburg. The first time she heard that name was at the meeting of the Central Council in Paris, where his destruction was considered so desirable. What would he think if he knew that this engaging woman had cast lots to kill him?

He was a man of high breeding and pleasant manners, of handsome face and commanding form, Beside him the fussy Petrovitch was insignificant.

Eliska mastered her varying emotions with the skill of one who has complete control of the passions, and by the coolness of her manner gave the impression that the meeting was nothing more than an ordinary affair.

Prince Vladimir, or Count Rolof, for he it was who had come to Moscow to confer with Petrovitch relative to the proposed attack on the life of the Czar at the moment of the coronation, was not insensible to the great beauty of Eliska, whose name he had often heard, but of whose power to fascinate he was hitherto not aware.

Madame Moravief engaged Petrovitch in conversation. Presently the first soft strains of a waltz were heard, and he invited her to join him in the dance.

"With all my heart," she answered, then, smiling at Eliska, she moved off with her delighted partner.

"Shall we follow their example?" said Count Rolof, with some hesitation.

Eliska assented with a gracious smile, and presently Count Rolof found himself the most envied man in the ball-room, as he led his fair partner through the poetic measure.

Eliska was a charming dancer, and her partner proved a much more pleasing companion than she expected. Their heads were close together, and they were soon engaged in animated conversation. Two or three times they met Petrovitch and his stately partner, and the eyes of the former followed Eliska in unconscious admiration, while his mind was filled with strange fancies. A bachelor in the noon of life, was it possible that the matchless charms of this girl had captivated him?

The measure was ended. Eliska and her partner wandered off to a cozy nook where they were entirely alone.

Prince Vladimir thanked her for the pleasure she had afforded him, and made the declaration that he had never in his life passed a happier half hour. She maintained a charming reserve, and pretended not to know that she had ever heard of him before.

This made him all the more communicative.

"The delight of the ball-room would be greater," he said, "if we were privileged to carry the acquaintance there formed beyond its doors."

"That would not always be desirable," said Eliska.

"But you will admit that there are exceptions."

"Yes, there are some rare exceptions in which it would be a pleasure to do so, but in such cases those concerned can be a w unto themselves."

"What would you think if I were to propose such a law? If, for instance, I should request the pleasure of being numbered in your list of friends, and if the acquaintance formed in Moscow could be carried to St. Petersburg?"

Eliska hesitated, and turned over in her own mind how this acquaintance, if continued, could be utilized to advantage.

Had she any real influence over this man, or was his admiration merely feigned? These things she considered seriously, weighing well the circumstances involved.

"Ah, I see you hesitate. Then pardon me if I have suggested something that would not be agreeable," he observed.

"It will be a pleasure," she said, smiling sweetly, "to continue such an agreeable acquaintance."

His face wore a look of genuine happiness, and just then the rustling Madame Moravief and her companion cut short the interview.

"I have been looking for you everywhere, Eliska, fearing that you had eloped. Now I am so happy that I found you."

Prince Vladimir bowed and was about to withdraw, when Madame Moravief interrupted him for a few idle words. Petrovitch improved the opportunity by engaging Eliska for the next quadrille. Prince Vladimir did not enjoy this turn of affairs and it had such an unexpected effect upon him that he did not even desire to ask Madame Moravief to be his partner for the measure.

But they chatted pleasantly, and improved the time until Petrovitch, proud as a peacock, returned with his fair partner.

Before the ball closed, thanks to the strategy of Madame Moravief, there were two jealous men in the room. They had entered it as friends, but were scarcely on speaking terms when they withdrew.

This state of feeling was not improved by the visits of the next few days at the house of Madame Moravief, who encouraged it by all the skill of which she was mistress.

To such an extent did it affect the staid old Petrovitch and his more fiery friend, that they made but little progress in the line of searching for the man who was delegated to assassinate the Czar on his coronation in the cathedral.

"Can you not give me some clew to this person of whom you wrote to the Czar?" said Prince Vladimir one day, growing impatient of delay.

Petrovitch was petulant. This handsome young fellow had the confidence of the Czar, and was evidently preferred by this beautiful young woman, Eliska, of whom the restless Petrovitch was deeply enamored.

His presence was painful, and at last Petrovitch conceived a bold scheme for destroying him.

He wrote to the Czar that the man who was expected to strike him down was none other than this trusted friend of his, Prince Vladimir, who was a Nihilist in disguise, although professing such great loyalty for the emperor. In proof of this Petrovitch promised to produce evidence showing that Count Rolof spent his nights in company with some of the leading Nihilists, and was a constant visitor at a fashionable house where Nihilist nobles congregated. Petrovitch concluded his treacherous dispatch by saying he was fully convinced the person now known as Prince Vladimir was the man who contemplated the perpetration of the fearful act, as, under the guise of going into the Cathedral to guard the sacred person of the emperor, he expected to secure a favorable position for the purpose of striking a blow that would thrill the world. The object of assassinating the Czar, he said, at the moment of his coronation was to make it appear all the more terrible, and to show the people that the most solemn ceremony was not sufficient to save a royal head from the doom pronounced against it by the Terrorists.

Having sent this document under seal to Gatschina, the next move on the part of Petrovitch was to quarrel with Count Rolof in such a way as not to incur a duel, while giving him a sufficient excuse for leaving Moscow in a hurry. Accordingly, when Rolof asked Petrovitch if he could not give some more definite clew that might lead to the detection of the noble assassin who was to strike down the Czar at the moment of his coronation, Petrovitch replied:

"Oh, that is not at all necessary, my friend. I have already forwarded all information on the subject to the Czar."

Rolof was astounded.

"You have discovered the traitor," he said, "and sent on his name without as much as letting me know! Come, come, my friend, that is hardly fair."

"Well, my dear prince," said Petrovitch, with a tone of irony in the pronunciation of the word "prince," "it was something which I felt I ought not let a living person know a thing about

but the Czar. If he thinks proper to tell you, I shall have no fault to find; but you understand we cannot be too careful."

"Your prudence is creditable to your patriotism," said Rolof; "but you should know that the Czar has not a secret on this subject that I do not share, and therefore you need not be so circumspect in a matter of this kind."

"Since the Czar lets you into all his political secrets, he will probably make you acquainted with this," added Petrovitch, dryly; "but you appreciate the importance of not saying much on the subject, and you will appreciate it all the better when you become acquainted with the facts."

A horrible suspicion came into Rolof's mind, but he banished it immediately and would not let himself think of it for a moment.

Could it be that this sweet-spoken Petrovitch, to whom he had talked so freely of his service to the Czar, had played him false? Impossible! And yet why did he hide from him the secret which he had been commissioned to assist him in finding out? He would not question him further on the subject. He would return at once to St. Petersburg, and learn from the lips of the emperor himself what this secret was that the wily Petrovitch could not trust him with. Accordingly he quitted Moscow hurriedly, and lost no time in going to Gatschina.

His visit to the palace was made at night, and he found his way into the subterranean corridor without interruption. To his great surprise, however, on entering the secret subterranean way he found it dark, and it was with a feeling of horror that he heard the door close behind him with a loud noise that locked it. Having overcome this first unpleasant shock, Count Rolof groped about for the telegraph instrument communicating with the Czar's apartments. It was not in its usual place. Something had gone wrong. Had Petrovitch betrayed him? This thought had no sooner flashed across his mind than he felt his shoulders caught by two brawny hands. Maddened at being the victim of treachery, he exclaimed: "Release me! I am the servant of the Czar!" But his words were not heeded, and as he felt himself borne down by an overpowering force, he determined to sell his life dearly, and a deadly struggle ensued in the dark.

CHAPTER XIII.

TREACHERY IN HIGH PLACES.

Before Count Rolof left Moscow for St. Petersburg, Petrovitch, in one of his merry moods, when his discretion was as effervescent as the champagne which caused his tongue to wag so frequently, boasted that he was in possession of a secret of the Czar's, which, if known at Gatschina, would cause the emperor more misery than the machinations of the Nihilists.

Count Rolof was not the man to learn so much and no more. Accordingly, under pretense of not desiring to know, he plied Petrovitch with wine, and that conceited worthy let the secret out by degrees.

"Did you not hear that before?" he asked, with a patronizing air of assumed astonishment at Rolof's ignorance. "That's strange, considering that you were in the Czar's confidence so deeply. Now he has intrusted me with the whole affair. You see this woman is very beautiful, and she has completely fascinated our emperor. Ah, if the empress should know what a mine of passion it would explode! Worse than dynamite let me tell you."

"This woman must be possessed of powerful charms to captivate the grave and seriously inclined Alexander."

"Lovely; ah, lovely! a very queen!" said Petrovitch, with enthusiasm. "A queen in face and form. Well, as to face, I do not think she can compare with that witch Eliska. Her beauty is of a bolder type, but in physique she is superb. The Czar was charmed the moment he saw her. I can never forget it. She was riding a spirited black horse, and it was hard to tell which was the more fiery as they dashed around the ring like morning on the edge of night."

"The ring! the ring!" said Count Rolof. "What ring?"

"Why, the circus ring," replied Petrovitch, draining another glass. "And when the act was over Donnichesky, glowing like the aurora, was conducted to his imperial majesty to receive his personal compliments on her matchless riding. She bowed low and dashed off, but his eyes followed her, and when she was gone he whispered to me: 'Petrovitch, I must see her again.'"

"What! a circus rider?"

"Why, yes, man; she's divine. You should see her; but no, you too would be charmed with her, and that would be treason. She lives like an empress here in Moscow. I often call to see her, and I do flatter myself that she thinks almost as much of me as she does of the Czar."

"Oh, no doubt," said Count Rolof, who was astonished, and

who at first thought the vanity of Petrovitch had inspired him to relate this romance. But Petrovitch was quite circumstantial, so that Rolof was compelled to think his strange story was not without some foundation.

When Count Rolof hinted at the matter the morning following, Petrovitch was considerably embarrassed. He said it was simply a delusion of the glass, and that his imagination had magnified a mere incident into a matter of importance. He begged Count Rolof, for the sake of the emperor, to think no more about it, as it was unworthy of the Czar, and that no true friend of his could for a moment connect his name with such an episode.

But although Petrovitch sought to make light of the matter, he was much disturbed over his own folly in having referred to it in an unguarded hour, and his desire to undo Count Rolof was all the greater on that account. He feared that if Rolof continued to enjoy the emperor's favor he would allude to this matter, and if he related the idle boasting of Petrovitch, it might be the means of sending the latter to Siberia, or worse.

This intensified Petrovitch's eagerness to destroy the dashing young leader of the Holy League, and gave added bitterness to his secret and treacherous dispatch to the Emperor Alexander.

All these things flashed across Count Rolof's mind when he found himself borne down in the darkness of the subterranean entrance to the Czar's private apartments at the palace of Gatschina, and gave him the desire to fight his captors with greater energy, so that he might live to vindicate himself and learn the truth of Petrovitch's treachery.

"Whoever you are," he cried to his assailants, "you will have cause to rue this rash conduct unless you release me. I am the sworn servant of the Czar."

But his words were not heeded and the desperate struggle was renewed.

The fierce commotion resounding along the dismal corridor created a stir among the noble guards, and the news of the conflict soon reached the ear of the Czar, who gave prompt orders that no personal injury should be done to Count Rolof, but that he should be disarmed, bound, and brought into the imperial presence.

Three members of the Holy League then hastened with lights to the scene of the conflict, and found Rolof lying on his back, his right hand brandishing a poniard, with which he slashed right and left at his two powerful antagonists, and his face white with rage, while a great streak of blood across his forehead gave him a ghastly appearance.

"Hold! hold!" cried the Czar's messenger. "Peace every one! I bring a message from the Czar. He commands Count Rolof to give up all weapons, and surrender himself without further strife."

The appearance of the light and the sound of this voice were a relief to Rolof, who saw for the first time that his struggle had been with two men whom he had hitherto counted among his devoted friends.

Despite the damaging dispatch of Petrovitch, which, in the Czar's restless frame of mind, filled his soul with fresh alarm, the emperor held Rolof in such personal esteem that he was slow to believe anything against him, and would not condemn him unheard.

