

By Order of the Czar

A Story of Russian Power

By MARCUS EASTLAKE

CHAPTER II.—(Continued.)

I pass Dr. Schleeman's gates and along the Nevski, shrinking under the occasional glare of a street lamp, and gasping with relief each time I leave one behind me, and can proceed for a space under cover of the darkness. Meanwhile the black, rolling clouds discharge themselves, whilst the thunder growls and mutters after the flickering flash.

Long may the storm last, for if it should clear before I have reached my place of refuge, faint indeed will be my chance. If the moon should shine out and illumine my still wandering feet I am lost.

Soaked through, with my shirt clinging to my body—coat I have none—the water running in rivulets from my hair, staggering from side to side, almost blind and with a sickening dread of falling in a fainting fit, I at length reach the narrow doorway which leads by a flight of stairs to Maruscha's lodging. Luckily the narrow stone passage has no door to the street, so I stagger in somehow.

The mounting of those steps is like an interminable nightmare. I drag myself up with long agonizing pauses between; step by step. There is but the one hope left me now, that of looking once again on Maruscha's face ere I die.

At last the topmost step is gained, and I see a bar of light streaming from beneath the door. I lay my head down on the landing and listen. Her light feet are pacing the floor to and fro, now faint, now near. I hear the sweep of her skirts against the door as she turns. Now she sighs, ah! so drearily. Is she living through again the awful scene of my execution?

Perhaps she is meditating self-destruction. Maruscha cannot live without her Vladimir. I raise my head and try to call her name. The sound I make startles and frightens me; it is like the croak of a raven! I have no voice where-with to call Maruscha!

I am lying at her door, where I cannot remain. I crawl close to it, striving to summon up courage to knock. She is near me again. I hear her cry in despair, "Vladimir! my Vladimir! Oh, my murdered love!" I breathe a prayer for her and—knock. She has paused in her walk and listens.

"Maruscha—open—it is I!" I croaked desperately. I used to have a man's strong, deep voice; this could never be recognized as proceeding from any human being.

Within I hear a gasp; but still she opens not. I must get it over at once—at any cost! I strike the door with my fist. She makes a resolve. Takes a quick step forward—the key turns in the lock, and the door opens wide.

I cannot see her dear face, but O, she sees mine! She sees me when I crouch on her threshold, a ghastly visitant from the dead! I feel her eyes on me. I hear her catching breath. She recoils, and catches at the table for support.

"Fear me not, Maruscha! It is I, Vladimir!" She covers her eyes to shut out the sight of me. "Maruscha—I am no ghost. I am indeed thy Vladimir in the flesh!" I croak in my despair. I feel my senses leaving me. "I would tell thee all—the wonder of it—but—I die—I—pity—Maruscha!"

CHAPTER III.

I wake from a long, long sleep—a sleep which has been troubled with strange dreams, sometimes gracious ones, full of the presence of Maruscha, when I have felt the soothing touch of her hands, looked into the deep blue wells of her eyes, and vaguely seen, fathomed there, a wealth of love, and patience, and pity. There is a delicious perfume of roses in the air, reminding me of the roses in the air, reminding me of the home in Kieff.

But I am not at home. My eyes have begun to wander from one detail to another of my surroundings; the dainty toilet table with its gauzy drapery tied with knots of blue ribbons; the hanging book shelves against the wall filled with brightly bound volumes; the crimson curtain of the portiere that runs along one entire side—Maruscha's room is divided by a crimson portiere! The vase with roses on the little table by my bed. I gave that vase to Maruscha!

There is a stir at the other side of the portiere, and instantly her sweet face appears at the opening in the curtains. I see the light of a great joy leap suddenly to her eyes.

"Vladimir!" There is a whole world of joy in her utterance. She has my hand in hers, and our eyes meet in one long look of unutterable satisfaction.

"My dove!" I murmur. She puts her finger on her lips. Her face is radiant with smiles, and shining like the morning star from the golden setting of her hair.

"Thou must not talk, but sleep again, my Vladimir!"

She is withdrawing her hand, and I feebly catch at it. She will vanish, this angelic vision, and leave me in darkness. "I go but to get thee thy medicine," she says, and stroking the back of my hand with her disengaged one; "Thinkest thou I would leave thee? I cannot if I would—thou knowest I could not!"

I release her lingeringly, and watch her glide away, throwing back at me a tender glance, and a nod ere she disappears.

I lie quite still, listening to the rustle of her dress as she moves about. There is the faint chink of china and she is at my side again, raising me with her soft arms about my shoulders, whilst she puts a cup to my lips.

"Now you must drink this, nor leave

a drop!" she says, with a little air of authority.

I do not object. If it were poison and held to my lips by Maruscha, I would swallow it; but it is bouillon, and the fumes recommend it to my stomach. When I have drunk it, she deftly turns my pillow and lays me back.

