Knights of Industry

Vsevolod Vladimirovitch Krestovski

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I. THE LAST WILL OF THE PRINCESS

Princess Anna Chechevinski for the last time looked at the home of her girlhood, over which the St. Petersburg twilight was descending. Defying the commands of her mother, the traditions of her family, she had decided to elope with the man of her choice. With a last word of farewell to her maid, she wrapped her cloak round her and disappeared into the darkness.

The maid's fate had been a strange one. In one of the districts beyond the Volga lived a noble, a bachelor, luxuriously, caring only for his own amusement. He fished, hunted, and petted the pretty little daughter of his housekeeper, one of his serfs, whom he vaguely intended to set free. He passed hours playing with the pretty child, and even had an old French governess come to give her lessons. She taught little Natasha to dance, to play the piano, to put on the airs and graces of a little lady. So the years passed, and the old nobleman obeyed the girl's every whim, and his serfs bowed before her and kissed her hands. Gracefully and willfully she queened it over the whole household.

Then one fine day the old noble took thought and died. He had forgotten to liberate his housekeeper and her daughter, and, as he was a bachelor, his estate went to his next of kin, the elder Princess Chechevinski. Between the brother and sister a cordial hatred had existed, and they had not seen one another for years.

Coming to take possession of the estate, Princess Chechevinski carried things with a high hand. She ordered the housekeeper to the cow house, and carried off the girl Natasha, as her daughter's maid, to St. Petersburg, from the

first hour letting her feel the lash of her bitter tongue and despotic will. Natasha had tried in vain to dry her mother's tears. With growing anger and sorrow she watched the old house as they drove away, and looking at the old princess she said to herself, "I hate her! I hate her! I will never forgive her!"

Princess Anna, bidding her maid good−by, disappeared into the night. The next morning the old princess learned of the flight. Already ill, she fell fainting to the floor, and for a long time her condition was critical. She regained consciousness, tried to find words to express her anger, and again swooned away. Day and night, three women watched over her, her son's old nurse, her maid, and Natasha, who took turns in waiting on her. Things continued thus for forty−eight hours. Finally, on the night of the third day she came to herself. It was Natasha's watch.

"And you knew? You knew she was going?" the old princess asked her fiercely.

The girl started, unable at first to collect her thoughts, and looked up frightened. The dim flicker of the night light lit her pale face and golden hair, and fell also on the grim, emaciated face of the old princess, whose eyes glittered feverishly under her thick brows.

"You knew my daughter was going to run away?" repeated the old woman, fixing her keen eyes on Natasha's face, trying to raise herself from among the lace−fringed pillows.

"I knew," the girl answered in a half whisper, lowering her eyes in confusion, and trying to throw off her first impression of terror.

"Why did you not tell me before?" the old woman continued, even more fiercely.

Natasha had now recovered her composure, and raising her eyes with an expression of innocent distress, she answered:

"Princess Anna hid everything from me also, until the very last. How dare I tell you? Would you have believed me? It was not my business, your excellency!"

The old princess shook her head, smiling bitterly and incredulously.

"Snake!" she hissed fiercely, looking at the girl; and then she added quickly:

"Did any of the others know?"

"No one but myself!" answered Natasha.

"Never dare to speak of her again! Never dare!" cried the old princess, and once more she sank back unconscious on the pillows.

About noon the next day she again came to herself, and ordered her son to be called. He came in quietly, and affectionately approached his mother.

The princess dismissed her maid, and remained alone with her son.

"You have no longer a sister!" she cried, turning to her son, with the nervous spasm which returned each time she spoke of her daughter. "She is dead for us! She has disgraced us! I curse her! You, you alone are my heir!"

At these words the young prince pricked up his ears and bent even more attentively toward his mother. The news of his sole heirship was so pleasant and unexpected that he did not even think of asking how his sister had

disgraced them, and only said with a deep sigh:

"Oh, mamma, she was always opposed to you. She never loved you!"

"I shall make a will in your favor," continued the princess, telling him as briefly as possible of Princess Anna's flight. "Yes, in your favor—only on one condition: that you will never recognize your sister. That is my last wish!

"Your wish is sacred to me," murmured her son, tenderly kissing her hand. He had always been jealous and envious of his sister, and was besides in immediate need of money.

The princess signed her will that same day, to the no small satisfaction of her dear son, who, in his heart, was wondering how soon his beloved parent would pass away, so that he might get his eyes on her long−hoarded wealth.

II. THE LITHOGRAPHER'S APPRENTICE

Later on the same day, in a little narrow chamber of one of the huge, dirty tenements on Vosnesenski Prospekt, sat a young man of ruddy complexion. He was sitting at a table, bending toward the one dusty window, and attentively examining a white twenty−five ruble note.

The room, dusty and dark, was wretched enough. Two rickety chairs, a torn haircloth sofa, with a greasy pillow, and the bare table at the window, were its entire furniture. Several scattered lithographs, two or three engravings, two slabs of lithographer's stone on the table, and engraver's tools sufficiently showed the occupation of the young man. He was florid, with red hair; of Polish descent, and his name was Kasimir Bodlevski. On the wall, over the sofa, between the overcoat and the cloak hanging on the wall, was a pencil drawing of a young girl. It was the portrait of Natasha.

The young man was so absorbed in his examination of the twenty−five ruble note that when a gentle knock sounded on the door he started nervously, as if coming back to himself, and even grew pale, and hurriedly crushed the banknote into his pocket.

The knock was repeated—and this time Bodlevski's face lit up. It was evidently a well−known and expected knock, for he sprang up and opened the door with a welcoming smile.

Natasha entered the room.

"What were you dreaming about that you didn't open the door for me?" she asked caressingly, throwing aside her hat and cloak, and taking a seat on the tumble−down sofa. "What were you busy at?"

"You know, yourself."

And instead of explaining further, he drew the banknote from his pocket and showed it to Natasha.

"This morning the master paid me, and I am keeping the money," he continued in a low voice, tilting back his chair. "I pay neither for my rooms nor my shop, but sit here and study all the time."

"It's so well worth while, isn't it?" smiled Natasha with a contemptuous grimace.

"You don't think it is worth while?" said the young man. "Wait! I'll learn. We'll be rich!

"Yes, if we aren't sent to Siberia!" the girl laughed. "What kind of wealth is that?" she went on. "The game is not worth the candle. I'll be rich before you are."

"All right, go ahead!"

"Go ahead? I didn't come to talk nonsense, I came on business. You help me, and, on my word of honor, we'll be in clover!"

Bodlevski looked at his companion in astonishment.

"I told you my Princess Anna was going to run away. She's gone! And her mother has cut her off from the inheritance," Natasha continued with an exultant smile. "I looked through the scrap basket, and have brought some papers with me."

"What sort of papers?"

"Oh, letters and notes. They are all in Princess Anna's handwriting. Shall I give them to you?" jested Natasha. "Have a good look at them, examine them, learn her handwriting, so that you can imitate every letter. That kind of thing is just in your line; you are a first−class copyist, so this is just the job for you."

The engraver listened, and only shrugged his shoulders.

"No, joking aside," she continued seriously, drawing nearer Bodlevski, "I have thought of something out of the common; you will be grateful. I have no time to explain it all now. You will know later on. The main thing is—learn her handwriting."

"But what is it all for?" said Bodlevski wonderingly.

"So that you may be able to write a few words in the handwriting of Princess Anna; what you have to write I'll dictate to you."

"And then?"

"Then hurry up and get me a passport in some one else's name, and have your own ready. But learn her handwriting. Everything depends on that!"

"It won't be easy. I'll hardly be able to!" muttered Bodlevski, scratching his head.

Natasha flared up.

"You say you love me?" she cried energetically, with a glance of anger. "Well, then, do it. Unless you are telling lies, you can learn to do banknotes."

The young man strode up and down his den, perplexed.

"How soon do you want it?" he asked, after a minute's thought. "In a couple of days?"

"Yes, in about two days, not longer, or the whole thing is done for!" the girl replied decisively. "In two days I'll come for the writing, and be sure my passport is ready!"

"Very well. I'll do it," consented Bodlevski. And Natasha began to dictate to him the wording of the letter.

As soon as she was gone the engraver got to work. All the evening and a great part of the night he bent over the papers she had brought, examining the handwriting, studying the letters, and practicing every stroke with the utmost care, copying and repeating it a hundred times, until at last he had reached the required clearness. At last he mastered the writing. It only remained to give it the needed lightness and naturalness. His head rang from the concentration of blood in his temples, but he still worked on.

Finally, when it was almost morning, the note was written, and the name of Princess Anna was signed to it. The work was a masterpiece, and even exceeded Bodlevski's expectations. Its lightness and clearness were remarkable. The engraver, examining the writing of Princess Anna, compared it with his own work, and was astonished, so perfect was the resemblance.

And long he admired his handiwork, with the parental pride known to every creator, and as he looked at this note he for the first time fully realized that he was an artist.

III. THE CAVE

"Half the work is done!" he cried, jumping from the tumble−down sofa. "But the passport? There's where the shoe pinches," continued the engraver, remembering the second half of Natasha's commission. "The passport—yes—that's where the shoe pinches!" he muttered to himself in perplexity, resting his head on his hands and his elbows on his knees. Thinking over all kinds of possible and impossible plans, he suddenly remembered a fellow countryman of his, a shoemaker named Yuzitch, who had once confessed in a moment of intoxication that "he would rather hook a watch than patch a shoe." Bodlevski remembered that three months before he had met Yuzitch in the street, and they had gone together to a wine shop, where, over a bottle generously ordered by Yuzitch, Bodlevski had lamented over the hardships of mankind in general, and his own in particular. He had not taken advantage of Yuzitch's offer to introduce him to "the gang," only because he had already determined to take up one of the higher branches of the "profession," namely, to metamorphose white paper into, banknotes. When they were parting, Yuzitch had warmly wrung his hand, saying:

"Whenever you want anything, dear friend, or if you just want to see me, come to the Cave; come to Razyeziy Street and ask for the Cave, and at the Cave anyone will show you where to find Yuzitch. If the barkeeper makes difficulties just whisper to him that 'Secret' sent you, and he'll show you at once."

As this memory suddenly flashed into his mind, Bodlevski caught up his hat and coat and hurried downstairs into the street. Making his way through the narrow, dirty streets to the Five Points, he stopped perplexed. Happily he noticed a sleepy watchman leaning leisurely against a wall, and going up to him he said:

"Tell me, where is the Cave?"

"The what?" asked the watchman impatiently.

"The Cave."

"The Cave? There is no such place!" he replied, looking suspiciously at Bodlevski.

Bodlevski put his hand in his pocket and pulled out some small change: "If you tell me—"

The watchman brightened up. "Why didn't you say so before?" he asked, grinning. "You see that house, the second from the corner? The wooden one? That's the Cave."

Bodlevski crossed the street in the direction indicated, and looked for the sign over the door. To his astonishment

he did not find it and only later he knew that the name was strictly "unofficial," only used by members of "the gang."

Opening the door cautiously, Bodlevski made his way into the low, dirty barroom. Behind the bar stood a tall, handsome man with an open countenance and a bald head. Politely bowing to Bodlevski, with his eyes rather than his head, he invited him to enter the inner room. But Bodlevski explained that he wanted, not the inner room, but his friend Yuzitch.