Accordingly when he was brought a prisoner to the Czar's private room, Alexander, whose anger was intense, met him with an outburst of passion, exclaiming:

"Rolof, I did not expect that you, my most trusted friend, would prove the traitor that I have ascertained you are. It is you, then, who under the guise of guarding me, hope to gain admission to the Cathedral to strike me down at the moment of my coronation. You are the noble plotting for my confidence and my ruin. What have you to say, sir, in explanation of your perfidy?"

"This—that rather than be called a traitor I would be shot dead where I stand. Oh, my noble Czar, think well who are your true friends before you condemn. I deny and denounce with all my soul the infamous slander that has so disgraced me in your sight. I am no traitor. The tongue that whispered this poison in your ear, the pen that shaped it for your eye, are the weapons that your majesty need fear. As Heaven is my witness, my devotion has not wavered one moment in your service. Before you condemn me, grant me the small favor of letting me know the name of my accuser."

"It is not for you to know it."

"Ah, I know it already. It is Petrovitch, who, jealous of the confidence you placed in me, has adopted this base way of effecting my destruction."

The Czar looked at the speaker in astonishment.

"I have several reasons for knowing that he is my deadly enemy," continued Count Rolof, "but if the vile information he alleges against me be as he says, the way out of the diffi-

culity is easy. He alleges that I am anxious to attend you in the Cathedral at the coronation that I may have an opportunity of committing the sacrilege of striking you down. May my tongue wither and my arm be lopped off this instant if ever such a thought entered my soul. Let me be suspected by you, be denied admission to the coronation ceremony, held as a prisoner if you will, or buried in some Siberian mine, but let it be on some other proof than that of this evil man whose mouth fills Moscow with scandals concerning your majesty."

"Does he dare then to talk of me?"

"Ah, indeed, and in one of his drunken moods I heard him libel your majesty most grossly. I only ask that before I am unjustly condemned I shall have an opportunity of letting you hear what I learned from the treacherous lips of this treacherous man."

The Czar gave orders for the removal of Rolof's fetters, and then asked what it was that Petrovitch had dared to talk about.

"Why, he coined the base story that you are enamored of a certain circus-rider—a woman named Donnichesky, who lives in Moscow—and in his vain boasting he said he flattered himself that his so-called paragon of beauty regarded him with as much favor as she does the emperor. I knew the whole story was false, and I felt at the time how utterly unworthy your confidence must this man be who invents such fabrications."

"Did Petrovitch dare to say this thing?" said the Czar, passionately, his face growing purple with rage.

"As I live, and am now in disgrace before you, he told me this brutal falsehood."

"And he said that Donnichesky regards him with favor?" said the Czar, from whose mind the element of jealousy had driven all other thoughts for the time.

"That he said," replied Rolof, "but I did not believe him. Who, having seen the Czar, would think of the paltry Petrovitch? I felt that this woman was a myth, and that his talk was mere braggadocio to make me believe how close he was to you. Indeed, he appeared to be surprised that I, who had enjoyed so much of your confidence, did not know this thing. On the morning following this communication he begged me to forget it, as it was the merest bit of romance on his part; but I saw that the explanation embarrassed him, and I knew from his manner that he would gladly have recalled what he had told. I believe he is the man who has poisoned your mind against me, and I also believe that self-preservation as much as malice prompted him in doing it."

The Czar was troubled by this recital. He made no reply, but paced up and down the apartment for several minutes. Rolof was the first to speak again. He said:

"My imprisonment now will be a misfortune, since it comes at a time when I am in a position to obtain such information as will crush the most powerful Nihilistic circle in St. Petersburg."

"Have you any proof of this?" said the Czar, suddenly stopping short.

"Nothing more than my word of honor, which your majesty never doubted before, but the best proof shall be in the act itself—the prompt capture of a nest of traitors who are plotting your destruction."

"I scarcely know what to do—whom to trust," said the Czar, in evident distress. "The story this man Petrovitch sends me of your treachery is direct enough, but your arraignment of him is even more convincing. Whom shall I believe?"

"Let your heart decide. If its verdict is against me, I will bow to its sentence without a murmur, even though it should entail death itself," broke in Rolof.

"I have decided," said the Czar. "I do and will continue to trust you, for if you are false, then is heaven itself a delusion."

Count Rolof was overjoyed.

"My Czar! my Czar! I knew that if I could reach you, my life, my honor would be safe. Let my actions henceforth speak for me."

The Czar then ordered the others to withdraw, desiring Count Rolof to remain a few minutes longer.

When they were alone he asked:

"Did this Petrovitch introduce you to Donnichesky?"

"No, your majesty, nor did I ask for such a favor at his hands," said Rolof, smiling; "for I knew no such person existed, and that his vain boasting was but the natural action of a conceited spirit. How could I believe that our own model Czar, blessed with so sweet an empress, would look with favor on a daughter of Tartary?"

"But she is bewitching!" said the Czar. "A classic poem in flesh and blood."

Count Rolof was shocked. For the first time he believed that there was something more than vain boasting in the story Petrovitch had told him, and he resolved on being cautious. That exclamation in praise of Donnichesky had lowered the em-

peror in the estimation of his friend and faithful knight more than all the arts of Petrovitch could accomplish.

"It is true that Petrovitch spoke highly of this woman's beauty," said Rolof.

"Yes, and I think you said he boasted also of being favored by her smiles?"

"Ay, that he did."

"The deceitful dastard!" said the Czar, with clenched teeth. "Donnichesky must not remain in Moscow any longer. She must come to St. Petersburg, and I must contrive some way of bringing her to Gatschina. Rolof, will you aid me in this?"

Count Rolof drew himself to his full height, and said:

"Your majesty, my head, my heart, my hand are at your service in any honorable adventure, however perilous, but I must ask to be excused in this."

The Czar was at first disposed to be angry, but, recovering control of himself, he said:

"Well, I will excuse you, and place the task in other hands."

Count Rolof, then pleading weariness, withdrew from the imperial presence, after receiving renewed assurances of the Czar's friendship.

It was with a sigh of relief that he drove from Gatschina in the direction of the village of Alexis, where he hoped to rest a while at the quiet manor-house of Michael Kirsanof.

As he approached the village, he saw straggling ahead of his conveyance a shambling figure in the roadway, moving in the same direction.

"Lookout there!" shouted the count, as the figure continued to keep in the middle of the road.

The stunted figure now showed itself to be human, and shuffled aside to let Count Rolof pass. The latter saw a pair of piercing eyes under a shock of shaggy hair. He did not desire conversation, but the individual accosted him and asked if he knew where the manor-house of Michael Kirsanof lay.

"Not more than half a mile ahead," said the count, adding, "You are out rather late. Probably the family has retired before this, but you may be a friend or a relative."

"I'm a relative," said the other, "and no hour is too late at the house of a relative where one is welcome."

"I am going that way," said the count, "and if you have no objection a seat is at your service."

"Thanks. I will accept. The road is not good, and I am anxious to get there."

"Possibly you may be a brother of Michael Kirsanof," said the count, who did not exactly relish the looks of his companion on closer acquaintance.

"Not quite," was the laconic reply. "At least not in the sense you mean. We are all brothers to some extent. They tell me that my friend Kirsanof occasionally entertains a certain young noble named Count Rolof."

This sudden turn in the conversation made the count feel uncomfortable. Was his companion an assassin or a member of the Holy League? He looked a good deal more like the former than anything else as he swung his fat, shaggy head around on a short neck, and looked in the count's face.

"I take no pains to inquire who his visitors are," said the count, in a tone that showed the question had displeased him.

"Oh, indeed," said the other. "Then pardon me, but perhaps you are the count himself."

The horses were now going at a lively speed, and the manor-house was but a short distance away. This was a relief to Count Rolof, who was anxious to know something of this fellow whose abrupt questions and audacious presumption were so provoking. But the count did not lack courage, and, after a pause, said:

"Well, suppose I am—what then?"

"I guess aright," said the other, "and am glad of it. If you are the count, I have something to tell you which will make the blood tingle in your veins."

When they halted at the door of the manor-house they were met by Michael Kirsanof in person, who whispered, as he saw the short, shaggy man:

"Ah, Itsoff, you have kept your word! This way, through the side door, and we will join you immediately."

"Itsoff!" thought the count, with a shudder. "Why, that's the most terrible Nihilist in St. Petersburg. What can it mean?"

CHAPTER XIV.

ELISKA, THE NIHILIST.

The fever of Nihilism ran high in Moscow when Leo Rollins arrived there. The order was great in numbers, influence, and expectations, and the leaders were busy with projects that promised to blot out the Romanof dynasty forever. The details of these great schemes were known to but a few, and the work was

carried on only by those who could be trusted implicitly. Science, skill, and muscle were actively at work putting the various plans in shape. These consisted of the undermining in twenty different places of railroad over which the imperial train was expected to pass on its way to the "Holy City," as well as the undermining of the Cathedral, where the coronation was to take place.

The latter was the more elaborate scheme. The engineers had gauged the situation so accurately that, if their plans could be followed out, a dynamite mine could be laid immediately under the edifice and fired by electricity in the most solemn moment of the coronation, which was to be attended with unusual pomp and splendor.

This hazardous piece of excavating was begun directly under the extensive warehouse of a wealthy Nihilist, a descendant of one of the oldest families in Moscow, and was managed so adroitly that it was carried on without interruption to his business.

A shaft was sunk directly under the building which covered a considerable area, and the dirt and rubbish were hauled away as merchandise in barrels and dry-goods boxes.

The most trusty men and women in the Nihilist organization were engaged in this particular piece of work, which was carried on night and day.

As soon as the shaft reached a proper depth, a gallery was driven in the direction of the Krennel, and in this dark, damp, and difficult place Leo Rollins worked like a slave. Women worked there, too, and did it cheerfully, insisting on helping on an undertaking from which they all expected so much.

Eliska Aurbach often toiled there for hours. She liked to be near Leo and to contribute of her strength to the destruction of the system which every lover of liberty detested. This was the Nihilist view of the undertaking, and no one for a moment thought of it as a preparation for assassination.

Nothing else was considered but the destruction of that system under which such horrible deeds, as the murder of Jewish men, women, and children, were possible—the system that grew strong on the tears and groans of the people, who could not say a word for freedom without incurring the dangers of the hangman's grip, the dreadful journey to Siberia under the Cossack's lash, leaving friends and hope behind, to enter a living tomb, wear chains and delve in the dark until blindness and death brought release.

"When we think of these things," said Eliska to Leo one day as they were hard at work hauling away the earth and rubbish from the work of excavation to the foot of the shaft, "it should make a task like this light indeed."

"But, my dear sister, such delicate hands as yours are out of place at coarse work like this. Are there not strong hands enough in Russia for such a task?"

"Yet each hand has its allotted work. If I cannot do much here I know that my presence is agreeable to you, my brother."

"Ah, indeed it would be under different circumstances. But why work so hard. Besides the roof may fall in and crush us at any moment."

"If it does our sorrows will be over. I do not fear death any more than I do sleep. What is death but endless calm. If this roof does not fall until the voice of liberty speaks in this tunnel we shall share the joy of exulting millions and feel that we contributed to the people's freedom."

"True, and that is something to look forward to with hope. Eliska, I often think of the girl we snatched from the bloody claws of that Cossack. That was a happy thing. Such an act thrills one with satisfaction. Where is the girl now?"

"I sent her to my father with a letter, asking him to take good care of her until I return home. Poor Esther! How she has suffered!"

Thus they worked and chatted, day after day, until one morning, when a letter arrived that startled both.

It was a cipher dispatch from the council at St. Petersburg, commanding Leo to hasten back and execute sentence of death on Count Rolof, who was active and dangerous in the city.

The reading of this caused the color to fly from Eliska's cheeks.

The truth was that, no matter how much she struggled against it, she had learned to think a great deal of Count Rolof. His gentle voice and pleasant ways, his tenderness toward her whenever they met, and the half spoken suggestion of a deeper regard, had stirred within her heart a feeling such as she had never before experienced.

Leo Rollins although glad to get away from the mining operatives, did not relish the murderous mission which called him home. There was a time when he was eager to destroy this man's life, but his desire for revenge had been lessened by delay.

There was no way of evading the distasteful task, however, so he lost no time in leaving Moscow accompanied by Eliska, who was determined on saving the life that he was going to destroy.

Eliska did not let her companion know of her determination. That might be fatal to more than one. She would use her woman's tact on reaching St. Petersburg. Will it succeed?