"Now thou wilt sleep."

Her voice is like the coo of the stock dove! She takes up a bit of needlework from the easy chair, but goes and sits where she is out of the range of my vision.

"Where I can see thee, I pray thee, Maruscha!" I plead.

She bends forward. "Wilt thou not be content, willful one?" she murmurs. Yet she goes to her easy chair, facing me, though she shakes her head.

As she sits before me, bending over her work, and I gazing at her, I see a shyness come over her, such as I have never seen before. The rosy blushes dye her fair skin, and, as if to hide them, her head droops lower.

In my love I am cruel and think only how the blushes are for me, and how lovely they look. At length they fade, and I note that she looks pale and worn, and that there are anxious lines about her sweet mouth, and violet marks under her eyes. These, too, are for me!

Before me instantly, blotting her out from me, rises a vision from somewhere in my past. I lie panting, bruised, half naked, voiceless, with a ghastly mark about my neck—an object to turn from with shuddering horror—on her threshold. And after? Her brave heart conquered her dread! She took me in, put me in her own white bed, nursed me.

A great sob lifts my breast, and breaks the stillness. She looks up startled, and the needlework falls from her fingers. I try to stretch my hand toward her—see her I cannot for tears—but it falls powerless on the counterpane.

"Maruscha," I falter, "let me—let me kiss thy hand!"

She flies to me. "My hand, my lips! What thou wilt; but weep not, Vladimir!"

She kisses me wildly, not thinking what she does, but only of pacifying me. "Thou hast been ill—very ill; thou must not excite thyself—it is bad for thee. Think not of the past, it is over—all over, and thou art with me! Think how I have striven to nurse thee well, and thou wouldst undo all! Lie on thee! Thou hast no pity for me!"

Talking thus, she takes her handkerchief and dries my eyes, sweeps the hair from my brow and lets her fingers rest on it caressingly.

She seats herself on the side of the bed. I possess myself of her hand, and holding it against my lips, my spirit slips away into the sweet oblivion of dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

My life is a succession of deep and tranquil sleeps and blissful awakenings to the discovery of Maruscha's presence.

And she is my willing slave in all things save one. I may not even hold her hand for long, or carry it to my lips. If I venture on the latter, she gently but firmly withdraws it, casting on me such a look of fond reproach that I am fain to blush like a school girl at my temerity.

Maruscha avoids all mention of that awful chapter in my life, the subject seems so hateful to her that I have abstained from questioning her, though I am consumed with curiosity to know how my sudden appearance out of the grave, as it were, had affected her.

She evidently fears, too, that the discussion of so painful a theme would injure me in my still weak state, for I can see that she has enjoined Ivan—the only member of our section besides herself who knows of my existence—not to let me talk of it to him.

When I would speak of it, he has different ways of eluding me. He will rise hastily, as though something had just occurred to him about which he must consult Maruscha; or he will pretend not to hear me, and put a sudden question, as:

"Has Maruscha read thee Pushkin's latest poem? No? Then I must bring it to thee; it is glorious!"

I feel inexpressibly sad to-day, and Maruscha shares my feeling. As she sits beside me, her sweet, fair face, downcast, over her work, I guess that it is only my presence that keeps her from weeping. Her swift needle glances in and out of the linen she has on her lap. She is finishing a shirt for me to take with me, and there is not much time left now. Ivan comes for me this evening, and we leave together when the darkness falls.

It has been heaven to me, this calm, blissful period of convalescence—all too short, and here is the end of it, and the beginning of fresh struggles with the world.

This move has been talked of for some days past, Ivan has been urgent, and my soul responds to his wishes. Whatever Maruscha may say, there is danger in my sojourn with her. Though the situation was forced on us by necessity, and accepted joyfully by my pure-minded love, we feel that it is one that must be put an end to as soon as possible. A sob escaped her, and in my desire to comfort her I assume an air of cheerfulness I am far from apprehending.

"This is no parting, Maruscha. I go but to Ivan, and whilst I am there we shall see each other daily. Let us not meet trouble half way. And when the

parting comes there will still be the prospect of our reunion. The world is wide, and surely I shall find some spot under a free sky on which to build a modest little nest for thee and me. Think of that time, dear heart. Hope for the best."

"Ah, if thou wast but safely out of this terrible land, then I might hope!" Maruscha sighed.

"I have great faith in the future!" I cry. "A man is not snatched from the very waters of death only to be cast back again like a worthless weed. There is some special end in these sudden acts of Providence. Thou wilt see this, my second life will not be wrested from me."

I sit down again and draw Maruscha to my side.

"Maruscha," I continued, "I have been thinking much of our future whilst I lay there, and of how thou wouldst help me to make it worthy. That other life was all wrong. I made nothing of it."

