

THE MYSTERY OF COUNT LANDRINO

BY FRED WHISHAM

Continued from First Page

travel so far. Don't think me ungrateful. I am very much obliged to you for pulling me out. I'd rather die of cold at home, or hunger either, than drown like a rat under the ice. Bah! The idea is sickening!"

"Look here," I said, an idea striking me. "If your place is so cold and uncomfortable and you've no change of clothes, you shall lie up for a few days at my house. You shall be fed well and have a good rest. When you feel all right again, you shall be free to go. Do you consent?"

"But stop! Why all this? Who are you? You pulled me out of the water at some risk, and I am grateful for it, but when you come to offer me these other kindnesses I don't know what to think. I am suspicious of your good faith, for, after all, why should you treat me in this way—a total stranger?"

"There is a certain service which I think you can render me, if you like, I said. 'I will tell you that much. I would gladly give you in luxury for ten years if I could obtain certain information from you which you may or may not be able to give me. There, I am open with you, you see.'"

"Good! I will be as open with you. See here! I would sell my soul for ten years of luxurious life. If there is any information that it is in my power to give you and you are prepared to pay well for it, you shall have all I have to tell you and I shall make the terms all the easier because you lugged me out of yonder death trap. But why should I particularly like to be able to give you the information you desire? Are you sure that I possess it?"

"No, I am not. Still you are sure to be able to afford me some satisfaction, if you cannot tell me all I wish to know. Step out quicker. The faster we go the sooner you shall have a warm room and some dry clothes and a full meal!"

"A hot meal—hot meat, and so on?" said the student looking wolfishly at me, "and perhaps a glass of wine or good brandy?"

"Most certainly," I laughed. "If you fancy it, why not? Are a good meal and a glass of beer so unwanted a luxury to you?"

"I have not eaten a really full meal for two years, at least. That which I eat scarcely serves to keep body and soul together."

"Are you so terribly poor, then?" I asked. I had never seen such poverty. I had always had plenty of the best of everything and had never consequently realized what the want of good food meant.

"God knows how I live," shivered the student. "I don't."

We were now on the Palace quay and rapidly approaching our big house—the very place he had last left before we had both started upon our wild and ill-omened race.

"Where are you taking me to?" he said.

"To my home, of course," I replied, with a laugh.

"Which house is it?" he said, hanging back a little. "Not this huge one—the Landrinof mansion?"

"Yes, certainly. Why not? I am Count Boris Landrinof, and you shall be my guest, as I promised."

He stepped on the doorstep, shivering violently.

"Oh, I dare not," he said. "Not there—I didn't guess you were young Count Landrinof."

"Nonsense," I said. "Now we have made one another's acquaintance, you will find I am quite as good a friend, and perhaps a more profitable one, than—well, than your other friend here—Korniloff or Andre Landrinof, or whatever you may call him. Come! He shan't know you are in the house!"

"Swear it!" said the student, shaking more than even his semitropical condition demanded. "If he were to know I was in the place and on confidential terms with yourself, he would—no, I haven't come in, I really haven't."

"Think again," I said. "Fifty rubles a month so long as you live in the house and serve me in any way I shall demand of you. If I should not need your services, a gratuity of 200 rubles each year for ten years, or a lump sum, if you prefer it, of 1,000 rubles."

"Stop! Is this house so large that I can live in it and this other as well, and he not know I am there?"

"There is room for 30, none of whom should know of the presence of the other."

"Well, I think I'll come!" he said. "As for information, I cannot tell of course, what it is you intend to demand of me, but now that I know you are young Count Landrinof, I may tell you that I can, if I like, give you some information which will be useful to you."

"About this Andre?"

"That and the rest."

"Tell me now," I said, "before we enter the house, because, should the information be valuable to me, I need not occasion you the risk of coming into the den of the tiger, or rather Andre. Give me an idea of your news."

"No, not yet. I will judge of the value of the bargain before I conclude it. Go up the steps by yourself, please, and see that Andre—before your friend who is staying in the house is out of the way. If the coast is clear, I will come up."

I did as he desired and found the coast clear.

"Come," I said, "it's all right!" and up the marble steps ran my shivering will o' the wisp and entered the house.

Through the front part of the building I led my man and into one of the long wings that ran down on either

room quickly for a guest.

The old lady merely raised her hands and eyes in surprise at the peculiar aspect of the guest I had brought in, but she was too polite and too well trained to say anything. She bustled about, and in five minutes she had a comfortable room ready and a grand wood fire crackling and roaring in the stove.

I brought the student a suit of my own clothes—old ones—including plenty of warm underwear, and the shivering little rascal climbed into them with a chuckle of delight. Then I had him sit and warm himself till dinner time, when he should have the finest meal brought in to him that ever he had partaken of on this planet.

When he had consumed this—and he ate every particle of each course that was placed before him—and had negotiated a bottle of wine, which, of course, he drank to the angel, he returned to see in what frame of mind he now was. I found him in the most amiable, and, observing that this was so, I asked the fellow whether he was now prepared to strike a bargain, and, if so, whether he could give some indication of the kind of information he had to sell. He grinned and lay back in his chair, entirely happy.

"You are Boris Landrinof, son of Count Vladimir Landrinof, are you not?" he asked lazily.

"I replied with beating heart that I was."

"Well," he said, "it so happens that I have something to say about him that may interest you."

CHAPTER XX
BARGAINING FOR INFORMATION.

The little student looked keenly at me to see how I would receive his statement. He wished no doubt to estimate the value of the information which he professed to be able to give me by watching the effect of his remark upon the expression of my face.

I am afraid I added thousands of rubles to that estimated value simply through my inability to control my countenance.

I would have given worlds to appear to remain indifferent or incredulous or what not, but I was very young and but a poor actor to boot, and I gave my hand away lazily.