It was late when Eliska arrived home. Nothing could be done that night. She was weary after the long ride and her father's welcome was refreshing. Leo, too, was tired. But he did not sleep much. Eliska, too, had a restless night. How could she save Count Rolof? It was a terrible risk to run. Where was he? If she only knew where he was she might warn him to go to London, or Switzerland, or America, until the storm was past.

If she would save, she must see him. That afternoon she took the train for Alexis. She succeeded better than she had expected. The very first person she set eyes on after entering the manor-house was Count Rolof, the Prince Vladimir of her Moscow experience.

He was chatting with Vera Kirsanof, and both looked happy. Eliska's appearance startled every one. But she was not a stranger, and Vera's warm welcome soon made her feel at home.

Count Rolof, who was at first perplexed and disturbed by her presence, was afterward pleased on learning that she was a friend of Vera's. He could not deny that he had been charmed by this mysterious and bewitching girl's grace and beauty. But what could her visit mean? The last time he saw her was at Madame Moraviel's, in Moscow. Was she plotting against his life? Had she been set on his path by the Nihilists?

He suggested this to Vera at the first favorable opportunity. But Vera assured him he need not be alarmed. They were friends from childhood she said, and Eliska's visit was but to return one she had paid her a short time previously.

This made Rolof feel easier, but not wholly at ease; yet he was not displeased with Eliska's society.

When she was near, she exercised an influence over him which he could not explain, and the sensations he felt were such as no other woman inspired.

Vera was playing her latest piece of music on the piano, and the only persons in the room were herself, Eliska, and Count Rolof.

"You seem preoccupied," said the count to Eliska, in a low voice. "There is a serious look in your face. What can it mean?"

"I have something of great importance to tell you," she replied; "but I must see you alone. How can it be done?"

"Suppose we drive out."

"Ah! no; that would not do. That would incur delay and danger."

"You don't wish to compromise yourself by appearing in my company. You do not like me."

"But I do like you," she whispered, quickly, scarcely knowing what she said; "and that is why I am here!"

The player ceased, and Count Rolof assured Vera that he had not heard such delightful music in a long time.

"Neither of you listened to a note," said Vera, haughtily.

"However, I forgive you, and if you will excuse me for a few minutes I will leave you together; that is provided you think it safe to be in each other's society."

Vera had noticed their attention to each other, and as she arose to go Count Rolof bowed gracefully, remarking that they could take the risk of each other's company for the sake of excusing one to whom they could deny nothing.

When Vera was gone Eliska said:

"No doubt, Count Rolof—Prince Vladimir—you thought it strange to see me here to-day. But at the governor's ball in Moscow you asked if we could not carry our acquaintance to St. Petersburg, and I am as good as my word, but this is no idle visit. I came as one who feels some interest in your life, and wishes to save you."

"From what?" he asked, in alarm.

"From death!" was the calm reply. "I come to warn you that the sentence of death hangs over you, and to tell you that your salvation lies in quitting this place—nay, in quitting the country at once."

"You do not jest," he said. "No, you are serious now, and I believe you sincere, but by whom has this sentence been pronounced?"

"Ah, need you ask? Can you not guess?"

"The Nihilists? Well, I have no fear. I have fought their schemes with all my might, and with the unselfishness—"

"Of a brave man who was mistaken," said Eliska, completing the sentence.

"Nay, of one who felt that they were the foes of real liberty. True freedom consists in order and the majesty of that law that secures to each protection in society, in property, and in home."

"This is what despotism does not," she said; "but let us not drift into a political discussion. You are loyal now, but you

may be suspected this very night, and sent to Siberia. Think of that."

He did think of it. His recent experience at Gatschina made him think of it all the more, and he could not deny that his zeal in the cause of the Czar had been shaken somewhat by the fact that so base a wretch as Petrovitch could have it in his power to betray and destroy him.

"But let us not discuss politics," he said; "rather let us talk of ourselves. You are a brave girl, and an unselfish friend, for coming to tell me of this, but I do not think I shall leave St. Petersburg. I have a work to do, and it is my present intention to remain until it is fully accomplished."

"It is perilous to remain a day, and in coming to tell you of this I have run a greater risk than you think. Were it known, it would cost me my life; but I could not bear the thought of your death."

"You are probably surprised that I do not show more alarm; but I have been warned already. My death decree is absolute, and Leo Rollins is to be my executioner."

"How did you ascertain this?" she asked, in amazement. "I said nothing of an execution."

"But you see I know it. That does not, however, lessen my obligation to you, and you will see that I am not ungenerous."

As he spoke, he took from his pocket a document which bore the name of Eliska's father in Arabic, and placing it in her hands, he said:

"I now give you this, and with it the information that will enable you to save your father's life. This document is in cipher, but it has been translated to me by a Nihilist, and I know its contents. It is the paper which I intercepted from the central council while in Paris, and about which so much has been said in your meetings. But this is not all. A greater danger threatens your father now, and it is he, not I, who should leave St. Petersburg at once. You wonder that I know so much, and you wonder that I should tell you. I would not tell you, Eliska, did I not love you," he said, taking her hand in his, and drawing her close to his breast, against which she nestled unresistingly; "and I am vain enough to think," he added, "that your interest in my behalf springs from more than duty—it is love, is it not, Eliska?—an element stronger than Nihilism!"

He raised her hand to his lips, but she withdrew it quickly, and moving away, said:

"Do not touch me. I am not worthy of your caresses."

"Come, come!" he said, "don't be your own accuser. I do not blame that little hand for drawing lots to kill me. You did not know me then, and the fearful system that has influence over you, not your own, gentle, brave, and resolute nature, is to blame."

"I did not know you then," she said, "and it might be better had we never met; but how came you to know all this? Who told you these things?"

"I cannot tell you now, Eliska," he said; "but believe me, they have not lessened my regard for you—rather let me say my love, for I love you ardently, as man never loved woman before. But tell me, I pray, if I am loved in return."

She gave him her hand, and with it such a look as sent a thrill of rapture through his being. Then, becoming reckless, he drew her to him and kissed those tempting lips of cherry ripeness, forgetting the fact that both were standing near the window. But it was the side window of the manor-house, and few ever passed that way.

The act of Count Rolof was followed by a half-suppressed scream from Eliska, who uttered the word "Itsoff." She had seen a coarse face at the window looking like that of Itsoff, the Nihilist, and thinking he had been placed on the trail of Rolof, said:

"I fear we are undone."

"What caused you to start so?"

"A face at the window."

"Only a face?"

"It might have been. But still let me beg of you to leave this place. You may manage to evade the sentinel for a day or a week if you remain, but you are bound to be killed, as the sentence is imperative and its execution must be carried out at any hazard."

"I will think of it," he said, "but if I go how shall I hope to see you again. Would you fly with me?"

"I cannot leave my father now. But we can hear from each other for a time."

"I will think the matter over. It is worthy of consideration to leave and live, or stay and die. But how can we reach your father to-night. There are no trains to St. Petersburg, and it is necessary that somebody should see him."

"Is his life in danger?" she asked, with beating heart.

"It is, and he must be seen to-night and warned against going to the council-chamber."

"Ha! There's that face again," said Eliska. Count Rolof saw the face this time, and at once recognized it as that of Itsoff.

"It is imagination," he said; "nothing more. Now let us see how can your father be warned to-night. I cannot think of any way of getting there in time. The government has decided not to run any trains from here to St. Petersburg after dark."

"But I must go," she said. "I must go at any risk if he is in danger."

"Let me accompany you."

"No, I shall go alone. Vera will give me her horse to ride, and I will make the trip in a short time. What is the nature of the danger?"

"Shall I tell you?"

"As you expect me to believe your declaration of love."

"Then it is this," he said, in a whisper. "All who meet in the subterranean council-room to-night will die."

"Die!" she exclaimed. "How?"

"At a certain hour before dawn, when the leaders are deep in discussing their plans, a spring will be touched and the river Neva will rush in upon the conspirators. Those who are not extinguished in the flood will be captured at the doors by the members of the Holy League, but I expect few will escape the terrors of the rising tide."

Her face was white. She pressed both hands to her breast to still the storm therein, and muttered:

"My father, my father, how can I save you from this wretched fate? Who is the traitor that has betrayed the people? Ye gods give us strength and courage now!"

"Be calm," said Count Rolof, "or you will spoil all—destroy yourself and me!"

"Oh, my friend and my foe! you whom I should hate and yet love so dearly, pity me, pity a poor, crushed woman; and if you know a way to save my father, I beg you will now put it in operation."

"I would deny you nothing, Eliska, but I have no way other than to ride with you to St. Petersburg and warn your father of his fate."

"That cannot be," she said. "See, now I am calm. Let me find Vera at once and get her horse for this ride."

And as she spoke she ran from the room.

When she was gone, the face with the penetrating eyes appeared once more at the window, and a hand beckoned Count Rolof. He advanced, and under the casement Itsoff said:

"I want to see you at once. Find time to come out. Beware of that woman; she may kill you!"

Count Rolof hastened out, and when he reached Itsoff, the latter said:

"The grand council has sentenced the Czar to death. The walls of St. Petersburg are covered with placards pronouncing his doom. Twenty nobles have volunteered to kill him and give their lives to the cause. I thought you ought to know at once."

"Brave Itsoff, you shall be well rewarded for this," said the count, to encourage the man he despised, but whose services the Holy League had turned to good account.

"Beware of Eliska. She is deceitful. She betrayed me, and has a favorite in the person of this Leo Rollins, who is now under sentence of death to kill you. But I will foil them all. Now I go to turn the elements loose upon as villainous a den of conspirators as ever practiced tyranny under the sacred name of freedom. St. Petersburg will have thrilling news to-morrow. Good-by."

Saying this, Itsoff mounted a horse that he had close at hand and vanished with the fleetness of a night-hawk in the dark.

When Rolof returned to the parlor, he found Eliska and Vera there much agitated. Eliska knew of Vera's love for Leo, and had told her as much of the danger as now hung over his life as she could. This caused Vera great pain. Without letting her parents know, she ordered Andrei to saddle her own horse, Salamander, at once for Eliska; also to get another ready and let old Peter know that he was wanted to join her at once for St. Petersburg.

Andrei did as directed. He knew nothing of the particulars, but he guessed that there was something thrilling on foot, and lost no time in carrying out Vera's instructions.

When he roused up old Peter, the grizzly conspirator was dazed on hearing Eliska's name mentioned.

"Eliska!" he said. "How came she at the manor-house?"

"Old friend of the family," said Andrei. "But it matters not now; she is there, and must reach the council at once, or something terrible will happen."

"But I am not much of a horseman," said Peter. "Could not we have a conveyance?"

"Impossible; the road is wretched, and no conveyance could

take you there fast enough. Hurry up! don't waste valuable time. You must ride like the wind."

"I will try," said old Peter. "But why cannot you go, Andrei? It is a case of life and death. You are a trained horseman, and if it is such an important adventure as you say, why let the consequences take care of themselves? Go!"

"I will do it," said Andrei, who hastened back to put his resolution into action.

When he returned to the manor-house he was astonished to learn from Vera that Eliska had gone already, and that Count Rolof, disguised as a peasant, had volunteered to accompany her on the exciting ride to St. Petersburg.

CHAPTER XV.

THE RISING TIDE.

The night was dark when Eliska and Count Rolof galloped away from the manor-house of Michael Kirsanof in the direction of St. Petersburg.

Count Rolof hoped they would outrun Itsoff, who had started in advance of them, and reach St. Petersburg before he could get there. They had ridden an hour without seeing him.

At last, when within sight of the city lights, Count Rolof drew near Eliska and spoke to her for the first time since starting.

He said:

"Now let us ride hard and get far ahead of that hurrying horseman you see in advance."

The horseman referred to was Itsoff, who was making good time over the unpleasant road.

Count Rolof knew it could be no other, and he felt that if they passed him Eliska could yet save her father's life.

Eliska did not know who the horseman was, but at the words of Count Rolof, she stroked Salamander gently on the neck and almost redoubled his speed.

Rolof managed to keep abreast of the noble black, and like the rattling of a close thunder crash the clash of hoofs almost stunned Itsoff as they swept by him. Eliska was on the side next him. He caught a glimpse of her face, and it flashed upon him that she had heard his story and was going to save the Nihilists. Who could her escort be? He could not be any better than a servant, perhaps one of Michael Kirsanof's former serfs, perhaps Leo Rollins, perhaps Count Rolof himself.