"Yuzitch?" said the barkeeper thoughtfully. "We don't know anyone of that name."

"Why, he's here all the time," cried Bodlevski, in astonishment.

"Don't know him," retorted the barkeeper imperturbably.

"'Secret' sent me!" Bodlevski suddenly exclaimed, without lowering his voice.

The barkeeper looked at him sharply and suspiciously, and then asked, with a smile:

"Who did you say?"

"'Secret,'" repeated Bodlevski.

After a while the barkeeper said, "And did your—friend make an appointment?"

"Yes, an appointment!" Bodlevski replied, beginning to lose patience.

"Well, take a seat in the inner room," again said the barkeeper slyly. "Perhaps your friend will come in, or perhaps he is there already."

Bodlevski made his way into a roomy saloon, with five windows with faded red curtains. The ceiling was black from the smoke of hanging lamps; little square tables were dotted about the floor; their covers were coarse and not above reproach on the score of cleanliness. The air was pungent with the odor of cheap tobacco and cheaper cigars. On the walls were faded oleographs of generals and archbishops, flyblown and stained.

Bodlevski, little as he was used to refined surroundings, found his gorge rising. At some of the little tables furtive, impudent, tattered, sleek men were drinking.

Presently Yuzitch made his appearance from a low door at the other end of the room. The meeting of the two friends was cordial, especially on Bodlevski's side. Presently they were seated at a table, with a flask of wine between them, and Bodlevski began to explain what he wanted to his friend.

As soon as he heard what was wanted, Yuzitch took on an air of importance, knit his brows, hemmed, and hawed.

"I can manage it," he said finally. "Yes, we can manage it. I must see one of my friends about it. But it's difficult. It will cost money."

Bodlevski immediately assented. Yuzitch at once rose and went over to a red−nosed individual in undress uniform, who was poring over the Police News.

"Friend Borisovitch," said Yuzitch, holding out his hand to him, "something doing!"

"Fair or foul?" asked the man with the red nose.

"Hang your cheek!" laughed Yuzitch; "if I say it, of course it's fair." After a whispered conference, Yuzitch returned to Bodlevski and told him that it was all right; that the passport for Natasha would be ready by the next evening. Bodlevski paid him something in advance and went home triumphantly.

At eleven o'clock the next evening Bodlevski once more entered the large room at the Cave, now all lit up and full of an animated crowd of men and women, all with the same furtive, predatory faces. Bodlevski felt nervous. He had no fears while turning white paper into banknotes in the seclusion of his own workshop, but he was full of apprehensions concerning his present guest, because several people had to be let into the secret.

Yuzitch presently appeared through the same low door and, coming up to Bodlevski, explained that the passport would cost twenty rubles. Bodlevski paid the money over in advance, and Yuzitch led him into a back room. On the table burned a tallow candle, which hardly lit up the faces of seven people who were grouped round it, one of them being the red−nosed man who was reading the Police News. The seven men were all from the districts of Vilna and Vitebsk, and were specialists in the art of fabricating passports.

The red−nosed man approached Bodlevski: "We must get acquainted with each other," he said amiably. "I have the honor to present myself!" and he bowed low; "Former District Secretary Pacomius Borisovitch Prakkin. Let me request you first of all to order some vodka; my hand shakes, you know," he added apologetically. "I don't want it so much for myself as for my hand—to steady it."

Bodlevski gave him some change, which the red−nosed man put in his pocket and at once went to the sideboard for a flask of vodka which he had already bought. "Let us give thanks! And now to business!" he said, smacking his lips after a glass of vodka.

A big, red−haired man, one of the group of seven, drew from his pocket two vials. In one was a sticky black fluid; in the other, something as clear as water.

"We are chemists, you see," the red−nosed man explained to Bodlevski with a grin, and then added:

"Finch! on guard!"

A young man, who had been lolling on a couch in the corner, rose and took up a position outside the door.

"Now, brothers, close up!" cried the red−nosed man, and all stood in close order, elbow to elbow, round the table. "And now we take a newspaper and have it handy on the table! That is in case," he explained to Bodlevski, "any outsider happened in on us—which Heaven prevent! We aren't up to anything at all; simply reading the political news! You catch on?"

"How could I help catching on?"

"Very well. And now let us make everything as clear as in a looking−glass. What class do you wish to make the person belong to? The commercial or the nobility?"

"I think the nobility would be best," said Bodlevski.

"Certainly! At least that will give the right of free passage through all the towns and districts of the Russian Empire. Let us see. Have we not something that will suit?"

And Pacomius Borisovitch, opening his portfolio, filled with all kinds of passports, certificates, and papers of identification, began to turn them over, but without taking any out of the portfolio. All with the same thought—that some stranger might come in.

"Ha! here's a new one! Where did it come from?" he cried.

"I got it out of a new arrival," muttered the red−headed man.

"Well done! Just what we want! And a noble's passport, too! It is evident that Heaven is helping us. See what a blessing brings!

"'This passport is issued by the District of Yaroslav,'" he continued reading, "'to the college assessor's widow, Maria Solontseva, with permission to travel,'" and so on in due form. "Did you get it here?" he added, turning to the red−headed man.

"Came from Moscow!"

"Pinched?"

"Knocked on the head!" briefly replied the red−headed man.

"Knocked on the head?" repeated Pacomius Borisovitch. "Serious business. Comes under sections 332 and 727 of the Penal Code."

"Driveling again!" cried the red−headed man. "I'll teach you to talk about the Penal Code!" and rising deliberately, he dealt Pacomius Borisovitch a well−directed blow on the head, which sent him rolling into the corner. Pacomius picked himself up, blinking with indignation.

"What is the meaning of such conduct?" he asked loftily.

"It means," said the red−headed man, "that if you mention the Penal Code again I'll knock your head off!"

"Brothers, brothers!" cried Yuzitch in a good−humored tone; "we are losing precious time! Forgive him!" he added, turning to Pacomius. "You must forgive him!"

"I—forgive him," answered Pacomius, but the light in his eye showed that he was deeply offended.

"Well," he went on, addressing Bodlevski, "will it suit you to have the person pass as Maria Solontseva, widow of a college assessor?"

IV. THE CAPTAIN OF THE GOLDEN BAND

Bodlevski had not time to nod his head in assent, when suddenly the outer door was pushed quickly open and a tall man, well built and fair−haired, stepped swiftly into the room. He wore a military uniform and gold−rimmed eyeglasses.

The company turned their faces toward him in startled surprise, but no one moved. All continued to stand in close order round the table.

"Health to you, eaglets! honorable men of Vilna! What are you up to? What are you busy at?" cried the

newcomer, swiftly approaching the table and taking the chair that Pacomius Borisovitch had just been knocked out of.

"What is all this?" he continued, with one hand seizing the vial of colorless liquid and with the other the photograph of the college assessor's widow. "So this is hydrochloric acid for erasing ink? Very good! And this is a photo! So we are fabricating passports? Very fine! Business is business! Hey! Witnesses!"

And the fair−haired man whistled sharply. From the outer door appeared two faces, set on shoulders of formidable proportions.

The red−headed man silently went up to the newcomer and fiercely seized him by the collar. At the same moment the rest seized chairs or logs or bars to defend themselves.

The fair−haired man meanwhile, not in the least changing his expression of cool self−confidence, quickly slipped his hands into his pockets and pulled out a pair of small double−barreled pistols. In the profound silence in which this scene took place they could distinctly hear the click of the hammers as he cocked them. He raised his right hand and pointed the muzzle at the breast of his opponent.

The red−headed man let go his collar, and glancing contemptuously at him, with an expression of hate and wrath, silently stepped aside.

"How much must we pay?" he asked sullenly.

"Oho! that's better. You should have begun by asking that!" answered the newcomer, settling himself comfortably on his chair and toying with his pistols. "How much do you earn?"

"We get little enough! Just five rubles," answered the red−headed man.

"That's too little. I need a great deal more. But you are lying, brother! You would not stir for less than twenty rubles!"

"Thanks for the compliment!" interrupted Pacomius Borisovitch.

The fair−haired man nodded to him satirically. "I need a lot more," he repeated firmly and impressively; "and if you don't give me at least twenty−five rubles I'll denounce you this very minute to the police—and you see I have my witnesses ready."

"Sergei Antonitch! Mr. Kovroff! Have mercy on us! Where can we get so much from? I tell you as in the presence of the Creator! There are ten of us, as you see. And there are three of you. And I, Yuzitch, and Gretcka deserve double shares!" added Pacomius Borisovitch persuasively.

"Gretcka deserves nothing at all for catching me by the throat," decided Sergei Antonitch Kovroff.

"Mr. Kovroff!" began Pacomius again. "You and I are gentlemen—"

"What! What did you say?" Kovroff contemptuously interrupted him. "You put yourself on my level? Ha! ha! ha! No, brother; I am still in the Czar's service and wear my honor with my uniform! I, brother, have never stained myself with theft or crime, Heaven be praised. But what are you?"

"Hm! And the Golden Band? Who is its captain?" muttered Gretcka angrily, half to himself.

"Who is its captain? I am—I, Lieutenant Sergei Antonitch Kovroff, of the Chernovarski Dragoons! Do you hear? I am captain of the Golden Band," he said proudly and haughtily, scrutinizing the company with his confident gaze. "And you haven't yet got as far as the Golden Band, because you are COWARDS! Chuproff," he cried to one of his men, "go and take the mask off Finch, or the poor boy will suffocate, and untie his arms—and give him a good crack on the head to teach him to keep watch better."

The "mask" that Kovroff employed on such occasions was nothing but a piece of oilcloth cut the size of a person's face, and smeared on one side with a thick paste. Kovroff's "boys" employed this "instrument" with wonderful dexterity; one of them generally stole up behind the unconscious victim and skillfully slapped the mask in his face; the victim at once became dumb and blind, and panted from lack of breath; at the same time, if necessary, his hands were tied behind him and he was leisurely robbed, or held, as the case might be.

The Golden Band was formed in the middle of the thirties, when the first Nicholas had been about ten years on the throne. Its first founders were three Polish nobles. It was never distinguished by the number of its members, but everyone of them could honestly call himself an accomplished knave, never stopping at anything that stood in the way of a "job." The present head of the band was Lieutenant Kovroff, who was a thorough−paced rascal, in the full sense of the word. Daring, brave, self−confident, he also possessed a handsome presence, good manners, and the worldly finish known as education. Before the members of the Golden Band, and especially before Kovroff, the small rascals stood in fear and trembling. He had his secret agents everywhere, following every move of the crooks quietly but pertinaciously. At the moment when some big job was being pulled off, Kovroff suddenly appeared unexpectedly, with some of his "boys," and demanded a contribution, threatening instantly to inform the police if he did not get it—and the rogues, in order to "keep him quiet," had to give him whatever share of their plunder he graciously deigned to indicate. Acting with extraordinary skill and acumen in all his undertakings he always managed so that not a shadow of suspicion could fall on himself and so he got a double share of the plunder: robbing the honest folk and the rogues at the same time. Kovroff escaped the contempt of the crooks because he did things on such a big scale and embarked with his Golden Band on the most desperate and dangerous enterprises that the rest of roguedom did not even dare to consider.

The rogues, whatever their rank, have a great respect for daring, skill, and force—and therefore they respected Kovroff, at the same time fearing and detesting him.