I grew pale and red; I knew it. I clutched the arms of my chair. I felt choky and faint. My heart behaved ridiculously and commenced to play a devil's tattoo within my breast. I could not speak; I believe I should have cried if I had attempted it. Had this little rascal really and truly important communications to make concerning Andre, father? Could he possibly know anything? If so, Andre was equally well informed. Nay, father must be or must have been, actually in the hands of these rascals, though why or for what purpose they should have captured and kept him I could not conceive.

If this student could be brought over into our camp and made to tell us all he knew, why, he would be worth almost any money to us. Not only would we learn perhaps priceless news about my dear father, but we should, moreover, be able to score off Andre and turn him at once, neck and crop, out of the house; nay, perhaps have him so completely in our power that we should be enabled, by the help of the police, to get him quietly sent away to places where he could no longer worry us by his presence, which, of course, we only tolerated for a moment in the hope of obtaining our quid pro quo in the form of information about father.

What a satisfaction it would be to do without him altogether—ha! How he would fume and rage, the rascal, for undoubtedly he flattered himself that he had my mother and myself in the hollow of his hand, as, indeed, he had until this most fortunate encounter of mine in mid-Neva with the well-favored and pride-puffed little rascal in the armchair here! All these thoughts passed very quickly through my brain as I sat trying to regain control over my features and my tongue before replying to the student.

"At last I felt that I might attempt to speak."

"What you have just said, and I began, my voice sounding faint and far away from my own ears. 'Thanks be to God, you may possibly be in possession of information that is really valuable to us. If it should prove so, you will not regret having confided it to me.'"

"No, no; that is not business," he laughed. "See here, this is the position. I have vitally important news to give you, news that concerns your father and which you can obtain from none but me."

"There's always Andre," I blurted.

"Andre, for reasons of his own, and mighty good ones, would never reveal it to you—not though you fed and pampered and housed and paid him for years to come. You will understand why when—and if—we have come to terms and my secret becomes yours. Very well, then. The point, I say, is this: I am in possession of this information. You, being a dutiful son, are naturally desirous of obtaining it. That is point No. 1. Point No. 2: You chase me (heaven moves why) into a hole in the ice, which in itself is enough to close my lips forever, in so far as concerns the opening of the same to do you any service; but, point No. 3, you pulled me out again, at some risk and with some pluck, as I am ready to admit, which respects my lips is your advantage, if (point No. 4) you make it worth my while to do so, and (point No. 5) since my secret in itself is of some value, and (6) since I am running risks which you little suspect in coming under my roof and selling my secret to you, (point 7 and last) I cannot possibly put the figure down at less than 10,000 rubles."

I would have given the sum named. I think, to take the little rascal by the shoulders from behind and to kick him round the room until either he died or I tired, but I kept my temper and showed little or no signs of the rage I felt. It was his concealed manner that angered me far more than the exorbitance of the sum he demanded for his information.

To receive news which would set us upon a track which should ultimately lead to the discovery of my dear father I would gladly have paid ten times the sum asked. But this little student wore such a detestable air as he spoke, and was, besides, such a consummate little villain on the face of him, that I would have given worlds, as I say, to kick the secret out of him or garrote him till he was glad to save his neck by confessing to his share of the devilry that must have been played with his connivance upon my poor father.

"May I consult my two friends and my mother before answering your question?" I said as calmly as I could. I don't think the calmness was very striking, however.

"Certainly not. Your mother and the rest may agree afterward. This matter is between you and me. Who are your two friends, an Englishman?" I said, "and the other is Boris, whom you must have seen or heard of from your friend Andre."

"What! That little fool? The one that brought Andre over and tried to palm him off upon you as Count Landrinof? Tell him what you like, my

friend, afterward. But now, this moment, our little matter must be decided by our two wits. Either you sign an statement with me for 10,000 rubles, payable tomorrow morning, together with a guarantee that in case of any trouble my name is not to be mentioned as in any way connected with any matter, or—"

I would have given worlds to kick the secret out of him.

Whatever that may be mentioned between us. Either this agreement, I say, or the thing is off, and so am I, and you may whistle for my secret!"

"Oh, come!" I said, trying—rather feebly—to assume a nonchalance which I did not feel. "In that case the police will soon find means to induce you to tell us what you know."

The student made a gesture of spitting.

"Tut!" he said, "that for your police! They have nothing against me. If you declared to them (and you would be a fool to do that) that I had said this and that, I should say, simply, 'This man is a liar. My word is as good as yours. Why should they believe yours and not mine? Let them prove that by watching the effect of his remark upon the expression of my face.'"

This was the fact, and I recognized it. But another and a better idea struck me.

"Stop!" I said. "You are going too fast! You have forgotten the terrible risk you are running, as you took care to inform me, by stopping in this house and dealing with me for your secret. There is our friend Andre to be considered. In settling the terms for your information we must take into consideration the fact that Andre will get you into trouble."

"Dare to do it! Only dare to attempt it, curse you!" cried the student, growing suddenly white as paper. "You are right as to the fact; but, see here, you shouldn't live a day, neither you nor your mother, if you played the traitor. I swear this. There are many who would avenge me."

"Nonsense," I said. "No one knows you are here, and we shall take good care that no one discovers the interest you have in this matter. You threaten until you are in a better position to carry them out and until you have better reason, moreover. You are perfectly safe here, my friend, and I am prepared to pay a fair price for your news, but you shall not cheat us. What say you to 5,000 rubles?"

"Cash down?" asked the student with glowing eyes. "And a guarantee?"

"Certainly," I said. "I will guarantee that no one of my party mentions your name, but you shall not cheat us with these matters."

"Done!" cried the little rascal. "Fetch your cashbook and pen and ink, and we'll settle the matter before we sleep."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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