Itsoff set spurs to his horse and kept close behind.

"Whoever it is," he thought, "their success means my destruction, but I will cripple them."

Then, drawing his revolver, he fired deliberately. The report startled the horses, and they plunged in terror to the roadside and danced wildly about. Another shot from Itsoff's pistol increased their fright, and the animal ridden by Rolof was fairly wild. Whip and spur were useless.

Itsoff, seeing his opportunity, fired once more, this time making sure of his aim, and immediately afterward the count fell from his saddle with a cry of pain, exclaiming:

"I am shot!"

His horse, freed from its burden, plunged away, and was soon out of sight.

Eliska was dismayed and terrified. She turned to where her generous friend lay, and as she did so, Itsoff galloped on toward the city at lightning-like speed.

"I'm dying!" said Count Rolof, as Eliska drew near him. "But lose no time with me, Eliska; save yourself, save your father, and remember that my last thoughts were of you."

"Oh, live, live!" she cried, "noblest, most unselfish of men!"

"Leave me, save your father, and be happy. Good-night, sweet one—good-night, forever!"

"Ah! I wish the ruffian's bullet had pierced my breast," she said, "rather than have wounded you!"

Her heart was sore, her brain distracted. Just then a drenching rain-storm came.

Eliska turned her horse aside, and galloping ahead, halted at the door of the nearest house and knocked loudly.

The sleepy and somewhat frightened inmates responded tardily.

"Get up at once!" she cried; "there is a noble dying down the road. Run to him, tend him, save his life, and you shall be rich. Spare nothing. There is a fortune in this for you. Go to him at once—at once!"

Saying this, Eliska galloped wildly away in the storm, leaving the superstitious peasants in awe. They did not know what to think. The voice might be that of some evil spirit trying to tempt them into some trouble; but the thought of making a fortune by being kind to a dying man caused them to hasten out lest somebody else should find the wounded noble.

With determination in every nerve, and her teeth firmly set, Eliska whipped Salamander to the full height of his speed, heed-

less of the blinding rain and the darkness. She was intent upon distancing this assassin, who had slain her friend, and whose treachery threatened to destroy her father.

At a short distance from the city limits she saw the ill-favored Itsoff just ahead. But she passed him like a flash, and, stooping her head, braced herself for the expected peril. She was not disappointed. Presently the report of his pistol was heard, and the bullet went whistling close beside her ear. Salamander snorted with fright, but did not slacken speed. Itsoff fired again, but the dashing woman was soon beyond his reach; and, chagrined over his failure, he fairly dug the spurs into the flanks of his now jaded horse.

The city was close at hand. Itsoff saw the flash of Salamander's steel-shod hoofs on the pavement, and cursed his own weary beast for being so slow.

"Ha! she is too late," he thought. "She cannot save them now, and if she goes into the council-room, she, too, will fall into the trap, and share the common fate."

Eliska turned aside from the main road, and sped on in the direction of the river, to the house of old Nicholas.

The first gray streaks of morning were faintly visible in the east as she dismounted—all drenching wet and bespattered with mud and foam—at a short distance from the entrance to the council-room.

She left her faithful horse in the road, and, on touching the ground, was so dizzy and faint, that she almost fell forward when she tried to run.

By an extreme effort, however, she reached the entrance to the subterranean way, and knew by the signal that the council was still in session.

Staggering along the dismal corridor, she descended the second stair-way, and was breathless and speechless when she stood at the door of the room, where a dozen determined men were still plotting the details of the Czar's death.

She saw her father in the president's chair, and back of him a placard similar to that which had been posted all over the city during the night. It was headed in black letters:

DEATH TO THE CZAR.

Eliska tried to speak, but could not. What strange spell held her tongue now, when most needed. Her brain grew dizzy. She stamped her foot to attract attention. Every head was turned to where she stood, and every tongue pronounced the word "Eliska," as her white and frightened face depicted the terror she felt.

She waved her hand, and then fell prostrate on the floor.

Her father and Leo ran to her assistance, and the latter caught her up in his arms.

"Eliska, Eliska, my child, speak!" said Herman Aurbach, in great distress, but she made no answer.

"I will carry her up to the fresh air," said Leo, going in the direction of the elevator which led to the rooms occupied by old Nicholas.

Herman Aurbach burst into tears, and cried:

"My child—my child! she is dead!"

Just then a terrific crash was heard, like the roar of thunder, and the men sprang to their feet in terror. A second shock was felt, followed by a gust of cold air, which sent the papers flying about the place, and extinguished all the lights.

Every heart sank, and every mind was filled with indescribable fear.

The next moment the place was flooded with the cold waters of the Neva, that came in from the mighty river, and, in their desperate struggle to escape, the despairing Nihilists were swearing, splashing in the rising tide.

CHAPTER XVI.

A RUSSIAN DUNGEON.

It was a moment of intense terror when the roaring Neva rushed into the council-room of the conspirators. The Nihilists dashed about wildly in the Cimmerian darkness, but their cries and curses were soon silenced in the flood, and the supreme struggle, with which every nature resists death, lasted but a few seconds in the fierce swirl of the seething current.

Leo Rollins, quick and strong, ran up the narrow steps with Eliska, still senseless in his arms. The rising tide followed closely, as if eager to overwhelm them both in its icy embrace, but Leo made his way to the elevator with which communication was kept up with the outer world by way of the supposed residence of old Nicholas, and immediately gave the signal to hoist. There was no response. The rising river now having spent the force of its first impulse, ascended slowly. It was reaching its level. It rose to Leo's knees, and still there was no response to his signaling. He placed Eliska on his shoulders, determined to

save her life as long as he was able. He was sensible of the fact that the water was still rising. The effect was chilling, but it was nothing compared to the fear of death in such a place, with the means of escape almost within reach. Leo signaled continually. The cold current had risen to his breast, and he felt it creeping about his neck. He thought he had but a short time to live. The freezing flood had surged up to his chin. Awful as the situation was, had he known the reception that awaited him at the landing, he would not be so eager to escape the dark fate that threatened him at that thrilling moment. He would a thousand times rather been engulfed in the oblivion which had claimed his companions.

The water was up to his lips, and he was signaling wildly, when, to his great joy, the elevator began to ascend. In less than a minute later he stepped from the platform, dripping wet and shivering with cold, to the carpeted floor of the parlor in the familiar house of old Nicholas, where he had laid his burden down so tenderly. Poor Eliska! She had not yet awakened to the fact that she did not reach the council-room in time to save her father and her friends.

But what did Leo see? A group of determined men, who advanced at once, and laying hands upon him, placed him under arrest. Leo realized that he was in the grasp of the law at last, and might meet with a worse fate than that which he had escaped so narrowly.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked.

A slap in the face was the only reply. A stalwart Cossack muttered shortly afterward that traitors should not ask questions.

"Let me at least beg that you will treat this poor lady kindly."

"Ah, yes; she is very beautiful—a beautiful devil!" said the same officer, who had so rudely assaulted Leo, with a sneer.

Eliska showed signs of recovering. She looked about, struggled to her feet, but fell again as the officers held Leo back from going to her assistance.

She cried, in a confused way, as she looked wildly around:

"Oh, my father! my father! Where is he? Quick! leave this place! The river—the river is upon us! Itsoff has betrayed us."

"Fear not, Eliska; we are safe," said Leo; but he was sharply warned to say no more, or he would be promptly punished.

The officers saw that Eliska was slightly delirious, and thought she might say something that they could turn to account; but, as she recovered, she seemed to realize the situation, and then, with a cry of pain so agonizing as to touch the hardest heart, she burst into tears, exclaiming:

"He is lost! lost, forever!"

Shivering in their wet garments, Leo and Eliska were taken away and cast into prison, where a coarse, dry garb was given to each, to save their lives for the punishment which the government had in store for them.

It was not a sense of kindness that had moved the authorities to give them dry clothing, but the fear that they would not live to make a sacrifice for the scaffold if they retained their wet garments.

The cells in which they were placed were cold and dark. Leo found his so low in the ceiling that it did not afford sufficient room for him to stand erect, and so short that he could not lie at full length. The sensations that filled his mind, as he realized the character of this dismal living tomb, were much like those described by men who have been buried alive and escaped from their entombment. A faint ray of light struggled through the close iron grating at the top of the cell door, but it merely served to intensify the gloom.

Leo wondered whether Eliska would receive better treatment. If not, he thought the poor girl must die, as in her present state of mind and body she could not endure harsh usage. The thought of this brave girl's bereavement, the frightful fate of her father, and the possible loss of her reason made Leo forget his own suffering. He was still at a loss to know how to account for the frightful disaster that had overtaken the conspirators just at the hour when they had laid a new plot for the assassination of the Czar.

Eliska's thoughts were all of her father. She had but a confused idea of the disaster and did not know whether her father was dead or alive, fettered or free. There was no one with whom she might speak on the subject. Her cell was the darkest in the prison, and the only light she saw was when the jailer looked in with his lantern. There was no bed. Whatever repose was to be had must be taken on the stone floor, and that was cold and damp. This was a terrible experience for one reared in luxury as Eliska had been; but she did not murmur.

At the end of the third day the jailer brought a visitor. Eliska recognized his face as that of Prince Petrovitch, of Moscow, and she turned away.

"Leave us," said Petrovitch to the jailer; "and you may take the light away."

"No," said Eliska. "What you have to say may as well be said in presence of this man."

"But I prefer that it should not, my fair one," said Petrovitch, with a sneer.

"Then I ask that he shall leave the light in the cell."

"That is a waste. However, since you desire it, be it so," and Petrovitch waved the jailer away with his hand. The attendant, on withdrawing, slammed the heavy iron door to, and it closed with a spring. It seemed to Petrovitch as if he had been suddenly shut up in a vault. The place presented a dismal appearance. He trembled to think of it, and yet this gentle girl was compelled to endure it.

"Will they hang us?" said Eliska, looking straight at her visitor.

"Yes," was the laconic reply.

"And without trial, I hope!"

"That depends. I can procure you a trial. I can save your life," said Petrovitch.

"You will think it strange that I do not appear more grateful, and fall at your feet and thank you, Prince Petrovitch, but the truth is, life has no charms for me any longer."

"But you have charms for life," he answered, quickly. "You have charms to make others happy. Why surrender yourself to despair and death when joy and life await you?"

"What are the conditions?" she asked.

"That you tell all you know of Nihilism, and promise to be mine."

"Alas! I do not know much. I only know that my heart is sore; that the floor is cold and hard; that this gloom is terrible; that I would rather die than live, and that were even such a thing possible, I would not be yours."

"But you know much about the Nihilist movement. Your father was the leader—the greatest in the ranks of the Nihilists. His name was a power in the secret meetings in Paris and London, and even in New York it is held in high esteem among men who call themselves lovers of liberty."

"Tell me," she said, "does my dear father live?"

"No; at least not in the hands of the authorities."

"Thank Heaven for that!" she said, fervently.

"Why be thankful for a thing of that sort?"

"Because he cannot be tortured and disgraced."

"The government has seized all his property—his home, his ships, his money, his merchandise, and valuable papers have been found throwing light on this movement with which, I am sorry to say, you have been too prominently identified, Eliska. The information against you is so clear and convincing that only one thing can save you. I have come to tell you this, because I love you."

"Ah, do not mock me. This is offensive," she said, scornfully.

"Nay, it is reason. Listen to it. If you do not you will be hanged, and so will this man, Leo Rollins. By telling what you know I can have your sentence commuted to banishment to Siberia for life. Once there, I could easily buy your freedom, and you would be entirely safe under another name."

"Oh, no, no, no. Better death—ah, better death now!"

"Don't decide too rashly."

"Will there be a trial?"

"No. The Czar is opposed to further trials. The proceedings, however secret, get abroad and bring the government into contempt. There will be no trial. The sentence of death is already passed."

"Then let it take its course. I have nothing to say."

"But, Eliska, think of the happiness that may yet be yours—ours if you consent to this. If you don't I shall be the most miserable of men, for indeed I love you."

"If you love me, as you say, you will do all you can to aid me unconditionally—you will secure my freedom and that of Leo Rollins."

"Ah! gladly would I do it, but Rollins was hanged this morning, so that it would be impossible to set him free."

"Enough, enough. I will hear no more. If Leo is dead, then welcome my fate, whatever it may be."