"Who are you getting that passport for?" he asked, calmly taking the paper from the table and slipping it into his pocket. Gretcka nodded toward Bodlevski.

"Aha! for you, is it? Very glad to hear it!" said Kovroff, measuring him with his eyes. "And so, gentlemen, twenty−five rubles, or good−by—to our happy meeting in the police court!"

"Mr. Kovroff! Allow me to speak to you as a man of honor!" Pacomius Borisovitch again interrupted. "We are only getting twenty rubles for the job. The whole gang will pledge their words of honor to that. Do you think we would lie to you and stain the honor of the gang for twenty measly rubles?"

"That is business. That was well said. I love a good speech, and am always ready to respect it," remarked Sergei Antonitch approvingly.

"Very well, then, see for yourself," went on the red−nosed Pacomius, "see for yourself. If we give you everything, we are doing our work and not getting a kopeck!"

"Let him pay," answered Kovroff, turning his eyes toward Bodlevski.

Bodlevski took out his gold watch, his only inheritance from his father, and laid it down on the table before Kovroff with the five rubles that remained.

Kovroff again measured him with his eyes and smiled.

"You are a worthy young man!" he said. "Give me your hand! I see that you will go far."

And he warmly pressed the engraver's hand. "But you must know for the future," he added in a friendly but impressive way, "that I never take anything but money when I am dealing with these fellows. Ho, you!" he went on, turning to the company, "some one go to uncle's and get cash for this watch; tell him to pay conscientiously at least two thirds of what it is worth; it is a good watch. It would cost sixty rubles to buy. And have a bottle of champagne got ready for me at the bar, quick! And if you don't, it will be the worse for you!" he called after the departing Yuzitch, who came back a few minutes later, and gave Kovroff forty rubles. Kovroff counted them, and put twenty in his pocket, returning the remainder in silence, but with a gentlemanly smile, to Bodlevski.

"Fair exchange is no robbery," he said, giving Bodlevski the passport of the college assessor's widow. "Now that old rascal Pacomius may get to work."

"What is there to do?" laughed Pacomius; "the passport will do very well. So let us have a little glass, and then a little game of cards."

"We are going to know each other better; I like your face, so I hope we shall make friends," said Kovroff, again shaking hands with Bodlevski. "Now let us go and have some wine. You will tell me over our glasses what you want the passport for, and on account of your frankness about the watch, I am well disposed to you. Lieutenant Sergei Kovroff gives you his word of honor on that. I also can be magnanimous," he concluded, and the new friends accompanied by the whole gang went out to the large hall.

There began a scene of revelry that lasted till long after midnight. Bodlevski, feeling his side pocket to see if the passport was still there, at last left the hall, bewildered, as though under a spell. He felt a kind of gloomy satisfaction; he was possessed by this satisfaction, by the uncertainty of what Natasha could have thought out, by the question how it would all turn out, and by the conviction that his first crime had already been committed. All these feelings lay like lead on his heart, while in his ears resounded the wild songs of the Cave.

V. THE KEYS OF THE OLD PRINCESS

It was nine o'clock in the evening. Natasha lit the night lamp in the bedroom of the old Princess Chechevinski, and went silently into the dressing room to prepare the soothing powders which the doctors had prescribed for her, before going to sleep.

The old princess was still very weak. Although her periods of unconsciousness had not returned, she was still subject to paroxysms of hysteria. At times she sank into forgetfulness, then started nervously, sometimes trembling in every limb. The thought of the blow of her daughter's flight never left her for a moment.

Natasha had just taken the place of the day nurse. It was her turn to wait on the patient until midnight. Silence always reigned in the house of the princess, and now that she was ill the silence was intensified tenfold. Everyone walked on tiptoe, and spoke in whispers, afraid even of coughing or of clinking a teaspoon on the sideboard. The doorbells were tied in towels, and the whole street in front of the house was thickly strewn with straw. At ten the household was already dispersed, and preparing for sleep. Only the nurse sat silently at the head of the old lady's bed.

Pouring out half a glass of water. Natasha sprinkled the powder in it, and took from the medicine chest a phial with a yellowish liquid. It was chloral. Looking carefully round, she slowly brought the lip of the phial down to the edge of the glass and let ten drops fall into it. "That will be enough," she said to herself, and smiled. Her face,

as always, was coldly quiet, and not the slightest shade of any feeling was visible on it at that moment.

Natasha propped the old lady up with her arm. She drank the medicine given to her and lay down again, and in a few minutes the chloral began to have its effect. With an occasional convulsive movement of her lower lip, she sank into a deep and heavy sleep. Natasha watched her face following the symptoms of unconsciousness, and when she was convinced that sleep had finally taken complete possession of her, and that for several hours the old woman was deprived of the power to hear anything or to wake up, she slowly moved her chair nearer the bedstead, and without taking her quietly observant eyes from the old woman's face, softly slipped her hand under the lower pillow. Moving forward with the utmost care, not more than an inch or so at a time, her hand stopped instantly, as soon as there was the slightest nervous movement of the old woman's face, on which Natasha's eyes were fixed immovably. But the old woman slept profoundly, and the hand again moved forward half an inch or so under the pillow. About half an hour passed, and the girl's eyes were still fastened on the sleeping face, and her hand was still slipping forward under the pillow, moving occasionally a little to one side, and feeling about for something. Natasha's expression was in the highest degree quiet and concentrated, but under this quietness was at the same time concealed something else, which gave the impression that if—which Heaven forbid!—the old woman should at that moment awake, the other free hand would instantly seize her by the throat.

At last the finger−ends felt something hard. "That is it!" thought Natasha, and she held her breath. In a moment, seizing its treasure, her hand began quietly to withdraw. Ten minutes more passed, and Natasha finally drew out a little bag of various colored silks, in which the old princess always kept her keys, and from which she never parted, carrying it by day in her pocket, and by night keeping it under her pillow. One of the keys was an ordinary one, that of her wardrobe. The other was smaller and finely made; it was the key of her strong box.

About an hour later, the same keys, in the same order, and with the same precautions, found their way back to their accustomed place under the old lady's pillow.

Natasha carefully wiped the glass with her handkerchief, in order that not the least odor of chloral might remain in it, and with her usual stillness sat out the remaining hours of her watch.

VI. REVENGED

The old princess awoke at one o'clock the next day. The doctor was very pleased at her long and sound sleep, the like of which the old lady had not enjoyed since her first collapse, and which, in his view, was certain to presage a turn for the better.

The princess had long ago formed a habit of looking over her financial documents, and verifying the accounts of income and expenditure. This deep−seated habit, which had become a second nature, did not leave her, now she was ill; at any rate, every morning, as soon as consciousness and tranquillity returned to her, she took out the key of her wardrobe, ordered the strong box to be brought to her, and, sending the day nurse out of the room, gave herself up in solitude to her beloved occupation, which had by this time become something like a childish amusement. She drew out her bank securities, signed and unsigned, now admiring the colored engravings on them, now sorting and rearranging them, fingering the packets to feel their thickness, counting them over, and several thousands in banknotes, kept in the house in case of need, and finally carefully replaced them in the strong box. The girl, recalled to the bedroom by the sound of the bell, restored the strong box to its former place, and the old princess, after this amusement, felt herself for some time quiet and happy.

The nurses had had the opportunity to get pretty well used to this foible; so that the daily examination of the strong box seemed to them a part of the order of things, something consecrated by custom.

After taking her medicine, and having her hands and face wiped with a towel moistened with toilet water, the

princess ordered certain prayers to be read out to her, or the chapter of the Gospel appointed for the day, and then received her son. From the time of her illness—that is, from the day when she signed the will making him her sole heir—he had laid it on himself as a not altogether pleasant duty to put in an appearance for five minutes in his mother's room, where he showed himself a dutiful son by never mentioning his sister, but asking tenderly after his mother's health, and finally, with a deep sigh, gently kissing her hand, taking his departure forthwith, to sup with some actress or to meet his companions in a wine shop.

When he soon went away, the old lady, as was her habit, ordered her strong box to be brought, and sent the nurse out of the room. It was a very handsome box of ebony, with beautiful inlaid work.

The key clicked in the lock, the spring lid sprang up, and the eyes of the old princess became set in their sockets, full of bewilderment and terror. Twenty−four thousand rubles in bills, which she herself with her own hands had yesterday laid on the top of the other securities, were no longer in the strong box. All the unsigned bank securities were also gone. The securities in the name of her daughter Anna had likewise disappeared. There remained only the signed securities in the name of the old princess and her son, and a few shares of stock. In the place of all that was gone, there lay a note directed "to Princess Chechevinski."

The old lady's fingers trembled so that for a long time she could not unfold this paper. Her staring eyes wandered hither and thither as if she had lost her senses. At last she managed somehow to unfold the note, and began to read:

"You cursed me, forced me to flee, and unjustly deprived me of my inheritance. I am taking my money by force. You may inform the police, but when you read this note, I myself and he who carried out this act by my directions, will have left St. Petersburg forever.

"Your daughter,

"PRINCESS ANNA CHECHEVINSKI."

The old lady's hands did not fall at her sides, but shifted about on her lap as if they did not belong to her. Her wandering, senseless eyes stopped their movements, and in them suddenly appeared an expression of deep meaning. The old princess made a terrible, superhuman effort to recover her presence of mind and regain command over herself. A single faint groan broke from her breast, and her teeth chattered. She began to look about the room for a light, but the lamp had been extinguished; the dull gray daylight filtering through the Venetian blinds sufficiently lit the room. Then the old lady, with a strange, irregular movement, crushed the note together in her hand, placed it in her mouth, and with a convulsive movement of her jaws chewed it, trying to swallow it as quickly as possible.

A minute passed, and the note had disappeared. The old princess closed the strong box and rang for the day nurse. Giving her the usual order in a quiet voice, she had still strength enough to support herself on her elbow and watch the nurse closing the wardrobe, and then to put the little bag with the keys back under her pillow, in its accustomed place. Then she again ordered the nurse to go.

When, two hours later, the doctor, coming for the third time, wished to see his patient and entered her bedroom, he found only the old woman's lifeless body. The blow had been too much—the daughter of the ancient and ever honorable line of Chechevinski a fugitive and a thief!

Natasha had had her revenge.

VII. BEYOND THE FRONTIER

On the morning of that same day, at nine o'clock, a well−dressed lady presented at the Bank of Commerce a number of unsigned bank shares. At the same time a young man, also elegantly dressed, presented a series of signed shares, made out in the name of "Princess Anna Chechevinski." They were properly indorsed, the signature corresponding to that in the bank books.

After a short interval the cashier of the bank paid over to the well−dressed lady a hundred and fifty thousand rubles in bills, and to the elegantly dressed young man seventy thousand rubles. The lady signed her receipt in French, Teresa Dore; the young man signed his name, Ivan Afonasieff, son of a merchant of Kostroma.

A little later on the same day—namely, about two o'clock—a light carriage carried two passengers along the Pargoloff road: a quietly dressed young woman and a quietly dressed young man. Toward evening these same young people were traveling in a Finnish coach by the stony mountain road in the direction of Abo.

Four days later the old Princesss Chechevinski was buried in the Nevski monastery.