"Vladimir!" interrupts Maruscha, and her eyes shine like stars. "Thou gavest thy life for the great cause?"

"And what has it availed? Is the world the better for my sacrifice? The tyrant still oppresses. Liberty still lurks in secret places, and will continue to do so. And why? Because as a nation we are not ripe for liberty. One-half is asleep, the other is in the thrall of consuming passions, and nothing attempted in the heat of passion can have good results. Conviction must have matured into steady calm ere action is proceeded to. It has ever been a mad, blind rush at the enemy."

"Filled with a noble enthusiasm!" puts in Maruscha. "Oh, Vladimir, thou art indeed changed. The cause, then, is nothing to thee now?" She looks mournfully up at me.

"Not so, Maruscha. It is as ever, everything to me. I love liberty more than life; only my opinion as to how to attain it is changed. Hitherto I was at the wrong end. Mistake thou not the lurid flare of passion for the pure flame of enthusiasm? I fear it is so."

Ivan's knock and signal interrupts us. Maruscha is leaving me to open the door. I detain her.

"Thou art disappointed in me, sweet love?" I whispered, watching her face with anxiety.

Her eyes seek the ground. "I—I—understand thee not," she falters.

"Yet thou canst trust me?" I breathe.

The blue, bewildered eyes turn on me, and our glances meet. I see hers clear and kindle until naught shines in them but pure, unmixt love. Then suddenly, as if by an unaccountable impulse, she puts her two hands on my shoulders and murmurs, "Thou art my very soul and my conscience, Vladimir! Thy thoughts, thy aspirations, thy God are surely mine!"

She stoops and presses her lips to my forehead, and leaves me quickly to admit Ivan.

He enters with a coat over his arm, and after greeting us, produces from his pocket a soft felt hat, which he throws on a chair. Now he comes and stands before me, regarding me critically.

"How long hast thou been up to-day?" he inquires at length.

"Only about an hour. I have husbanded my forces for this evening."

Maruscha makes us some tea, and whilst we take it Ivan tells us the latest news. Fifty men and women have been arrested on suspicion of being implicated with the Nihilists. Three assassinations of tyrants have occurred in different parts of the country, and everybody is talking of the daring "leader" in to-day's issue of the "Voice of the People." Ivan produced the newspaper and read it to us.

And all this falls flat on me. No longer can I rejoice at these things, they only make me sad. The day has gone by when the walls of a city could be made to fall at the blast of trumpets. My heart is full of the approaching leave-taking, and gloomily I watch the twilight shadows creep up and close around us. I seem to see the relentless angel of fate pointing to the gates of my Paradise, and bidding me depart into the dark unknown region without, and alas! I may not even take with me my Eve!

Maruscha scarcely speaks a word. She stitches away at the shirt, and when she has finished it, busies herself packing some things for me in a bag. As the shades deepen, Ivan also becomes silent. He goes over to the window and stands with his back to us, blowing a tune through his lips.

Maruscha comes to me. I fold her silently in my arms, and thus we remain, heart to heart, cheek to cheek. At length Ivan says, but without looking around, "We had better not let it get too late, Vladimir."

One long, silent kiss I press on Maruscha's lips ere I release her. "When-ever thou wilt, Ivan," I reply, clearing my voice, for it sounds strangely husky.

Hearing Maruscha stir about the room, Ivan judges that he may return. I begin to get into the coat he has brought forward for me, while Maruscha stands and straightens the hat. He takes it from her hand, and puts it on my head, slouching it down in front to almost conceal my face. Maruscha puts up her face and we solemnly kiss each other. Ivan draws my hand through his arm, and Maruscha precedes us to the door.

"Adieu, Maruscha," Ivan extends his hand toward her. She takes it and swiftly, ere he is aware of her intention, she lifts it to her lips.

"Adieu, and God bless thee, my brother," she murmurs, with eyes brimming with gratitude.

I, holding his arm, feel the shock that thrills his body, but his voice is clear and calm as he replies, "God bless thee also, my sister!"

Maruscha stands watching us as we slowly descend the stairs. At the foot I pause to wave my hand toward her, though her form is swallowed up by the darkness, and we issue forth into the still evening.

(To be continued.)

Proper Classification.

Rastus—What kin' ob er dog am dat, Miss Snowball?
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Rastus—What do yo' all mean by dat?
Miss Snowball—Why, he am a spit.

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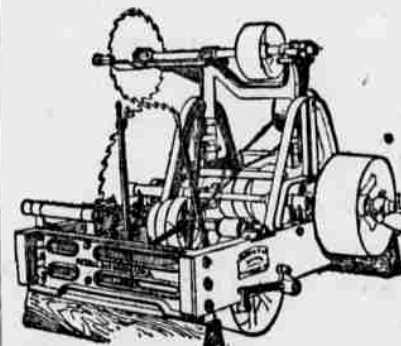
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