The announcement Petrovitch made had an entirely different effect than he intended, and all further entreaty and exposition were useless. He took her hand in his, but she shrank from his touch. Then he caught her forcibly in his arms and tried to force a kiss, but she struggled bravely and cried for help. The jailer was attracted by the noise and opened the cell-door.

"You must put this prisoner in chains," said Petrovitch, with a mocking smile. The jailer was indignant, but dared not speak. Petrovitch then wished Eliska good-day, adding, "I will call again before the hangman comes." Then dropping a coin in the jailer's hand, he passed out of the cell, and the iron door swung to its fastenings, shutting in Eliska with misery and darkness.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN THE CRUCIBLE.

When consciousness returned to Count Rolof after his collision with Itsoff, the traitor, he found himself in a wretched room surrounded by a group of wondering people, who appeared to be greatly concerned for his welfare. A doctor was in attendance, and moved about with an air of great mystery.

"Is the wound serious?" said the count.

The doctor hesitated to reply.

"Oh, you may tell me! I can endure the worst. Besides, I must know."

"The immediate danger is from the shock," said the doctor.

"The wound is not necessarily fatal."

"That's a consolation, and now I want you to pull me through as quickly as possible."

The doctor thought this was no ordinary patient, and asked how the affair came about.

"That we must not talk about now, doctor," said the wounded man. "My first concern is to be moved away from here. These people appear kind, but they are too poor, and I want to go where I can have more comforts and better care. I want to be removed to the manor-house of Michael Kirsanof, at Alexis."

"It is dangerous to remove you in your present condition," said the doctor, "but I will see what can be done."

"Spare no expense. You shall be liberally rewarded for your trouble."

This helped the doctor considerably, and the next morning he was on hand with a softly cushioned conveyance, which was rendered still more comfortable by plenty of robes.

After rewarding the kind-hearted peasants who had cared for him, Count Rolof was placed in the vehicle and driven slowly to the manor-house, where his appearance caused considerable surprise.

"Why, this is horrible," said Michael Kirsanof. "How did it happen?"

"I was riding to the city, to be present at the capture of the Nihilists and obtain possession of important maps and papers, showing the mining operations now going on in Moscow, when that fool, Itsoff, for some mad reason that I know not, shot me down. We have lost some valuable information by this savage's idiotic folly. Of course I suppose he did not know me, as I was disguised, but the pain is none the less. Have you heard anything of your horses?"

"Nothing; but let that go. I am glad to see you alive."

"But we must not let it go. You must permit me, when I get around again, to buy you a pair equally as good."

It was then for the first time that Count Rolof learned the fearful fate of the Nihilists, and of the capture of Leo Rollins and Eliska as they escaped the horrors of the flood.

"I am sorry the flood did not overtake Rollins," he said, "but now he is where he can do no harm. I did not feel entirely safe while he had his freedom."

But he said nothing of Eliska, although it pained him to the heart to think she had fallen into the toils.

"I expect both will be hanged," said Michael Kirsanof.

"They will be shown no mercy," answered the count, and the other expressed his satisfaction that such dangerous persons were removed from the community.

"A few more surprises such as that," he added, "and the Czar might easily venture forth to be crowned."

"Ah, you little know the real strength or determination of this organization," said Count Rolof. "I confess it has puzzled me all along, and the more I ascertained the more I was amazed. It has made an impression where I least expected."

"But to be frank," said Kirsanof, "I do regret the fate of my old friend, Herman Aurbach, as noble a soul as ever lived, and as generous, even if he was a Nihilist. The bitter experience of his early days made his life bitter and poisoned his mind against the government. I believe an officer in a burst of passion killed his mother because she resisted his unlawful demands. She was a Jewess. Aurbach himself practiced no religion. The iron of cruelty entered his soul at an early age and left him without parental precept. But he was bold, adventurous, and kind of heart, and took a special pride in showing the world that it had falsely judged the Jew."

While Michael Kirsanof was giving his opinion of one who had befriended him in days gone by, the mind of Count Rolof was occupied with thoughts of Eliska, whose fair face was before him in all his fevered dreams. Her last "good-night" in the storm, when she looked pityingly down upon him, and then,

with a breaking heart, galloped away to save her father, was a memory never to be forgotten.

Michael Kirsanof left the wounded man to his thoughts. The peasants had told the count that a voice like that of a spirit had roused them from their slumbers, and told them a noble was dying by the wayside, "and now," he thought, "when death threatens her, I am powerless to render assistance." This thought was oppressive, and he tossed about restlessly.

Vera Kirsanof glided into the room. Her presence had a soothing effect; and her low, sweet voice was pleasant to the ear of the sufferer. She had been hiding her own sorrow, and when Count Rolof spoke of Eliska's trials and perils, poor Vera burst into tears.

"Is there no way to save them?" she asked.

"If I could only get away from here and see the Czar, I think I could succeed in having Eliska's life spared. I might urge a policy of mercy, and recommend banishment to Siberia instead of hanging. I could not intercede for Leo Rollins because to be candid I am glad he is there, as I have learned from Itsoff that he is under orders to take my life."

"But that is all over now," said Vera; "and if Leo secured his freedom through your interposition, I know you would find him your firm friend."

"You seem to have great confidence in him. Well, we shall see."

The days of Count Rolof's prostration were weary ones, because his mind was elsewhere, and would not be at rest. He gave his thoughts a good deal to the cause in which he had engaged so earnestly on account of his devotion to the emperor, and often asked himself how he had profited by his zeal. His activity in opposition to the Nihilists sprang from the burning indignation which he felt at the assassination of Alexander II., and the solemn oath he took to be avenged on the merciless order that had so cruelly cut off the Czar from all that was dear in life. Count Rolof felt that by throwing his personal energy into the work of the Holy League, he could fight the Nihilists with their own weapons—oppose fire with fire, obtain possession of their secrets, and break up the organization by sending its leaders to the scaffold or Siberia. He little knew the great power of the society that had honeycombed all Russia.

Nihilism, whose professed principle was to reduce everything to complete simplicity, was not so easily broken up. Its great strength lay in the fact that its divisions were small and detached, and that the members of one division did not know the members of another. No Nihilist possessed information concerning the business or membership of any division save his own, unless he had been charged with a special mission, or was one in whom the Central Council reposed special confidence.

Notwithstanding their marvelous detective system, the members of the Holy League were baffled. Occasionally they ran down a stray Nihilist, pounced upon a boarding-house in which the poorest members of the order met, or discovered a mine, but these things did not disconcert the conspirators. Sometimes, a traitor, like Itsoff, either for jealousy or gain, betrayed his fellows, but he knew nothing outside the division to which he belonged, and was, therefore, powerless to injure the general organization.

This made it impossible for the members of the Holy League to discover anything definite as to the real strength or general movements of the order. The council in Paris was watched, but this had nothing to do with the general management more than to decree the policy to be pursued toward the general government.

Count Rolof sought to find in Paris the key to the whole system, but in this he had failed, as he had in all his other efforts. If Nihilism had been what he imagined he would have succeeded, but it was not, and hence his discomfiture.

He had time to think all these things over during the few days that he nursed Itsoff's bullet and cursed the would-be assassin. In addition to this he had realized that the Czar's friendship was not as firm as he thought, and he felt that it was not all there was in life to "hang on prince's favors." Why should the Czar have suspected him from the promptings of so base a man as Petrovitch?

Count Rolof was a man of chivalrous nature. He would gladly give up his life where he thought he was right in defense of a principle, and when he found himself defending what was wrong was as quick to set himself right. He felt that in his defense of the Czar, while defending a principle with regard to the head of the government, he was at the same time placing his life in peril for a man who was not worth it personally—whose domestic relations were made wretched by his scandalous preferences for a mere circus rider, and who inflicted pain on his amiable empress for this woman. Count Rolof thought this horrible, and had an idea that if ever he pledged his life to the love of a woman, no power on earth could tempt him to put such a

slight upon her as the emperor had put upon his charming empress. These ideas took a deep hold upon him, and the more he was left to himself the more he thought over them, and the more he wondered as to what his adversary, Petrovitch, was doing.

"He is jealous," thought the count at last, "of the favor shown me by the Czar, but hereafter let him bask in the imperial smile alone. Hereafter I will have none of it." His determination was fixed.

As the genial days of spring advanced the count grew stronger. His physician was all attention, and the wound having begun to heal, soon was well. When once he was able to drive out, he found his strength returning rapidly. Often Vera accompanied him, and did much to cheer him, although her own spirits were sad, and she frequently gave signs of deep despondency by long-drawn sighs.

"You have some sorrow at heart," said the count one day as they were returning from an unusually pleasant drive. "I have long suspected what it is, and if I guess I shall expect you to tell me whether I am right or not."

Vera promised to comply.

"If you guess," she added, "I shall tell you why I sighed; yet I see nothing unusual in sighing."

"On a day like this, when the buds are swelling and the birds chirping their sweetest love-notes! Ah, there is no cause for sighs in the midst of such surroundings unless they spring from sorrow. Will I tell you why you sigh? It is because you love Leo Rollins, who is now a prisoner, and whom you may never see again. Is it not so?"

"If I should confess to this you would consider it dangerous to ride with me, because you would think me a Nihilist."

"Not at all. You loved this lad before Nihilism turned his brain, and I believe it was his love of you that drove him to Nihilism, because he believed it was not required. Vera, I have modified my views on this question since first we met. I have learned what it is to throw one's self unselfishly into the service of somebody, and then to be suspected, despised, almost scorned and imprisoned, because a lying and less worthy person saw fit to misrepresent me. I will be frank with you—I am growing sick in the service of the Czar."

"I thought so," she said, calmly. "He is not worthy of your devotion."

"You have reference to his treatment of the empress. I agree with you, and now since we begin to understand each other, let me tell you that I am more anxious to release Eliska than to save the Czar."

"You love her, then?"

"With all my heart!"

"And she deserves it. She is a noble soul, even though she has entered into the cause of Nihilism so earnestly."

"She could not help that. She was under her father's influence. She is of a brave and noble nature, however, and I cannot tell you how unhappy it makes me to think of the fate that awaits her."

There was no longer any mystery between Vera and Count Rolof, but a perfect understanding; and when they drove out together, and the villagers said how devoted they were, few knew that the objects of their affection were confined in prison-cells so dark, narrow, and damp, as to be no better than living tombs.

The destruction of the council-room, and the arrest of Leo Rollins and Eliska, had caused consternation among the Nihilists. Old Peter disappeared from the village of Alexis as soon as he heard of it, and the real nature of his workshop soon became known to the authorities, as the village constable made it his business to break in after the place had been closed several days.

News did not travel very fast in Russia, nor were the details given very elaborately—probably because good news was so scarce. At any rate, neither Count Rolof nor Vera had heard anything of Leo or Eliska since the day of their arrest until that afternoon upon which they made known their secrets to each other, when a message was received stating that "Leo Rollins, the Nihilist, and Eliska, his paramour," had been sentenced to be hanged in the course of a few days.

When Count Rolof and Vera returned from their pleasant drive with smiling faces, made all the happier by each other's confidence, and the hope that a plan proposed by Count Rolof to set his sweetheart free would be successful, and this news was imparted to them in all its forbidding aspect, each felt a pain as keen as a dagger-wound in the heart, and they looked at each other in mute dismay for several minutes.

Vera was the first to speak. She said: "I don't believe it."

"That they are to be hanged?" questioned Rolof.

"No; but that they are what this message represents."

"I would rather not believe it," said the count; "and yet, who

can place any trust in human nature? Fool that I was to love her!"

"Come, now," said Vera, "you see I have faith in her, and in Leo, too. Are not these reports often distorted to bring the Nihilist movement into disgrace?"

"Very often," said the count, thoughtfully.

"Then this is done for another purpose. I cannot believe my lover is false, and I will not believe it!" she said, with a look of determination that made the count chide himself for having suffered his heart to doubt Eliska.

"But they are to be hanged," she said. "Can you save them?"

"I fear it cannot be done," he replied. "It is hard to reverse the sentence of death once passed on a Nihilist," and Vera hastened to her room, where she wept bitterly.

CHAPTER, XVIII.

"PREPARE FOR DEATH!"