On his return from the monastery, young Prince Chechevinski went straight for the strong box, which he had hitherto seen only at a distance, and even then only rarely. He expected to find a great deal more money in it than he found—some hundred and fifty thousand rubles; a hundred thousand in his late mother's name, and fifty thousand in his own. This was the personal property of the old princess, a part of her dowry. The young prince made a wry face—the money might last him two or three years, not more. During the lifetime of the old princess no one had known accurately how much she possessed, so that it never even entered the young prince's head to ask whether she had not had more. He was so unmethodical that he never even looked into her account book, deciding that it was uninteresting and not worth while.

That same day the janitor of one of the huge, dirty tenements in Vosnesenski Prospekt brought to the police office notice of the fact that the Pole, Kasimir Bodlevski, had left the city; and the housekeeper of the late Princess Chechevinski informed the police that the serf girl Natalia Pavlovna (Natasha) had disappeared without leaving a trace, which the housekeeper now announced, as the three days' limit had elapsed.

At that same hour the little ship of a certain Finnish captain was gliding down the Gulf of Bothnia. The Finn stood at the helm and his young son handled the sails. On the deck sat a young man and a young woman. The young woman carried, in a little bag hung round her neck, two hundred and forty−four thousand rubles in bills, and she and her companion carried pistols in their pockets for use in case of need. Their passports declared that the young woman belonged to the noble class, and was the widow of a college assessor, her name being Maria Solontseva, while the young man was a Pole, Kasimir Bodlevski.

The little ship was crossing the Gulf of Bothnia toward the coast of Sweden.

VIII. BACK TO RUSSIA

In the year 1858, in the month of September, the "Report of the St. Petersburg City Police" among the names of "Arrivals" included the following:

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Baroness von Doring, Hanoverian subject.

Ian Vladislav Karozitch, Austrian subject.
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The persons above described might have been recognized among the fashionable crowds which thronged the St. Petersburg terminus of the Warsaw railway a few days before: A lady who looked not more than thirty, though she was really thirty−eight, dressed with simple elegance, tall and slender, admirably developed, with beautifully clear complexion, piercing, intelligent gray eyes, under finely outlined brows, thick chestnut hair, and a firm mouth− −almost a beauty, and with an expression of power, subtlety and decision. "She is either a queen or a criminal," a physiognomist would have said after observing her face. A gentleman with a red beard, whom the lady addressed as "brother," not less elegantly dressed, and with the same expression of subtlety and decision. They left the station in a hired carriage, and drove to Demuth's Hotel.

Before narrating the adventures of these distinguished persons, let us go back twenty years, and ask what became of Natasha and Bodlevski. When last we saw them the ship that carried them away from Russia was gliding across the Gulf of Bothnia toward the Swedish coast. Late in the evening it slipped into the port of Stockholm, and the worthy Finn, winding in and out among the heavy hulls in the harbor—he was well used to the job—landed his passengers on the wharf at a lonely spot near a lonely inn, where the customs officers rarely showed their noses. Bodlevski, who had beforehand got ready the very modest sum to pay for their passage, with pitiable looks and gestures and the few Russian phrases the good Finn could understand, assured him that he was a very poor man, and could not even pay the sum agreed on in full. The deficit was inconsiderable, some two rubles in all, and the good Finn was magnanimous; he slapped his passenger on the shoulder, called him a "good comrade," declared that he would not press a poor man, and would always be ready to do him a service. He even found quarters for Bodlevski and Natasha in the inn, under his protection. The Finn was indeed a very honest smuggler. On the next morning, bidding a final farewell to their nautical friend, our couple made their way to the office of the British Consul, and asked for an opportunity to speak with him. At this point Natasha played the principal role.

'My husband is a Pole," said the handsome girl, taking a seat opposite the consul in his private office, "and I myself am Russian on the father's side, but my mother was English. My husband is involved in a political enterprise; he was liable to transportation to Siberia, but a chance made it possible for us to escape while the police were on their way to arrest him. We are now political fugitives, and we intrust our lives to the protection of English law. Be generous, protect us, and send us to England!"

The ruse, skillfully planned and admirably presented, was completely successful, and two or three days later the first passenger ship under the English flag carried the happy couple to London.

Bodlevski destroyed his own passport and that of the college assessor's widow, Maria Solontseva, which Natasha had needed as a precaution while still on Russian soil. When they got to England, it would be much handier to take new names. But with their new position and these new names a great difficulty presented itself: they could find no suitable outlet for their capital without arousing very dangerous suspicions. The many−sided art of the London rogues is known to all the world; in their club, Bodlevski, who had lost no time in making certain pleasant and indispensable acquaintances there, soon succeeded in getting for himself and Natasha admirably counterfeited new passports, once more with new names and occupations. With these, in a short time, they found their way to the Continent. They both felt the full force of youth and a passionate desire to live and enjoy life; in their hot heads hummed many a golden hope and plan; they wished, to begin with, to invest their main capital somewhere, and then to travel over Europe, and to choose a quiet corner somewhere where they could settle down to a happy life.

Perhaps all this might have happened if it had not been for cards and roulette and the perpetual desire of increasing their capital— for the worthy couple fell into the hands of a talented company, whose agents robbed them at Frascati's in Paris, and again in Hamburg and various health resorts, so that hardly a year had passed when Bodlevski one fine night woke up to the fact that they no longer possessed a ruble. But they had passed a brilliant year, their arrival in the great cities had had its effect, and especially since Natasha had become a person of title; in the course of the year she succeeded in purchasing an Austrian barony at a very reasonable figure—a barony

which, of course, only existed on paper.

When all his money was gone, there was nothing left for Bodlevski but to enroll himself a member of the company which had so successfully accomplished the transfer of his funds to their own pockets. Natasha's beauty and Bodlevski's brains were such strong arguments that the company willingly accepted them as new recruits. The two paid dear for their knowledge, it is true, but their knowledge presently began to bear fruit in considerable abundance. Day followed day, and year succeeded year, a long series of horribly anxious nights, violent feelings, mental perturbations, crafty and subtle schemes, a complete cycle of rascalities, an entire science of covering up tracks, and the perpetual shadow of justice, prison, and perhaps the scaffold. Bodlevski, with his obstinate, persistent, and concentrated character, reached the highest skill in card−sharping and the allied wiles. All games of "chance" were for him games of skill. At thirty he looked at least ten years older. The life he led, with its ceaseless effort, endless mental work, perpetual anxiety, had made of him a fanatical worshiper at the shrine of trickery. He dried up visibly in body and grew old in mind, mastering all the difficult arts of his profession, and only gained confidence and serenity when he had reached the highest possible skill in every branch of his "work." From that moment he took a new lease of life; he grew younger, he became gay and self−confident, his health even visibly improved, and he assumed the air and manner of a perfect gentleman.

As for Natasha, her life and efforts in concert with Bodlevski by no means had the same wearing effect on her as on him. Her proud, decided nature received all these impressions quite differently. She continued to blossom out, to grow handsomer, to enjoy life, to take hearts captive. All the events which aroused so keen a mental struggle in her companion she met with entire equanimity. The reason was this: When she made up her mind to anything, she always decided at once and with unusual completeness; a very short time given to keen and accurate consideration, a rapid weighing of the gains and losses of the matter in hand, and then she went forward coldly and unswervingly on her chosen path. Her first aim in life had been revenge, then a brilliant and luxurious life—and she knew that they would cost dear. Therefore, once embarked on her undertaking, Natasha remained calm and indifferent, brilliantly distinguished, and ensnaring the just and the unjust alike. Her intellect, education, skill, resource, and innate tact made it possible for her everywhere to gain a footing in select aristocratic society, and to play by no means the least role there. Many beauties envied her, detested her, spoke evil of her, and yet sought her friendship, because she almost always queened it in society. Her friendship and sympathy always seemed so cordial, so sincere and tender, and her epigrams were so pointed and poisonous, that every hostile criticism seemed to shrivel up in that glittering fire, and there seemed to be nothing left but to seek her friendship and good will. For instance, if things went well in Baden, one could confidently foretell that at the end of the summer season Natasha would be found in Nice or Geneva, queen of the winter season, the lioness of the day, and the arbiter of fashion. She and Bodlevski always behaved with such propriety and watchful care that not a shadow ever fell on Natasha's fame. It is true that Bodlevski had to change his name once or twice and to seek a new field for his talents, and to make sudden excursions to distant corners of Europe—sometimes in pursuit of a promising "job," sometimes to evade the too persistent attentions of the police. So far everything had turned out favorably, and his name "had remained unstained," when suddenly a slight mishap befell. The matter was a trifling one, but the misfortune was that it happened in Paris. There was a chance that it might find issue in the courts and the hulks, so that there ensued a more than ordinarily rapid change of passports and a new excursion—this time to Russia, back to their native land again, after an absence of twenty years. Thus it happened that the papers announced the arrival in St. Petersburg of Baroness von Doring and Ian Vladislav Karozitch.

IX. THE CONCERT OF THE POWERS

A few days after there was a brilliant reunion at Princess Shadursky's. All the beauty and fashion of St. Petersburg were invited, and few who were invited failed to come. It happened that Prince Shadursky was an admirer of the fair sex, and also that he had had the pleasure of meeting the brilliant Baroness von Doring at Hamburg, and again in Paris. It was, therefore, to be expected that Baroness von Doring should be found in the midst of an admiring throng at Princess Shadursky's reception. Her brother, Ian Karozitch, was also there, suave, alert, dignified, losing

no opportunity to make friends with the distinguished company that thronged he prince's rooms.

Late in the evening the baroness and her brother might have been seen engaged in a tete−a−tete, seated in two comfortable armchairs, and anyone who was near enough might have heard the following conversation:

"How goes it?" Karozitch asked in a low tone.

"As you see, I am making a bit," answered the baroness in the same quiet tone. But her manner was so detached and indifferent that no one could have guessed her remark was of the least significance. It should be noted that this was her first official presentation to St. Petersburg society. And in truth her beauty, united with her lively intellect, her amiability, and her perfect taste in dress, had produced a general and even remarkable effect. People talked about her and became interested in her, and her first evening won her several admirers among those well placed in society.

"I have been paying attention to the solid capitalists," replied Karozitch; "we have made our debut in the role of practical actors. Well, what about him?" he continued, indicating Prince Shadursky with his eyes.

"In the web," she replied, with a subtle smile.

"Then we can soon suck his brains?"

"Soon—but he must be tied tighter first. But we must not talk here." A moment later Karozitch and the baroness were in the midst of the brilliant groups of guests.

A few late corners were still arriving. "Count Kallash!" announced the footman, who stood at the chief entrance to the large hall.

At this new and almost unknown but high−sounding name, many eyes were turned toward the door through which the newcomer must enter. A hum of talk spread among the guests:

"Count Kallash—"

"Who is he—?"

"It is a Hungarian name—I think I heard of him somewhere."

"Is this his first appearance?"

"Who is this Kallash? Oh, yes, one of the old Hungarian families—"

"How interesting—"

Such questions and answers crossed each other in a running fire among the various groups of guests who filled the hall, when a young man appeared in the doorway.

He lingered a moment to glance round the rooms and the company; then, as if conscious of the remarks and glances directed toward him, but completely "ignoring" them, and without the least shyness or awkwardness, he walked quietly through the hall to the host and hostess of the evening.

People of experience, accustomed to society and the ways of the great world, can often decide from the first minute the role which anyone is likely to play among them. People of experience, at the first view of this young

man, at his first entrance, merely by the way he entered the hall, decided that his role in society would be brilliant—that more than one feminine heart would beat faster for his presence, that more than one dandy's wrath would be kindled by his successes.

"How handsome he is!" a whisper went round among the ladies. The men for the most part remained silent. A few twisted the ends of their mustache and made as though they had not noticed him. This was already enough to foreshadow a brilliant career.

And indeed Count Kallash could not have passed unnoticed, even among a thousand young men of his class. Tall and vigorous, wonderfully well proportioned, he challenged comparison with Antinous. His pale face, tanned by the sun, had an expression almost of weariness. His high forehead, with clustering black hair and sharply marked brows, bore the impress of passionate feeling and turbulent thought strongly repressed. It was difficult to define the color of his deep−set, somewhat sunken eyes, which now flashed with southern fire, and were now veiled, so that one seemed to be looking into an abyss. A slight mustache and pointed beard partly concealed the ironical smile that played on his passionate lips. The natural grace of good manners and quiet but admirably cut clothes completed the young man's exterior, behind which, in spite of all his reticence, could be divined a haughty and exceptional nature. A more profound psychologist would have seen in him an obstinately passionate, ungrateful nature, which takes from others everything it desires, demanding it from them as a right and without even a nod of acknowledgment. Such was Count Nicholas Kallash.

A few days after the reception at Prince Shadursky's Baroness von Doring was installed in a handsome apartment on Mokhovoi Street, at which her "brother," Ian Karozitch, or, to give him his former name, Bodlevski, was a frequent visitor. By a "lucky accident" he had met on the day following the reception our old friend Sergei Antonovitch Kovroff, the "captain of the Golden Band." Their recognition was mutual, and, after a more or less faithful recital of the events of the intervening years, they had entered into an offensive and defensive alliance.

When Baroness von Doring was comfortably settled in her new quarters, Sergei Antonovitch brought a visitor to Bodlevski: none other than the Hungarian nobleman, Count Nicholas Kallash.

"Gentlemen, you are strangers; let me introduce you to each other," said Kovroff, presenting Count Kallash to Bodlevski.

"Very glad to know you," answered the Hungarian count, to Bodlevski's astonishment in Russian; "very glad, indeed! I have several times had the honor of hearing of you. Was it not you who had some trouble about forged notes in Paris?"

"Oh, no! You are mistaken, dear count!" answered Bodlevski, with a pleasant smile. "The matter was not of the slightest importance. The amount was a trifle and I was unwilling even to appear in court!"

"You preferred a little journey to Russia, didn't you?" Kovroff remarked with a smile.

"Little vexations of that kind may happen to anyone," said Bodlevski, ignoring Kovroff's interruption. "You yourself, dear count, had some trouble about some bonds, if I am not mistaken?"

"You are mistaken," the count interrupted him sharply. "I have had various troubles, but I prefer not to talk about them."

"Gentlemen," interrupted Kovroff, "we did not come here to quarrel, but to talk business. Our good friend Count Kallash," he went on, turning to Bodlevski, "wishes to have the pleasure of cooperating in our common undertaking, and—I can recommend him very highly."

"Ah!" said Bodlevski, after a searching study of the count's face. "I understand! the baroness will return in a few minutes and then we can discuss matters at our leisure."

But in spite of this understanding it was evident that Bodlevski and Count Kallash had not impressed each other very favorably. This, however, did not prevent the concert of the powers from working vigorously together.

X. AN UNEXPECTED REUNION

On the wharf of the Fontauka, not far from Simeonovski Bridge, a crowd was gathered. In the midst of the crowd a dispute raged between an old woman, tattered, disheveled, miserable, and an impudent−looking youth. The old woman was evidently stupid from misery and destitution.

While the quarrel raged a new observer approached the crowd. He was walking leisurely, evidently without an aim and merely to pass the time, so it is not to be wondered at that the loud dispute arrested his attention.

"Who are you, anyway, you old hag? What is your name?" cried the impudent youth.

"My name? My name?" muttered the old woman in confusion. "I am a— I am a princess," and she blinked at the crowd.

Everyone burst out laughing. "Her Excellency, the Princess! Make way for the Princess!" cried the youth.

The old woman burst into sudden anger.

"Yes, I tell you, I am a princess by birth!" and her eyes flashed as she tried to draw herself up and impose on the bantering crowd.

"Princess What? Princess Which? Princess How?" cried the impudent youth, and all laughed loudly.

"No! Not Princess How!" answered the old woman, losing the last shred of self−restraint; but Princess Che−che−vin−ski! Princess Anna Chechevinski!"

When he heard this name Count Kallash started and his whole expression changed. He grew suddenly pale, and with a vigorous effort pushed his way through the crowd to the miserable old woman's side.

"Come!" he said, taking her by the arm. "Come with me! I have something for you!"

"Something for me?" answered the old woman, looking up with stupid inquiry and already forgetting the existence of the impudent youth. "Yes, I'll come! What have you got for me?"

Count Kallash led her by the arm out of the crowd, which began to disperse, abashed by his appearance and air of determination. Presently he hailed a carriage, and putting the old woman in, ordered the coachman to drive to his rooms.

There he did his best to make the miserable old woman comfortable, and his housekeeper presently saw that she was washed and fed, and soon the old woman was sleeping in the housekeeper's room.

To explain this extraordinary event we must go back twenty years.

In 1838 Princess Anna Chechevinski, then in her twenty−sixth year, had defied her parents, thrown to the winds

the traditions of her princely race, and fled with the man of her choice, followed by her mother's curses and the ironical congratulations of her brother, who thus became sole heir.

After a year or two she was left alone by the death of her companion, and step by step she learned all the lessons of sorrow. From one stage of misfortune to another she gradually fell into the deepest misery, and had become a poor old beggar in the streets when Count Kallash came so unexpectedly to her rescue.

It will be remembered that, as a result of Natasha's act of vengeance, the elder Princess Chechevinski left behind her only a fraction of the money her son expected to inherit. And this fraction he by no means hoarded, but with cynical disregard of the future he poured money out like water, gambling, drinking, plunging into every form of dissipation. Within a few months his entire inheritance was squandered.

Several years earlier Prince Chechevinski had taken a deep interest in conjuring and had devoted time and care to the study of various forms of parlor magic. He had even paid considerable sums to traveling conjurers in exchange for their secrets. Naturally gifted, he had mastered some of the most difficult tricks, and his skill in card conjuring would not have done discredit even to a professional magician.

The evening when his capital had almost melted away and the shadow of ruin lay heavy upon him, he happened to be present at a reception where card play was going on and considerable sums were staked.

A vacancy at one of the tables could not be filled, and, in spite of his weak protest of unwillingness, Prince Chechevinski was pressed into service. He won for the first few rounds, and then began to lose, till the amount of his losses far exceeded the slender remainder of his capital. A chance occurred where, by the simple expedient of neutralizing the cut, mere child's play for one so skilled in conjuring, he was able to turn the scale in his favor, winning back in a single game all that he had already lost. He had hesitated for a moment, feeling the abyss yawning beneath him; then he had falsed, made the pass, and won the game. That night he swore to himself that he would never cheat again, never again be tempted to dishonor his birth; and he kept his oath till his next run of bad luck, when he once more neutralized the cut and turned the "luck" in his direction.

The result was almost a certainty from the outset, Prince Chechevinski became a habitual card sharper.

For a long time fortune favored him. His mother's reputation for wealth, the knowledge that he was her sole heir, the high position of the family, shielded him from suspicion. Then came the thunderclap. He was caught in the act of "dealing a second" in the English Club, and driven from the club as a blackleg. Other reverses followed: a public refusal on the part of an officer to play cards with him, followed by a like refusal to give him satisfaction in a duel; a second occasion in which he was caught redhanded; a criminal trial; six years in Siberia. After two years he escaped by way of the Chinese frontier, and months after returned to Europe. For two years he practiced his skill at Constantinople. Then he made his way to Buda−Pesth, then to Vienna. While in the dual monarchy, he had come across a poverty− stricken Magyar noble, named Kallash, whom he had sheltered in a fit of generous pity, and who had died in his room at the Golden Eagle Inn. Prince Chechevinski, who had already borne many aliases, showed his grief at the old Magyar's death by adopting his name and title; hence it was that he presented himself in St. Petersburg in the season of 1858 under the high−sounding title of Count Kallash.

An extraordinary coincidence, already described, had brought him face to face with his sister Anna, whom he had never even heard of in all the years since her flight. He found her now, poverty− stricken, prematurely old, almost demented, and, though he had hated her cordially in days gone by, his pity was aroused by her wretchedness, and he took her to his home, clothed and fed her, and surrounded her with such comforts as his bachelor apartment offered.

In the days that followed, every doubt he might have had as to her identity was dispelled. She talked freely of their early childhood, of their father's death, of their mother; she even spoke of her brother's coldness and hostility

in terms which drove away the last shadow of doubt whether she was really his sister. But at first he made no corresponding revelations, remaining for her only Count Kallash.

XI. THE PHOTOGRAPH ALBUM

Little by little, however, as the poor old woman recovered something of health and strength, his heart went out toward her. Telling her only certain incidents of his life, he gradually brought the narrative back to the period, twenty years before, immediately after their mother's death, and at last revealed himself to his sister, after making her promise secrecy as to his true name. Thus matters went on for nearly two years.

The broken−down old woman lived in his rooms in something like comfort, and took pleasure in dusting and arranging his things. One day, when she was tidying the sitting room, her brother was startled by a sudden exclamation, almost a cry, which broke from his sister's lips.

"Oh, heaven, it is she!" she cried, her eyes fixed on a page of the photograph album she had been dusting. "Brother, come here; for heaven's sake, who is this?"

"Baroness von Doring," curtly answered Kallash, glancing quickly at the photograph. "What do you find interesting in her?"

"It is either she or her double! Do you know who she looks like?"

"Lord only knows! Herself, perhaps!"

"No, she has a double! I am sure of it! Do you remember, at mother's, my maid Natasha?"

"Natasha?" the count considered, knitting his brows in the effort to recollect.

"Yes, Natasha, my maid. A tall, fair girl. A thick tress of chestnut hair. She had such beautiful hair! And her lips had just the same proud expression. Her eyes were piercing and intelligent, her brows were clearly marked and joined together—in a word, the very original of this photograph!"

"Ah," slowly and quietly commented the count, pressing his hand to his brow. "Exactly. Now I remember! Yes, it is a striking likeness."

"But look closely," cried the old woman excitedly; "it is the living image of Natasha! Of course she is more matured, completely developed. How old is the baroness?"

"She must be approaching forty. But she doesn't look her age; you would imagine her to be about thirty−two from her appearance.

"There! And Natasha would be just forty by now!"

"The ages correspond," answered her brother.

"Yes." Princess Anna sighed sadly. "Twenty−two years have passed since then. But if I met her face to face I think I would recognize her at once. Tell me, who is she?"

"The baroness? How shall I tell you? She has been abroad for twenty years, and for the last two years she has lived here. In society she says she is a foreigner, but with me she is franker, and I know that she speaks Russian

perfectly. She declares that her husband is somewhere in Germany, and that she lives here with her brother."

"Who is the 'brother'?" asked the old princess curiously.