The hangman came from Moscow during the night. He was brought from his own solitary cell to strangle two fellow-creatures. Leo Rollins and Eliska were to die in the morning. Each was granted the benefit of the clergy, as it is called, but neither was in a frame of mind to be consoled in that fashion. Leo refused all spiritual consolation. He said he did not want the mockery of preparing his soul for heaven. If it was possible to make him good enough to go to heaven, he ought to be considered good enough to remain on earth. Then why not let him remain here? The poor priest of whom he asked the question, had nothing to do with this, and was powerless to answer it. He merely said that the government had power over the body, but granted this spiritual favor as an act of grace—an act of mercy to the soul.

"Why extend such favor to the soul?" said Leo. "My poor body has done nothing but what the soul desired in this connection."

It was useless to reason with him, and the priest at last, after prayer that God might give him a repentant spirit, left the narrow cell.

His next visit was to Eliska. He found her calm and resigned, but unwilling to talk on the subject of eternal life.

"Are you prepared to die?" he asked.

"Always," she said. "What is death but eternal calm? Why should I vex my spirit in my last moments, worrying about the things I know not of."

"But have you no hope of the life to come?"

"If I am vouchsafed another life after this, I fear it not. My heart is clean, and with such light as I have been given, have I viewed the world that is and is to come. If I could only hope to meet my poor father in the next life, I would gladly go forth, without a qualm, to put my life in the hands of the Czar's assassin. It is a dark ending of a life so full of joy and hope as mine once was, yet to this must every man and woman in Russia come who dares to think that men and women have minds and hearts, and are more than the mere worms that crawl in the earth. To this end would you yourself come, good priest, were you to obey the promptings of your better nature and speak out against the iniquities of the empire."

The spiritual adviser listened to this speech in astonishment. "Here is no ordinary woman," he thought, "what a pity it is to strangle her."

Just then the interview was abruptly terminated by the appearance of Petrovitch, who approached Eliska with a sinister smile. She averted her still proudly poised head as he drew near, and showed that his presence was painful to her.

"Dearest Eliska, it is yet in my power to save you from this disgraceful death," he began.

"Hush, hush, not another word," she interposed. "You see I am calm. I do not fear this death, and as for its disgrace, what care I for the calumny of a people so degraded as those who bow their necks to the yoke of the despot."

"But life is sweet, Eliska. Listen. I have no humiliating proposition to make. I only ask that you will let me know what Count Rolof's connection with Nihilism is. Answer this truthfully, and I will use my best offices to see that your life is spared."

"I might," she said, "save my own life, I suppose, by telling you a falsehood and insisting that it is true, but I will not do that. Count Rolof has no connection with Nihilism, but, on the contrary, is under sentence of death at the hands of that order."

This information pleased Petrovitch.

"Under sentence of death, you say."

"Ay, even so, and may be dispatched at any time."

This set Petrovitch to thinking seriously. Suddenly he asked, "Do they sentence many persons to such a fate?"

"Yes, and will kill one for every one the Czar kills. Now, after my life is taken to-morrow, the order may select yours in return, and give your spirit to the clouds before you have realized it. But tell me, is Leo Rollins to die to-morrow?"

"Yes, you both die on the same scaffold. Each may hear the other's voice, but may not see the other's face."

"Poor Leo! poor Leo!" and Eliska wept.

"You might yet be free, Eliska, if you would only consent to the proposition I made you the other day. Be mine!"

"Don't speak of that again, sir. Don't speak of it. I am overburdened with pain of body and mind already. I don't desire to live, and will therefore ask you to leave me."

She moved away to the farthest end of the cell, and turned her face to the wall. Petrovitch was still standing near the door. Pride and pity were struggling for the mastery of his heart. It was in his power to save this beautiful girl from death, at least. But why should he do it? She despised him. That was certain, and if he should save her he would not be thanked. Besides, the probability was that he would bestow her affections on Count Rolof, his rival, whom he was still seeking to destroy.

"Is there not one spark of humanity or feeling in your heart, proud one, that you spurn me in this way?" said Petrovitch, as she still held her beautiful face away from him.

"I only desire, sir, to be left alone for the next few solemn hours I have to live."

"And I have no wish to torture you. I wish merely to make you happy, if you will let me. Your mind is now distorted with strange ideas. Let me chase them away, Eliska."

As he spoke, he grew bolder and more indiscreet. He could not brook this woman's dignified contempt, and rushing toward her, he caught her in his arms, and struggled to kiss her.

"Coward!" she said. "You would not dare to assault me thus were I free. Why do it now? Release me, or I shall denounce you from the scaffold."

This caused him to start back, but suddenly his cowardly nature, fertile in devices to silence the voice of justice, came to his relief, and he said:

"You dare not do it. I shall see that you are led to the scaffold, gagged so that you cannot talk."

Having satisfied himself on this point, he again caught her in his arms, and struggled to kiss her. She cried aloud for help, and presently the door of her narrow room was flung open, and a man, in the garb of a prison-keeper, leaped into the cell, and with his fist struck down General Petrovitch.

Eliska, pale and trembling, turned to her deliverer. She was astonished to think the jailer should manifest so much spirit as to assault one so powerful in St. Petersburg, but on looking closer, she saw that, although the livery worn by her rescuer was that of the prison-warden, the face was that of Count Rolof, and as she recognized it, a look of love and joy filled her eyes; but she was warned to restrain her feelings by his frown.

Petrovitch picked himself up as best he could, then shook his fist at the prison-warden, and withdrew in a great rage, declaring, as he did so, that he would make him suffer for that in twenty-four hours.

"You dare not," said the pseudo jailer. "I can make it so lively for you in all the social circles in Russia that you will be ashamed to leave your own house. Now let us call it even, and you go your way, leaving this poor prisoner to the solace of her own thoughts."

Petrovitch thought it beneath him to make reply, but felt that the words of the jailer had some wisdom in them, and decided upon withdrawing from the prison as speedily as possible.

When he was gone, Eliska and Count Rolof flew into each other's arms, and she cried:

"My own brave lover, you still live! Heaven is kinder, after all, than I deserved. Now I can die without a murmur."

"Eliska," he answered, "don't despair. Look up. You shall not die."

"Alas! it would be in vain to hope. The hangman is here, and the spiritual visitor was with me a little while before you came. But how did you get in, and in this garb?"

"I have a good friend, Eliska. It is my purse. It can open any lock in Russia. I shared it with [the jailer, got this suit to wear for the time being, and here I am. But you say the priest was here to see you?"

"Yes."

"Then I must lose no time." And his face grew serious. "I must not stay here another moment. I will see the Czar himself, and demand your life."

"And Leo's, too."

"Of that I am not certain."

"For my sake?"

"For your sake I would do anything."

Eliska, who did not fear death half an hour before, and who said life had no charm for her, now experienced a different sensa-

tion, as this daring fellow, whom she had given up for dead, left her cell. He was her soul's idol, and she knew if he could possibly do so he would save her, but she also knew how difficult it was to turn aside the stern judgments of Russia; and she did not dare to hope.

The night was a dreary, sleepless one. When the first struggling ray of morning came, she heard the jailer at the door, and thought possibly he had come with a reprieve. Possibly Count Rolof had succeeded. But the warden's face was black, and, as he swung back the creaky door upon its rusty hinges, he said:

"Prepare for death!"

Had he stuck a dagger through Eliska's heart, he could not have given her more pain. She had been sustained during the night by love and hope, and at the very moment that she had made up her mind to prize life, this awful message came, "Prepare for death!" For the first time since her imprisonment, her brave spirit gave way, and she fell heavily upon the hard floor at the feet of the astonished jailer.

CHAPTER XIX.

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE SCAFFOLD.

The sun was shining in a clear sky when Leo and Eliska were led out to the scaffold. Neither faltered nor showed a sign of grief.

Eliska was led forth closely masked. She could hear her heart beat, it throbbed so violently at every step, and when she had gained the court-yard she felt that Leo must be there, and she said, in a firm voice:

"Leo, my brother."

"Here, Eliska," was the answer that came back in familiar tones. "How is my little sister?"

"Strong and calm. The darkness has come at last. I have closed my eyes peacefully under this mask, feeling that I have done what I could for liberty and for the people."

"Be brave, Eliska. Good-by forever."

He heard her answer and the sob that followed it, then felt the cold, clammy touch of the hangman. It made his blood curdle in his veins.

"This way," a hoarse voice whispered in his ear, and Leo was led up the steps to the platform from which he was to step to eternity.

The hangman trembled at his task and worked slowly. He had adjusted the noose on Leo with comparative firmness, but his fingers trembled as he placed the cruel rope around Eliska's fair, sweet neck.

"Why do you tremble, good man?" she asked. "Are you not the instrument of civilization in the hands of the emperor? You ought to be proud of your task."

"Ah, do not chide me," he said. "It makes my heart bleed."

The jailer asked if the culprits had anything to say before justice was satisfied. This was done in the hope of a confession that would lead to the capture of other conspirators. There was no answer.

Just then the painfully solemn stillness which made everybody almost afraid to breathe, was broken by a commotion at the entrance of the prison-yard, and a voice called out to the hangman to halt.

That functionary was so frightened that he almost fell from the scaffold where he was making the final preparations.

"Halt!" said an officer, "and remove those ropes. Give thanks to the merciful great white Czar! The sentence of death has been commuted to one of banishment for life with hard labor in the Siberian mines."

"Thank God!" said the hangman, fervently.

But Leo and Eliska made no sign of being thankful.

"I would rather be strangled now outright than subjected to such a slow, cruel torture," said Leo, "and I shall deem it a favor if the hangman completes his work."

"And I," said Eliska.

"That cannot be," said the officer. "Remove the conspirators."

And at his order, Leo and Eliska were led down from the platform from which they expected a few minutes before to be launched into oblivion.

The officer directed the jailer to remove their masks. He had heard of Eliska's great beauty, and longed to see her.

When the masks were taken off, her face was white with the terror of death, yet the evidences of that loveliness which impressed everybody who saw it were still there.

The prisoners were then led slowly back to their cells. Leo regretted that the supreme sentence had been stayed.

Eliska, however, realized that their deliverance was due to Count Rolof, and hoped that he might have some further plan by which they would eventually gain their freedom.

With these thoughts uppermost in her mind, she threw herself on the floor of her cell and for the first time in many hours slept.

In her dreams she saw her father. She thought he was taking part in the deliberations of the central council at Paris, and that the face of old Ivan looked specially sad, but that he was plotting for her deliverance.

She was aroused from this pleasant delusion by the voice of the jailer, who told her to prepare at once to start for Siberia.

"I have thought of you," he said, with a touch of tenderness in his voice, "and have prepared a special chain for you. It is lighter than the rest, and by pressing this spring you may easily open it when you please and lay it aside; but beware the Cossacks do not discover this, or I am undone."

Even this was a favor Eliska did not expect, and she expressed her gratitude as the badge of her servitude was adjusted to her delicate wrists. Always thoughtful for Leo, she asked whether the jailer could not do a similar favor for him.

"I have done so," he replied, "but his chain must be as heavy as any worn by the other prisoners. Yet he can remove it when he wishes. The supposition is that the chains put on here are never removed in Siberia. You see, there is no way of unclasping them, and the prisoner who is found trying to tamper with them is subjected to severe penalties. But you may lay yours off whenever the overseer is not about, being careful to put them on again whenever he is expected."

Saying this, he adjusted the chain, and for the first time Eliska felt the full depth of her degradation. Then the prisoners were led out, two by two, into the prison-yard, where they were received by a strong convoy of Cossacks, after which the peculiar procession started out on foot for the long and desolate journey to Siberia, while the clanking of chains made mournful music for the march.

Eliska shrank from the gaze of the people, and wished that the convoy might hasten through the city as fast as possible. She felt keenly the degradation of the chains, and her embarrassment was heightened by hearing her name called, as a carriage stopped just beside the convoy, and Madame Moravief rushed forward in tears.

"My poor Eliska!" she exclaimed, dashing in among the guards to embrace the beautiful exile.

The Cossacks were not prepared for such a demonstration. People generally were not so effusive, and even if they knew Nihilist exiles they did not desire to show it on the streets of Moscow. Besides this, the Cossack, notwithstanding his stolidity, is easily dazzled by wealth. He regards a rich man or woman as a being somewhat sacred, and the rustling silks and flashing jewels of Madame Moravief were too much for him as she leaped from her shining equipage and left her liveried attendant, for the purpose of embracing Eliska the Nihilist.