"The deuce knows! He is also a bit shady. Oh, yes! Sergei Kovroff knows him; he told me something about their history; he came here with a forged passport, under the name of Vladislav Karozitch, but his real name is Kasimir Bodlevski."

"Kasimir Bodlevski," muttered the old woman, knitting her brows. "Was he not once a lithographer or an engraver, or something of the sort?"

"I think he was. I think Kovroff said something about it. He is a fine engraver still."

"He was? Well, there you are!" and Princess Anna rose quickly from her seat. "It is she—it is Natasha! She used to tell me she had a sweetheart, a Polish hero, Bodlevski. And I think his name was Kasimir. She often got my permission to slip out to visit him; she said he worked for a lithographer, and always begged me to persuade mother to liberate her from serfdom, so that she could marry him."

This unexpected discovery meant much to Kallash. Circumstances, hitherto slight and isolated, suddenly gained a new meaning, and were lit up in a way that made him almost certain of the truth. He now remembered that Kovroff had once told him of his first acquaintance with Bodlevski, when he came on the Pole at the Cave, arranging for a false passport; he remembered that Natasha had disappeared immediately before the death of the elder Princess Chechevinski, and he also remembered how, returning from the cemetery, he had been cruelly disappointed in his expectations when he had found in the strong box a sum very much smaller than he had always counted on, and with some foundation; and before him, with almost complete certainty, appeared the conclusion that the maid's disappearance was connected with the theft of his mother's money, and especially of the securities in his sister's name, and that all this was nothing but the doing of Natasha and her companion Bodlevski.

"Very good! Perhaps this information will come in handy!" he said to himself, thinking over his future measures and plans. "Let us see—let us feel our way—perhaps it is really so! But I must go carefully and keep on my guard, and the whole thing is in my hands, dear baroness! We will spin a thread from you before all is over."

XII. THE BARONESS AT HOME

Every Wednesday Baroness von Doring received her intimate friends. She did not care for rivals, and therefore ladies were not invited to these evenings. The intimate circle of the baroness consisted of our Knights of Industry and the "pigeons" of the bureaucracy, the world of finance, the aristocracy, which were the objects of the knights' desires. It often happened, however, that the number of guests at these intimate evenings went as high as fifty, and sometimes even more.

The baroness was passionately fond of games of chance, and always sat down to the card table with enthusiasm. But as this was done conspicuously, in sight of all her guests, the latter could not fail to note that fortune obstinately turned away from the baroness. She almost never won on the green cloth; sometimes Kovroff won, sometimes Kallash, sometimes Karozitch, but with the slight difference that the last won more seldom and less than the other two.

Thus every Wednesday a considerable sum found its way from the pocketbook of the baroness into that of one of her colleagues, to find its way back again the next morning. The purpose of this clever scheme was that the "pigeons" who visited the luxurious salons of the baroness, and whose money paid the expenses of these salons,

should not have the smallest grounds for suspicion that the dear baroness's apartment was nothing but a den of sharpers. Her guests all considered her charming, to begin with, and also rich and independent and passionate by nature. This explained her love of play and the excitement it brought, and which she would not give up, in spite of her repeated heavy losses.

Her colleagues, the Knights of Industry, acted on a carefully devised and rigidly followed plan. They were far from putting their uncanny skill in motion every Wednesday. So long as they had no big game in sight, the game remained clean and honest. In this way the band might lose two or three thousand rubles, but such a loss had no great importance, and was soon made up when some fat "pigeon" appeared.

It sometimes happened that this wily scheme of honest play went on for five or six weeks in succession, so that the small fry, winning the band's money, remained entirely convinced that it was playing in an honorable and respectable private house, and very naturally spread abroad the fame of it throughout the whole city. But when the fat pigeon at last appeared, the band put forth all its forces, all the wiles of the black art, and in a few hours made up for the generous losses of a month of honorable and irreproachable play on the green cloth.

Midnight was approaching.

The baroness's rooms were brilliantly lit up, but, thanks to the thick curtains which covered the windows, the lights could not be seen from the street, though several carriages were drawn up along the sidewalk.

Opening into the elegant drawing−room was a not less elegant card room, appreciatively nicknamed the Inferno by the band. In it stood a large table with a green cloth, on which lay a heap of bank notes and two little piles of gold, before which sat Sergei Antonovitch Kovroff, presiding over the bank with the composure of a true gentleman.

What Homeric, Jovine calm rested on every feature of his face! What charming, fearless self−assurance, what noble self−confidence in his smile, in his glance! What grace, what distinction in his pose, and especially in the hand which dealt the cards! Sergei Kovroff's hands were decidedly worthy of attention. They were almost always clad in new gloves, which he only took off on special occasions, at dinner, or when he had some writing to do, or when he sat down to a game of cards. As a result, his hands were almost feminine in their delicacy, the sensibility of the finger tips had reached an extraordinary degree of development, equal to that of one born blind. And those fingers were skillful, adroit, alert, their every movement carried out with that smooth, indefinable grace which is almost always possessed by the really high−class card sharper. His fingers were adorned with numerous rings, in which sparkled diamonds and other precious stones. And it was not for nothing that Sergei Kovroff took pride in them! This glitter of diamonds, scattering rainbow rays, dazzled the eyes of his fellow players. When Sergei Kovroff sat down to preside over the bank, the sparkling of the diamonds admirably masked those motions of his fingers which needed to be masked; they almost insensibly drew away the eyes of the players from his fingers, and this was most of all what Sergei Kovroff desired.

Round the table about thirty guests were gathered. Some of them sat, but most of them played standing, with anxious faces, feverishly sparkling eyes, and breathing heavily and unevenly. Some were pale, some flushed, and all watched with passionate eagerness the fall of the cards. There were also some who had perfect command of themselves, distinguished by extraordinary coolness, and jesting lightly whether they lost or won. But such happily constituted natures are always a minority when high play is going on.

Silence reigned in the Inferno. There was almost no conversation; only once in a while was heard a remark, in a whisper or an undertone, addressed by a player to his neighbor; the only sound was that short, dry rustle of the cards and the crackling of new bank notes, or the tinkle of gold coins making their way round the table from the bank to the players, and from the players back to the bank.

The two Princes Shadursky, father and son, both lost heavily. They sat opposite Sergei Kovroff, and between them sat Baroness von Doring, who played in alliance with them. The clever Natasha egged them on, kindling their excitement with all the skill and calculation possible to one whose blood was as cold as the blood of a fish, and both the Shadurskys had lost their heads, no longer knowing how much they were losing.

XIII. AN EXPLANATION

Count Kallash and his sister had just breakfasted when the count's French footman entered the study.

"Madame la baronne von Doring!" he announced obsequiously.

Brother and sister exchanged a rapid glance.

"Now is our opportunity to make sure," said Kallash, with a smile.

"If it is she, I shall recognize her by her voice," whispered Princess Anna. "Shall I remain here or go?"

"Remain in the meantime; it will be a curious experience. Faites entrer!" he added to the footman.

A moment later light, rapid footsteps were heard in the entrance hall, and the rustling of a silk skirt.

"How do you do, count! I have come to see you for a moment. I came in all haste, on purpose. I have come IN PERSON, you must be duly appreciative! Vladislav is too busy, and the matter is an important one. I wanted to see you at the earliest opportunity. Well, we may all congratulate ourselves. Fate and fortune are decidedly on our side!" said the baroness, speaking rapidly, as she entered the count's study.

"What has happened? What is the news?" asked the count, going forward to meet her.

"We have learned that the Shadurskys have just received a large sum of money; they have sold an estate, and the purchaser has paid them in cash. Our opportunity has come. Heaven forbid that we should lose it! We must devise a plan to make the most of it."

The baroness suddenly stopped short in the middle of the sentence, and became greatly confused, noticing that there was a third person present.

"Forgive me! I did not give you warning," said the count, shrugging his shoulders and smiling; "permit me! PRINCESS ANNA CHECHEVINSKI!" he continued with emphasis, indicating his poor, decrepit sister. "Of course you would not have recognized her, baroness."

"But I recognized Natasha immediately," said the old woman quietly, her eyes still fixed on Natasha's face.

The baroness suddenly turned as white as a sheet, and with trembling hands caught the back of a heavy armchair.

Kallash with extreme politeness assisted her to a seat.

"You didn't expect to meet me, Natasha?" said the old woman gently and almost caressingly, approaching her.

"I do not know you. Who are you?" the baroness managed to whisper, by a supreme effort.

"No wonder; I am so changed," replied Princess Anna. "But YOU are just the same. There is hardly any change at

all."

Natasha began to recover her composure.

"I don't understand you," she said coldly, contracting her brows.

"But I understand YOU perfectly."

"Allow me, princess," Kallash interrupted her, "permit me to have an explanation with the baroness; she and I know each other well. And if you will pardon me, I shall ask you in the meantime to withdraw."

And he courteously conducted his sister to the massive oak doors, which closed solidly after her.

"What does this mean?" said the baroness, rising angrily, her gray eyes flashing at the count from under her broad brows.

"A coincidence," answered Kallash, shrugging his shoulders with an ironical smile.

"How a coincidence? Speak clearly!"

"The former mistress has recognized her former maid—that is all."

"How does this woman come to be here? Who is she?"

"I have told you already; Princess Anna Chechevinski. And as to how she came here, that was also a coincidence, and a strange one."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the baroness.

"Why impossible? They say the dead sometimes return from the tomb, and the princess is still alive. And why should the matter not have happened thus, for instance? Princess Anna Chechevinski's maid Natasha took advantage of the confidence and illness of the elder princess to steal from her strong box, with the aid of her sweetheart, Kasimir Bodlevski, money and securities—mark this, baroness—securities in the name of Princess Anna. And might it not happen that this same lithographer Bodlevski should get false passports at the Cave, for himself and his sweetheart, and flee with her across the frontier, and might not this same maid, twenty years later, return to Russia under the name of Baroness von Doring? You must admit that there is nothing fantastic in all this! What is the use of concealing? You see I know everything!"

"And what follows from all this?" replied the baroness with a forced smile of contempt.

"Much MAY follow from it," significantly but quietly replied Kallash. "But at present the only important matter is, that I know all. I repeat it—ALL."

"Where are your facts?" asked the baroness.

"Facts? Hm!" laughed Kallash. "If facts are needed, they will be forthcoming. Believe me, dear baroness, that if I had not legally sufficient facts in my hands, I would not have spoken to you of this."

Kallash lied, but lied with the most complete appearance of probability.

The baroness again grew confused and turned white.

"Where are your facts? Put them in my hands!" she said at last, after a prolonged silence.

"Oh, this is too much! Get hold of them yourself!" the count replied, with the same smile. "The facts are generally set forth to the prisoner by the court; but it is enough for you in the meantime to know that the facts exist, and that they are in my possession. Believe, if you wish. If you do not wish, do not believe. I will neither persuade you nor dissuade you."

"And this means that I am in your power?" she said slowly, raising her piercing glance to his face.

"Yes; it means that you are in my power," quietly and confidently answered Count Kallash.

"But you forget that you and I are in the same boat."

"You mean that I am a sharper, like you and Bodlevski? Well, you are right. We are all berries of the same bunch—except HER" (and he indicated the folding doors). "She, thanks to many things, has tasted misery, but she is honest. But we are all rascals, and I first of all. You are perfectly right in that. If you wish to get me in your power—try to find some facts against me. Then we shall be quits!"