Eliska returned the embrace of her friend with much warmth, and as she did so Madame Moravief whispered in her ear:

"Be brave. We will try to set you free."

These words were scarcely spoken ere the captain of the convoy, with much ceremony, approached Madame Moravief and requested her to withdraw, adding:

"You are likely to be reported for this."

"For bidding my friend good-by? Is this a political convoy?"

"Madam, these are Nihilists," said the captain. "You have run a great risk."

"Ah! I was not aware. Dear me!" and Madame Moravief was gone in an instant.

The captain was determined that such an incident should not occur again, and urged on his weary and reluctant charge, so as to get clear of Moscow as soon as possible.

The monotonous march to Eastern Siberia over the bleak steppes, had but little in it to render an account of such an experience interesting.

Day after day and week after week the convoy toiled over the dreary, desolate road. Whenever they showed a disposition to lag, the hardy Cossacks applied their whips unsparingly, driving them on like cattle, and threatening bayonets if a disposition was shown to resist the lash.

Sometimes the night was spent in the shelter of a shed adjoining one of the many post-stations along the road, but it often happened that the party was overtaken by darkness far away from any post-station, and in the midst of a great plain over which the storm-gusts swept with cutting keenness.

On such occasions an artificial shelter was made in the snow, and a fire built of stunted brushwood. Those who could sleep were permitted to do so under guard, but sleep was not easily obtainable under such circumstances. Blistering feet and sore hearts drove "nature's sweet restorer" far away from heavy eyelids, and as this occurred several nights in succession, Eliska feared the loss of reason. At last, however, her tired spirit suc-

cumbed, and in utter defiance of pain, and cold, and grief, the poor girl slept whenever she could.

After the convoy had journeyed for a month or more, it was overtaken by a sledge containing six persons. They were comfortably wrapped, and appeared to be well off in the world.

The captain of the convoy spoke to the driver, inquiring the character of the party, and was informed that it consisted of two English newspaper correspondents, with their assistants and servants. This seemed satisfactory, and the sledge was driven rapidly on. Eliska saw one of its occupants gazing at her intently, and with a look of pity.

She raised her chained hand, and made a sign. It was promptly returned, and her heart beat high with hope, for she knew the signal was known only to another person, and that was Count Rolof. The movement was so adroit that it escaped the keen-eyed Cossacks. Eliska expected something startling, but was disappointed as the days went by.

Nothing was seen of the correspondents for two weeks, when they again drove past the convoy to the great astonishment of the Cossacks, who commanded them to halt, and insisted this time on seeing their papers. The spokesman for the correspondents delivered himself in English, and had it translated by one of his companions, who did it so bunglingly that the supposed Englishman was frequently on the point of correcting him, but as this would simply confirm the suspicions of the Cossacks, he held his peace.

Through the interpreter, the leader of the convoy was informed that in the city of Omsk, where they stopped last, the correspondents were detained longer than they expected through the hospitality of a certain General Moravief, who desired to impress them with the beauty of life in that picturesque portion of Siberia, and gave a ball in their honor. In order to become more familiar with the history of the place, they deemed it best to remain for a few days, and devoted their attention to the gathering of data connected with the history of the famous Cossack, Vassili Yermak,* concerning whose exploits they had ascertained many new and hitherto unpublished incidents of rare interest. The experience of the party showed them that Siberia was a most desirable place to live in.

During this speech the clanking of the exiles' chains might be heard, but the captain of the convoy was so flattered with the praise of the Cossack, Yermak, and so gratified with the general picture of Siberian civility, that he did not notice what must have grated harshly on foreign ears.

The papers of the English correspondents were then handed down, examined, and found correct, after which, with a great show of ceremony, they were returned. They had been prepared by a skillful Nihilist, and were therefore in proper order.

The interpreter said they might find it necessary to stop in several towns along the road, and it was just as well that the officer of the convoy should have a full explanation now, so as to prevent further embarrassment or misunderstanding in case they should meet again. The party was penetrating into the heart of Siberia, and, of course, it would be all the more creditable to the government if they were treated with proper consideration.

All this the officer indorsed, adding that he felt honored in falling in with so distinguished a party.

"But pray who are these?" the interpreter asked, pointing at the exiles.

"A god-forsaken lot of Nihilists," was the reply.

"And the pretty woman?"

"The most dangerous in the number. Women are to-day the demons of the conspiracy. It was said of old that woman could not keep a secret, but if that be true the Nihilist women have changed their sex, for they are the very last among the conspirators to tell anything. This woman has been promised liberty to tell all she knows, but she would rather die she says, and she goes to work in the mines for life with her chains rather than divulge what would merely give a desperate lot of fiends their deserts. I am authorized to make her an offer of freedom on condition that she makes a full confession. I have made her the offer, but she refuses to listen, and the last time I spoke of the matter she begged I would not insult her again with such a proposition."

"Dear me, how obstinate," said the correspondent through his interpreter, adding that if the officer had no objection, he would make a note of the fact to show the desperate spirit of Nihilism.

The officer had no objection, and the correspondent entered the note in his book. He was in reality summing up the strength of the convoy.

* An absconded criminal, who, at the head of a strong band of wild followers, effected the conquest of Western Siberia in the sixteenth century.

"Did I understand you to say that this fair conspirator will wear her chains at work in the mines?"

"Exactly. That is the condition. She was under sentence of death, but the merciful Czar commuted that to banishment for life."

"A generous act, truly," said the correspondent.

"Noble in the extreme," said the Cossack, "but generosity is thrown away on these people. If the Czar does them a kindness, they say he is afraid; if he punishes them they call him a despot. They don't understand or appreciate the mercy of God or man."

At this the driver of the sledge whipped up his hardy ponies and they dashed off at a racing rate, and soon left the slow paced procession far behind.

Eliska felt that friends were at hand, and recalling the words of Madame Moravief, thought a surprise was near.

She longed to warn Leo, but this was impossible; besides, if an attempt was made to rescue them he would soon realize the situation and could easily throw away his chains.

The exiles numbered twenty, but there were forty Cossacks, and if a struggle ensued for a rescue it would be a difficult matter for six men to do much.

Something told her that the next night would bring a conflict, and she determined on staying awake.

Night overtook the convoy in the midst of a great white waste. The bitter wind was unusually cold, and seemed to penetrate to the very marrow of the shuddering exiles, whose shivering limbs made their chains rattle. The Cossacks being comfortably clothed, were better able to resist the rigors of the blast. Yet they realized more than ever before what they were compelled to suffer for the sins of their less fortunate fellow-beings who moaned in pain because of the chilly blasts, and then were whipped for moaning.

There was not a house in sight. The nearest post-station was many miles away. They had hoped to reach it before nightfall, but their progress had been so slow that the performance fell far short of their expectation.

Some of the Cossacks proceeded to make shelter in the snow. The prisoners begged to have their chains removed that they might do likewise, but the captain reminded them that they must wear those chains all their lives, and be buried with them when they died.

A few of the Cossacks were moved to pity and managed to make a rude shelter in the snow for the chained wretches. Then a heap of brushwood was gathered, and a blaze was started which made the most despondent exile feel glad and realize that there is no condition of wretchedness so deep that a lower depth cannot be reached.

The blazing, crackling fire made life even in that icy waste comparatively comfortable, and in its generous glow the tired exiles dozed one by one to sleep, and even the weary Cossack's were overcome, with the exception of the captain and four men who were on guard.

Presently one of the men on watch ran forward to the captain, who was talking to Eliska, and said he saw mysterious figures moving about in the shadow which the fire cast upon the snow.

The captain told him he must have seen wolves that were probably attracted by the light and warmth.

"Go out," he said, "you timid fellow, and drive them away."

The Cossack shook his head, and said the figures looked more like men than wolves.

"This, however, did not impress the captain, who called the man a fool, and said his imagination must have run riot with his judgment.

Eliska's heart beat wildly. She somehow felt that the crisis was at hand, and soon it would be death or liberty. She yearned to let Leo know, but he was sleeping soundly.

While she was wondering what to do she was startled by a sharp volley from the shadows, and the next instant the captain of the Cossacks rolled dead at her feet, and the four guardsmen dropped with their heads in the snow never to rise again.

It was a thrilling moment. Cossacks and exiles started from their slumber horrified, and several of the former were shot down.

Eliska alone realized what it was. There were friends at hand. In a twinkling she flung down her chains, and running to Leo, who shared the common fear, touched him on the shoulder, and said:

"Fling down your fetters. Now for freedom!"

He was dazed, but he did as directed, and taking her hand both dashed unmolested through the demoralized lines of the Cossacks, who were so bewildered at the killing of their captain and comrades that they made no attempt to fight, but fled in all directions.

They felt that they had been attacked by a superior force, and that it would be useless to show resistance. The exploding of

bombs all about them increased their terror and their speed, so that Eliska and Leo found escape an easy matter.

On gaining the shadows they were greeted by friendly voices, and quickly conveyed to a sledge, where they were comfortably placed between six men and driven rapidly away across the dreary steppe in the direction of the frontier, to get beyond the reach of the Siberian blood-hounds which they expected would soon be on their track.

CHAPTER XX.

SHORT AND SWEET.

Eliska Aurbach felt the arms of Count Rolof around her, and knew his voice as soon as she took her place in the sledge. He was one of the "correspondents" whom she had seen twice during the dismal journey, and with him were Andrei and old Peter, together with three trusty men picked out for the hazardous work of the rescue by the Central Council of Paris.

The news of the daring attack upon the convoy, and the escape of the Nihilists, traveled slowly, and was not reported to the authorities for several days, during which time the fugitives crossed the frontier and made their way to Switzerland. Here they assumed suitable disguises, and as they had plenty of money, it did not take them long to go to London, where there was great rejoicing among the "International Brotherhood" over their escape from what Ivan described as "the terrors of tyranny."

On their way there, Count Rolof told Eliska something that made her supremely happy. He assured her that her father, whom she had mourned as dead, was still alive, and when the glad news was confirmed at their meeting, she wept for joy. She had thought it impossible for him to escape when the treacherous Itsoff turned the waters of the Neva into the council-room, and so it would have been had he not acted promptly upon a daring plan.

When the other Nihilists were overwhelmed in their efforts to rush up the steps, Herman Aurbach plunged boldly into the gate-way through which the current was rushing, and after dragging himself through, had no difficulty in reaching the shore of the Neva. To obtain dry clothing and assume a disguise did not take long at a well-known Nihilist rendezvous, and then he left St. Petersburg for Paris, where he planned the plot which had been so successful in rescuing the condemned.

He felt the loss of his vast property keenly. He had been classed as a merchant of the first guild under the Russian law, and was not regarded generally as a Jew, because if he had been, he would not be permitted to carry on such an extensive business in St. Petersburg. But his sympathies with the race from which he was descended were ever keen, and he never forgot the cruel death of his parents at the hands of the Cossacks. He was disposed, however, to view the situation philosophically, and now that he had Eliska back again, he was happy.

There was happiness in store for Leo Rollins also. As soon as the fugitives reached Switzerland, Andrei gave him a letter from Vera Kirsanof. It told him how her heart had been breaking because of his trials; but now that there was a prospect of his escape, she was sustained by hope again. She had left the village of Alexis, with its painful scenes, forever, and proposed traveling for some time in England and America. As the letter mentioned the name of the hotel in London where Vera said she would remain until hearing the result of the expedition, Leo lost no time in going to see her. It is needless to say that the meeting was a happy one after so many bitter trials, and each resolved that nothing but death should separate them again. Esther, the waif, who was saved from the burning village by Leo and Eliska, had been chosen by Vera as her companion, and developed into a bright, interesting girl. The few days after the fugitives arrived in London were devoted to plans for their future, and it was unanimously agreed that they should go to New York, where Herman Aurbach hoped to recuperate his shattered fortune.

The sunshine of a pleasant afternoon illumined the spires of Liverpool, and cast the shadow of a stately ship upon the Mersey. A happy party had boarded the vessel, in which they secured comfortable quarters for New York. Leo and Vera Kirsanof sat face to face with Count Rolof and Eliska Aurbach. They seemed deeply interested in each other as the grand ship lay anchored in the river, and the rattle of chains—but not of tyranny—told of the bustling preparations for departure. Herman Aurbach, who had been pacing the deck, came into the cabin, and there was a pleased look on his face as he saw the happiness of the young people.