"And what is it you wish?"

"It is too late for justice, at least so far as she is concerned," replied the count, with a touch of sadness; "but it is not too late for a measure of reparation. But we can discuss that later," he went on more lightly, as if throwing aside the heavy impression produced by the thought of Princess Anna's misery. "And now, dear baroness, let us return to business, the business of Prince Shadursky! I will think the matter over, and see whether anything suggests itself."

He courteously conducted the baroness to the carriage, and they parted, to all appearance, friends. But there were dangerous elements for both in that seeming friendship.

XIV. GOLD MINING

A wonderful scheme was hatched in Count Kallash's fertile brain. Inspired by the thought of Prince Shadursky's newly replenished millions, he devised a plan for the gang which promised brilliant results, and only needed the aid of a discreet and skillful confederate. And what confederate could be more trustworthy than Sergei Antonovitch Kovroff? So the two friends were presently to be found in secret consultation in the count's handsome study, with a bottle of good Rhine wine before them, fine cigars between their lips, and the memory of a well−served breakfast lingering pleasantly in their minds. They were talking about the new resources of the Shadurskys.

"To take their money at cards—what a wretched business—and so infernally commonplace," said Count Kallash. "To tell you the truth, I have for a long time been sick of cards! And, besides, time is money! Why should we waste several weeks, or even months, over something that could be done in a few days?"

Kovroff agreed completely, but at the same time put the question, if not cards, what plan was available?

"That is it exactly!" cried Kallash, warming up. "I have thought it all over. The problem is this: we must think up something that would surprise Satan himself, something that would make all Hades smile and blow us hot kisses. But what of Hades?—that's all nonsense. We must do something that will make the whole Golden Band throw up their caps. That is what we have to do!"

"Quite a problem," lazily answered Kovroff, chewing the end of his cigar. "But you are asking too much."

"But that is not all," the count interrupted him; "listen! This is what my problem demands. We must think of some project that unites two precious qualities: first, a rapid and huge profit; second, entire absence of risk."

"Conditions not altogether easy to fulfill," remarked Kovroff doubtfully.

"So it seems. And daring plans are not to be picked up in the street, but are the result of inspiration. It is what is called a 'heavenly gift,' my dear friend."

"And you have had an inspiration?" smiled Sergei Antonovitch, with a slightly ironical shade of friendly skepticism.

"I have had an inspiration," replied the supposititious Hungarian nobleman, falling into the other's tone.

"And your muse is—?"

"The tenth of the muses," the count interrupted him: "another name is Industry."

"She is the muse of all of us."

"And mine in particular. But we are not concerned with her, but with her prophetic revelations."

"Oh, dear count! Circumlocutions apart! This Rhine wine evidently carries you to misty Germany. Tell me simply what the matter is."

"The matter is simply this: we must institute a society of 'gold miners,' and we must find gold in places where the geological indications are dead against it. That is the problem. The Russian laws, under threat of arrest and punishment, sternly forbid the citizens of the Russian Empire, and likewise the citizens of other lands within the empire, to buy or sell the noble metals in their crude form, that is, in nuggets, ore, or dust. For example, if you bought gold in the rough from me—gold dust, for example—we should both, according to law, have to take a pleasant little trip beyond the Ural Mountains to Siberia, and there we should have to engage in mining the precious metal ourselves. A worthy occupation, no doubt, but not a very profitable one for us."

"Our luxuries would be strictly limited," jested Kovroff, with a wry smile.

"There it is! You won't find many volunteers for that occupation, and that is the fulcrum of my whole plan. You must understand that gold dust in the mass is practically indistinguishable in appearance from brass filings. Let us suppose that we secretly sell some perfectly pure brass filings for gold dust, and that they are readily bought of us, because we sell considerably below the market rate. It goes without saying that the purchaser will presently discover that we have done him brown. But, I ask you, will he go and accuse us knowing that, as the penalty for his purchase, he will have to accompany us along the Siberian road?"

"No man is his own enemy," sententiously replied Kovroff, beginning to take a vivid interest in what his companion was saying. "But how are you going to work it?"

"You will know at the proper time. The chief thing is, that our problem is solved in the most decisive manner. You and I are pretty fair judges of human nature, so we may be pretty sure that we shall always find purchasers, and I suggest that we make a beginning on young Prince Shadursky. How we shall get him into it is my business. I'll tell you later on. But how do you like the general idea of my plan?"

"It's clever enough!" cried Kovroff, pressing his hand with the gay enthusiasm of genuine interest.

"For this truth much thanks!" cried Kallash, clinking glasses with him. "It is clever—that is the best praise I could receive from you. Let us drink to the success of my scheme!"

XV. THE FISH BITES

Three days after this conversation the younger prince Shadursky dined with Sergei Antonovitch Kovroff.

That morning he received a note from Kovroff, in which the worthy Sergei complained of ill health and begged the prince to come and dine with him and cheer him up.

The prince complied with his request, and appearing at the appointed time found Count Kallash alone with his host.

Among other gossip, the prince announced that he expected shortly to go to Switzerland, as he had bad reports of the health of his mother, who was in Geneva.

At this news Kallash glanced significantly toward Kovroff.

Passing from topic to topic, the conversation finally turned to the financial position of Russia. Sergei Antonovitch, according to his expression, "went to the root of the matter," and indicated the "source of the evil," very frankly attacking the policy of the government, which did everything to discourage gold mining, hedging round this most important industry with all kinds of difficulties, and practically prohibiting the free production of the precious metals by laying on it a dead weight of costly formalities.

"I have facts ready to hand," he went on, summing up his argument. "I have an acquaintance here, an employee of one of the best−known men in the gold−mining industry." Here Kovroff mentioned a well− known name. "He is now in St. Petersburg. Well, a few days ago he suddenly came to me as if he had something weighing on his mind. And I have had business relations with him in times past. Well, what do you think? He suddenly made me a proposal, secretly of course; would I not take some gold dust off his hands? You must know that these trusted employees every year bring several hundred pounds of gold from Asia, and of course it stands to reason that they cannot get rid of it in the ordinary way, but smuggle it through private individuals. It is uncommonly profitable for the purchasers, because they buy far below the market rates. So there are plenty of purchasers. Several of the leading jewelers" (and here he named three or four of the best−known firms) "never refuse such a deal, and last year a banking house in Berlin bought a hundred pounds' weight of gold through agents here. Well, this same employee, my acquaintance, is looking for an opportunity to get rid of his wares. And he tells me he managed to bring in about forty pounds of gold, if not more. I introduce this fact to illustrate the difficulties put in the way of enterprise by our intelligent government."

Shadursky did not greatly occupy himself with serious questions and he was totally ignorant of all details of financial undertakings. It was, therefore, perfectly easy for Sergei Antonovitch to assume a tone of solid, practical sense, which imposed completely on the young prince. Young Shadursky, from politeness, and to prove his worldly wisdom, assented to Kovroff's statements with equal decision. All the same, from this conversation, he quite clearly seized on the idea that under certain circumstances it would be possible to buy gold at a much lower price than that demanded by the Imperial Bank. And this was just the thought which Kallash and Kovroff wished to sow in the young prince's mind.

"Of course, I myself do not go in for that kind of business," went on Kovroff carelessly, "and so I could not give my friend any help. But if some one were going abroad, for instance, he might well risk such an operation, which

would pay him a very handsome profit."

"How so? In what way?" asked Shadursky.

"Very simply. You buy the goods here, as I already said, much below the government price. So that to begin with you make a very profitable bargain. Then you go abroad with your wares and there, as soon as the exchange value of gold goes up, you can sell it at the nearest bank. I know, for instance, that the agent of the ——− Bank" (and he mentioned a name well known in St. Petersburg) made many a pretty penny for himself by just such a deal. This is how it was: He bought gold dust for forty thousand rubles, and six weeks later got rid of it in Hamburg for sixty thousand. Whatever you may say, fifty per cent on your capital in a month and a half is pretty good business."

"Deuce take it! A pretty profitable bargain, without a doubt!" cried Shadursky, jumping from his chair. "It would just suit me! I could get rid of it in Geneva or Paris," he went on in a jesting tone.

"What do you think? Of course!" Sergei Antonovitch took him up, but in a serious tone. "You or some one else—in any case it would be a good bargain. For my acquaintance has to go back to Asia, and has only a few days to spare. He doesn't know where to turn and rather than take his gold back with him, he would willingly let it go at an even lower rate than the smugglers generally ask. If I had enough free cash I would go in for it myself."

"It looks a good proposition," commented Count Kallash.

"It is certainly very enticing; what do you think?" said Prince Shadursky interrogatively, folding his arms.

"Hm—yes! very enticing," answered Kovroff. "A fine chance for anyone who has the money."

"I would not object! I would not object!" protested Shadursky. "Suppose you let me become acquainted with your friend."

"You? Well—" And Kovroff considered; "if you wish. Why not? Only I warn you, first, if you are going to buy, buy quickly, for my friend can't wait; and secondly, keep the matter a complete secret, for very unpleasant results might follow."

"That goes without saying. That stands to reason," assented Shadursky. "I can get the money at once and I am just going abroad, in a day or two at the latest. So it would be foolish to miss such a chance. So it is a bargain?" And he held out his hand to Kovroff.

"How a bargain?" objected the cautious Sergei Antonovitch. "I am not personally concerned in the matter, and you must admit, my dear prince, that I can make no promises for my acquaintance."

"I don't mean that!" cried Shadursky. "I only ask you to arrange for me to meet him. Bring us together—and drop him a hint that I do not object to buying his wares. You will confer a great obligation on me."

"Oh, that is quite a different matter. That I can always do; the more so, because we are such good friends. Why should I not do you such a trifling service? As far as an introduction is concerned, you may count on it."

And they cordially shook each other by the hand.

XVI. GOLD DUST

Both Kallash and Kovroff were too cautious to take an immediate, personal part in the gold−dust sale. There was

a certain underling, Mr. Escrocevitch by name, at Sergei Kovroff's beck and call—a shady person, rather dirty in aspect, and who was, therefore, only admitted to Sergei's presence by the back door and through the kitchen, and even then only at times when there were no outsiders present.

Mr. Escrocevitch was a person of general utility and was especially good at all kinds of conjuring tricks. Watches, snuff−boxes, cigar−cases, silver spoons, and even heavy bronze paper−weights acquired the property of suddenly vanishing from under his hands, and of suddenly reappearing in a quite unexpected quarter. This valuable gift had been acquired by Mr. Escrocevitch in his early years, when he used to wander among the Polish fairs, swallowing burning flax for the delectation of the public and disgorging endless yards of ribbon and paper.

Mr. Escrocevitch was a precious and invaluable person also owing to his capacity of assuming any role, turning himself into any given character, and taking on the corresponding tone, manners, and appearance, and he was, further, a pretty fair actor.

He it was who was chosen to play the part of the Siberian employee.

Not more than forty−eight hours had passed since the previous conversation. Prince Shadursky was just up, when his footman announced to him that a Mr. Valyajnikoff wished to see him.

The prince put on his dressing gown and went into the drawing−room, where the tolerably presentable but strangely dressed person of Mr. Escrocevitch presented itself to him.