"Andrei and old Peter are on deck," he said, "and say the fear we will be pursued and brought back. They did not seem to take much comfort out of my assurance that there was no

ger. The mind that's once enslaved can never be wholly free."

Just then the two worthies whose names Herman had mentioned came to take their leave. Andrei said they proposed remaining in Liverpool for a few days, after which they would go back to London, and then to St. Petersburg.

"I am anxious," said old Peter, "to complete my invention for the blowing up of the Kremlin at the coronation of the Czar, and I can work in this country unmolested for several days."

Just then the bell was sounded, visitors were requested to withdraw, and the good ship sailed for New York with the rising tide.

[THE END.]

MERCILESS BEN, THE HAIR-LIFTER.

By NED BUNTLINE.

CHAPTER I.

THE NEW ARRIVAL.

"There was a laughing devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of hate and fear;
And where his frown of hatred darkly fell,
Hope, withering, fled, and Mercy sighed farewell."

BYRON'S "CORSAIR."

It was a bustling day at Fort Craig, New Mexico. The post-trader had just received a new stock of goods—liquids, solids, and fancy. The paymaster had recently visited the post, and both rank and file of army men were flush with money. Miners, bearded like pards, conspicuous in their high boots, slouched hats, and soil-colored clothes, had come in from the gold regions of Negrita, sixty miles away; there were Greasers (the usual name given to native Mexicans there), dark and scowling, under their great sombreros, their slender forms wrapped in gay ponchos, which concealed the ever-present, and often too ready, knife, which was thrust under their silken scarfs.

Senoritas and donnas, as beautiful as the males, by way of contrast, were ugly, helped to beautify the scene.

Cowboys, as they are called, but men whose business is to guard and drive the cattle on the great ranches which are found in Texas, New Mexico, and all through the grassy regions of the great South-west, swaggered about, armed to the teeth, and ready for any row into which drink or insolence might involve them.

The post-trader and two assistants were busied in waiting on their crowd of customers, now cutting off bright dress patterns for the senoritas, next selling some dilapidated miner a new suit of clothes, weighing out the gold dust tendered in payment thereof, then filling a cowboy's order for so many bottles of what he called "chain lightning," but which was drawn from a cask marked "Best Kentucky Bourbon,"—selling pipes, tobacco, cigars, powder, lead, flour, salt, sugar, coffee—in fact, about anything and everything man, woman, or child could use.

It was high noon, and the hot rays of the sun fell vertically on the placid breast of the Rio Grande as it rolled away in sullen silence toward its burial-place in the ocean.

While the heterogeneous crowd outside the sutler's store were talking, laughing, and descanting on such topics as came foremost in their minds, there was a new arrival, and one that drew every eye upon those who came.

There were but two in the party, and two more different types of humanity could scarcely be found on the face of the earth. One, riding a large and powerful black horse, with every mark of thoroughbred in its small head, large nostrils, splendid form and limbs of perfect symmetry, came a man in the prime of life. He was very tall, over six feet in height, muscular, yet slender, only his full, round chest showing his powerful build—with finely cut features, but an expression so

stern that even his smile was icy. His eyes were jet black, his hair and beard also black, except where some premature threads of silver glistened strangely in them, and yet they were as carefully combed as if he were somewhere else than at an outpost, where nobody cared for look or dress. This man carried a repeating rifle, slung at his belt, two very long-barreled rifle pistols in his belt, and a pair of army Remington revolvers in holsters at his saddle-bow. He was clad in coarse but well-fitting and serviceable clothes, made up much like modern hunting suits. He had none of the buckskin trappings so much used by scouts, hunters, and trappers on the plains and in the mountains. Yet he looked as if he filled the *role* of one or the other.

But the strangest thing of all about him was that of his bridle reins, his stirrup-leathers, and even the hat which he wore being fringed with scalps—Indian scalps—some dried and old, others that looked fresh, as if but recently torn from warrior heads. These had the ornaments on them which the owner had worn in life—some were tied with a scarlet thong, others held the eagle feather which denotes a chief. Of these full a hundred or more were in plain view, and when Captain Jack, the post scout, saw him, he turned to a couple of miners, who had come in with him from the "Chloride," saying, in a low tone:

"Pards, I never saw that man but once before, and it was when I was after old Victoria. Alone he was racing a dozen armed warriors at a speed my burro couldn't half imitate. And then I heard his name. It is 'Merciless Ben, the Hair-Lifter.' He never spares a redskin, but kills and scalps all whom he can meet or trail."

Behind this man, on a sinewy, finely built, spotted mustang, rode a dwarf—by his complexion and features a Mexican. He had a huge head, broad shoulders, long, muscular arms, but short, thin legs, which looked as if they could hardly support his body when afoot, or keep him in the saddle when he rode. He, too, was well armed with repeating-rifle and pistols, and his bridle-reins had many scalps affixed, but not so many as a tenth as those his leader carried.

Behind the dwarf came, side by side, two large pack-mules, clean-limbed animals, which looked as if speed and endurance were in their composition.

They were loaded with furs, hides, and Indian robes and trappings, and when the leader alighted from his horse, followed in his action by the dwarf, the mules closed up to the other animals and stopped as still as if bound to a post.

The Hair-Lifter, glancing coldly over the crowds that were grouped about in front of the building, spoke in a low, kind tone to the dwarf. He used good English—none of the slang so common among frontiersmen. He said:

"Manuel, stay out here with the animals. I will go in to see the trader. Ask no questions, and—*answer none.*"

Then with a proud and haughty step he turned and entered the store. Though it was crowded he had no trouble in passing up to where the trader stood at the upper end of his single long counter, for men and women gave way almost involuntarily as he advanced with a heavy, kingly tread, as if acknowledging his superiority.

"I have two mule-loads of furs, skins, and Indian gewgaws outside," he said, to the trader. "Come out, look at, and price them. I will trade them all for ammunition and provisions."

He spoke as if in command, not as asking a favor.

And the trader, a man who was always "well-heel'd" and very ready to resent any slight of his self-importance, gave him one searching glance, and said, in a respectful tone:

"I will go out and look at them, sir; no doubt we can trade to your satisfaction."

Calling two Mexican peons who stood near waiting his orders, the trader followed the Hair-Lifter out, with memorandum-book and pencil in his hand.

"Manuel, unpack the mules, then open the packs," was the order given by his leader as he returned.

The dwarf made no reply, but taking his rifle from his back, so that he could work more easily, hung it to the high horn of his Mexican saddle.

Then with his great bony hands and his long sinewy arms, he loosened the fastenings of the packs, lifted them from the mules, and opening them, tossed furs into one pile, dried hides into another, and the Indian robes, feathers, and ornaments into yet another, giving the trader time to note down each article as it was laid out.

Carelessly, as if less interested than the crowd which gathered about the group, the Hair-Lifter stood and saw the trader make his notes, commenting on goods and prices as he noted them down.

At last, after full thirty minutes' work, the packs were empty, and the three piles complete.

"I will give five hundred dollars for the lot—all you want in trade, the rest in money," said the trader, after footing up his figures.

"It is enough; I am content," said the Hair-Lifter. "Take them in, and I will give you a list of what I want in the store."

The trader took up the smallest, but the richest pile, choice furs, and his peons shouldered the other goods, and started for the store.

At that moment a great gaunt fellow, clad all in buckskin, with a lot of Indian finery on his person, stepped toward the Hair-Lifter, and, in a harsh tone, said:

"I'd like ter know whar you got all that plunder, stranger!"

One instant the Hair-Lifter looked at the speaker, his face at first calm and haughty. But in a second more his eyes flashed, and his face, all that was not covered by beard, flushed into a purple hue.

"Hyena! dog! I know you!" he said, in a low, hissing tone of concentrated rage. "You are a renegade to your race, a *squaw-man* among the Comanches. Begone, leave, or even here, among men of your own color, whom you disgrace, I'll slay you, and add your worthless scalp to those of the tribe you consort with, already mine."

Till then, this man, who was all that Merciless Ben called him, had not looked at the bridle-reins, lined with scalps, toward which the latter pointed as he spoke.

When he did, giant though he was, armed, too, with rifle, pistols, and knife, he turned to an ashen-gray in his face, and shook from head to foot as if he had been struck with an ague.

"It is the Hair-Lifter!" he muttered, and he slunk away like a whipped dog, and was out of sight in a second.

The former, in an instant calm and dignified as before, now turned and entered the store, while Captain Jack, who stood near with his mining comrades, said:

"The stranger spoke the truth. The fellow who slunk away is a *squaw-man*, a cowardly and treacherous spy, who hangs about camps and settlements to gain news and see chances where the red devils he consorts with can make raids, steal stock, commit murders, and do all the deviltries that they are capable of. I'm glad he has met a man beside myself who knows what he is, and what he deserves."

The dwarf, Manuel, who stood by the horses and mules of his leader, smiled when he heard Captain Jack speak in this manner.

The scout saw his look, and said, in a kind tone:

"Don't you want to go in the store? I'll guard your horses and mules for you."

"El capitano, my master told me stay here; I stay," replied the dwarf, his repulsive face made a shade brighter by an attempt to smile. "Me thank the brave all same."

"I require no thanks for doing nothing, my good *muchacho*. You had the will, but not the deed. Have you been long with el capitano, as you call him?"

"He told me to answer no questions. I do what he says—always."

"Right, my good little man. I heard his words, and was wrong to ask the question. But I like your master; he may be merciless, but it is to a race which deserves none. For theirs is a life of falsehood, treachery, and heartless cruelty, from their birth to the grave!"

And Jack, after saying this, passed into the store. Standing back where he would not be noticed, he looked with wondering curiosity upon the goods which the Hair-Lifter was purchasing from the trader. A large lot of the best fixed ammunition for his own rifle and that of his servant, was first laid out. Then powder, lead for bullets, and caps for his belt pistols were selected. Also a fixed ammunition for his holster weapons. Then a half-dozen new warm blankets, some tea, coffee, sugar, and salt. Some flour and dried bacon completed his list of provisions. Then a purchase was made which set Captain Jack wild with curiosity.

It was some dark, neat calico, some fine white hose, and a couple of pairs of fine gaiter boots; kids, such as were kept for officers' wives, and the smallest size in the store—number twos.

"Who on earth can these be for?" pondered Captain Jack. "He does not look like a 'ladies' man,' neither as if he could feel and know a passion like love! I'd give a hundred shares of Chloride stock to know where the foot treads that is to wear such dainty shoes as those!"

The Hair-Lifter had selected all the goods he wanted, even to a box of cigarettes for Manuel. He used no tobacco himself, he said.

"There are yet one hundred dollars due to you," said the trader.

"Place it to my credit on your books, and when I send Manuel for goods give them to him!" was the rejoinder.

"All right. Now join me in a glass of California wine or old Bourbon, if you like it better," said the trader.

"Excuse me! Many long years have passed since my lips have known the taste of strong drink!" was the firm answer. "Once I was accursed by a fondness for it. In a fit of drunken frenzy I struck down and nearly killed my best friend. From that hour on to this—and it will be life-long—I have never tasted aught but pure water, and tea and coffee where water is not good."

"Forgive me, sir, but let me press your hand. I, too, am a temperance man!" cried Captain Jack, impulsively, stepping forward.

The Hair-Lifter smiled, yet his look was even then stern and passionless. Taking the hand extended by the scout, he said:

"I know your habits, Mr. Crawford, as well as your bravery in the field. But the friend of Custer, the bravest of the brave, would be better employed in destroying the hated race which murdered him and his heroic band, than in such ignoble toil as using pick and shovel in the search for gold!"

"I bow to your rebuke, sir," said the brave scout. "Were I alone in the world, I would rejoice to throw aside the tools you scorn, and taking up weapons I am better used to, would follow you as far as even you dared to go in the work of just vengeance. But I have dear ones to feed and clothe, loved ones who were helpless but for my aid!"

"Ah! excuse my blunt and rude remarks. I thought you were alone in the world," said the other. "I have seen you more than once in the field, when you were with Terry, Crook and Buell! If we meet again, we meet as friends, young man, and if it ever be in my power to serve you, the deed will go with the will."

"Thanks, sir—heartfelt thanks!"

"MERCILESS BEN," by Ned Buntline, will be found complete in the next number (109) of the LOG CABIN LIBRARY.