"Permit me to have the honor of introducing myself," he began, bowing to Prince Shadursky; "I am Ivanovitch Valyajnikoff. Mr. Sergei Antonovitch Kovroff was so good as to inform me of a certain intention of yours about the dust. So, if your excellency has not changed your mind, I am ready to sell it to you with pleasure."

"Very good of you," answered Prince Shadursky, smiling gayly, and giving him a chair.

"To lose no time over trifles," continued Mr. Escrocevitch, "let me invite you to my quarters. I am staying at a hotel; you can see the goods there; you can make tests, and, if you are satisfied, I shall be very happy to oblige your excellency."

Prince Shadursky immediately finished dressing, ordered his carriage, and went out with the supposititious Valyajnikoff. They drove to a shabby hotel and went to a dingy room.

"This is my poor abode. I am only here on the wing, so to speak. I humbly request you to be seated," Mr. Escrocevitch said obsequiously. "Not to lose precious time, perhaps your excellency would like to look at my wares? Here they are—and I am most willing to show them."

And he dragged from under the bed a big trunk, in which were five canvas bags of various sizes, packed full and tied tightly.

"Here, here it is! This is our Siberian dust," he said, smiling and bowing, indicating the trunk with a wave of his hand, as if introducing it to Prince Shadursky.

"Would not your excellency be so good as to choose one of these bags to make a test? It will be much better if you see yourself that the business is above board, with no swindle about it. Choose whichever you wish!"

Shadursky lifted one of the bags from the trunk, and when Mr. Escrocevitch untied it, before the young prince's eyes appeared a mass of metallic grains, at which he gazed not without inward pleasure.

"How are you going to make a test?" he asked. "We have no blow− pipes nor test−tubes here?"

"Make your mind easy, your excellency! We shall find everything we require—blow−pipes and test−tubes and nitric acid, and even a decimal weighing machine. In our business we arrange matters in such a way that we need not disturb outsiders. Only charcoal we haven't got, but we can easily send for some."

And going to the door, he gave the servant in the passage an order, and a few minutes later the latter returned with a dish of charcoal.

"First class! Now everything is ready," cried Mr. Escrocevitch, rubbing his hands; and for greater security he turned the key in the door.

"Take whichever piece of charcoal you please, your excellency; but, not to soil your hands, you had better let me take it myself, and you sprinkle some of the dust on it," and he humbled himself before the prince. "Forgive me for asking you to do it all yourself, since it is not from any lack of politeness on my part, but simply in order that your excellency should be fully convinced that there is no deception." Saying this, he got his implements ready and lit the lamp.

The blow−pipe came into action. Valyajnikoff made the experiment, and Shadursky attentively followed every movement. The charcoal glowed white hot, the dust ran together and disappeared, and in its place, when the charcoal had cooled a little, and the amateur chemist presented it to Prince Shadursky, the prince saw a little ball of gold lying in a crevice of the charcoal, such as might easily have formed under the heat of the blow−pipe.

"Take the globule, your excellency, and place it, for greater security, in your pocketbook," said Escrocevitch; "you may even wrap it up in a bit of paper; and keep the sack of gold dust yourself, so that there can be no mistake."

Shadursky gladly followed this last piece of advice.

"And now, your excellency, I should like you kindly to select another bag; we shall make two or three more tests in the same way."

The prince consented to this also.

Escrocevitch handed him a new piece of charcoal to sprinkle dust on, and once more brought the blow−pipe into operation. And again the brass filings disappeared and in the crevice appeared a new globule of gold.

"Well, perhaps these two tests will be sufficient. What is your excellency good enough to think on that score?" asked the supposed Valyajnikoff.

"What is the need of further tests? The matter is clear enough," assented the prince.

"If it is satisfactory, we shall proceed to make it even more satisfactory. Here we have a touch−stone, and here we have some nitric acid. Try the globules on the touchstone physically, and, so to speak, with the nitric acid chemically. And if you wish to make even more certain, this is what we shall do. What quantity of gold does your excellency wish to take?"

"The more the better. I am ready to buy all these bags."

"VERY much obliged to your excellency, as this will suit me admirably," said Escrocevitch, bowing low. "And so, if your excellency is ready, then I humbly beg you to take each bag, examine it, and seal it with your

excellency's own seal. Then let us take one of the globules and go to one of the best jewelers in St. Petersburg. Let him tell us the value of the gold and in this way the business will be exact; there will be no room for complaint on either side, since everything will be fair and above board."

The prince was charmed with the honesty and frankness of Mr. Valyajnikoff.

They went together to one of the best−known jewelers, who, in their presence, made a test and announced that the gold was chemically pure, without any alloy, and therefore of the highest value.

On their return to the hotel, Mr. Escrocevitch weighed the bags, which turned out to weigh forty−eight pounds. Allowing three pounds for the weight of the bags, this left forty−five pounds of pure gold.

"How much a pound do you want?" Shadursky asked him.

"A pretty low price, your excellency," answered the Siberian, with a shrug of his shoulders, "as I am selling from extreme necessity, because I have to leave for Siberia; I've spent too much time and money in St. Petersburg already; and if I cannot sell my wares, I shall not be able to go at all. I assume that the government price is known to your excellency?"

"But I am willing to take two hundred rubles a pound. I can't take a kopeck less, and even so I am making a reduction of nearly a hundred rubles the pound."

"All right!" assented Shadursky. "That will amount to—" he went on, knitting his brows, "forty−five pounds at two hundred rubles a pound—"

"It will make exactly nine thousand, your excellency. Just exactly nine," Escrocevitch obsequiously helped him out. The prince, cutting the matter short, immediately gave him a check, and taking the trunk with the coveted bags, drove with the Siberian employee to his father's house, where the elder Prince Shadursky, at his son's pressing demand, though very unwillingly, exchanged the check for nine thousand rubles in bills, for which Ivan Ivanovitch Valyajnikoff forthwith gave a receipt. The prince was delighted with his purchase, and he did not utter a syllable about it to anyone except Kovroff.

Sergei Antonovitch gave him a friendly counsel not to waste any time, but to go abroad at once, as, according to the Exchange Gazette, gold was at that moment very high, so that he had an admirable opportunity to get rid of his wares on very favorable terms.

The prince, in fact, without wasting time got his traveling passport, concealed his purchase with the utmost care, and set out for the frontier, announcing that he was on his way to his mother, whose health imperatively demanded his presence.

The success of the whole business depended on the fact that brass filings, which bear a strong external resemblance to gold dust, are dissipated in the strong heat of the blowpipe. The charcoal was prepared beforehand, a slight hollow being cut in it with a penknife, in the bottom of which is placed a globule of pure gold, the top of which is just below the level of the charcoal, and the hollow is filled up with powdered charcoal mixed with a little beeswax. The "chemist" who makes the experiments must make himself familiar with the distinctive appearance of the charcoal, so as to pick it out from among several pieces, and must remember exactly where the crevice is.

On this first occasion, Escrocevitch had prepared all four pieces of charcoal, which were brought by the servant in the passage. He chose as his temporary abode a hotel whose proprietor was an old ally of his, and the servant was also a confederate.

Thus was founded the famous "Gold Products Company," which is still in very successful operation, and is constantly widening its sphere of activity.

XVII. THE DELUGE

Count Kallash finally decided on his course of action. It was too late to seek justice for his sister, but not too late for a tardy reparation. The gang had prospered greatly, and the share of Baroness von Doring and Bodlevski already amounted to a very large figure. Count Kallash determined to demand for his sister a sum equal to that of the securities in her name which Natasha had stolen, calculating that this would be enough to maintain his sister in peace and comfort to the end of her days. His own life was too stormy, too full of risks for him to allow his sister's fate to depend on his, so he had decided to settle her in some quiet nook where, free from danger, she might dream away her few remaining years.

To his surprise Baroness von Doring flatly refused to be put under contribution.

"Your demand is outrageous," she said. "I am not going to be the victim of any such plot!"

"Very well, I will compel you to unmask?"

"To unmask? What do you mean, count? You forget yourself!"

"Well, then, I shall try to make you remember me!" And Kallash turned his back on her and strode from the room. A moment later, and she heard the door close loudly behind him.

The baroness had already told Bodlevski of her meeting with Princess Anna, and she now hurried to him for counsel. They agreed that their present position, with Kallash's threats hanging over their heads, was intolerable. But what was to be done?

Bodlevski paced up and down the room, biting his lips, and seeking some decisive plan.

"We must act in such a way," he said, coming to a stand before the baroness, "as to get rid of this fellow once for all. I think he is dangerous, and it never does any harm to take proper precautions. Get the money ready, Natasha; we must give it to him."

"What! give him the money!" and the baroness threw up her hands. "Will that get us out of his power? Can we feel secure? It will only last till something new happens. At the first occasion—"

"Which will also be the last!" interrupted Bodlevski. "Suppose we do give him the money to−day; does that mean that we give it for good? Not at all! It will be back in my pocket to−morrow! Let us think it out properly!" and he gave her a friendly pat on the shoulder, and sat down in an easy chair in front of her.

The result of their deliberations was a little note addressed to Count Kallash:

"DEAR COUNT," it ran, "I was guilty of an act of folly toward you to−day. I am ashamed of it, and wish to make amends as soon as possible. We have always been good friends, so let us forget our little difference, the more so that an alliance is much more advantageous to us both than a quarrel. Come this evening to receive the money you spoke of, and to clasp in amity the hand of your devoted friend,

VON D."

Kallash came about ten o'clock in the evening, and received from Bodlevski the sum of fifty thousand rubles in notes. The baroness was very amiable, and persuaded him to have some tea. There was not a suggestion of future difficulties, and everything seemed to promise perfect harmony for the future. Bodlevski talked over plans of future undertakings, and told him, with evident satisfaction, that they had just heard of the arrest of the younger Prince Shadursky, in Paris, for attempting to defraud a bank by a pretended sale of gold dust. Count Kallash was also gay, and a certain satisfaction filled his mind at the thought of his sister's security, as he felt the heavy packet of notes in his pocket. He smoked his cigar with evident satisfaction, sipping the fragrant tea from time to time. The conversation was gay and animated, and for some reason or other turned to the subject of clubs.

"Ah, yes," interposed Bodlevski, "a propos! I expect to be a member of the Yacht Club this summer. Let me recommend to you a new field of action. They will disport themselves on the green water, and we on the green cloth! By the way, I forgot to speak of it—I bought a boat the other day, a mere rowboat. It is on the Fontauka Canal, at the Simeonovski bridge. We must come for a row some day."

"Delightful," exclaimed the baroness. "But why some day? Why not to−night? The moon is beautiful, and, indeed, it is hardly dark at midnight. Your speaking of boats has filled me with a sudden desire to go rowing. What do you say, dear count?" and she turned amiably to Kallash.

Count Kallash at once consented, considering the baroness's idea an admirable one, and they were soon on their way toward the Simeonovski bridge.

"How delightful it is!" cried the baroness, some half hour later, as they were gliding over the quiet water. "Count, do you like strong sensations?" she asked suddenly.

"I am fond of strong sensations of every kind," he replied, taking up her challenge.

"Well, I am going to offer you a little sensation, though it always greatly affects me. Everything is just right for it, and I am in the humor, too."

"What is it to be?" asked Count Kallash indifferently.

"You will see in a moment. Do you know that there are underground canals in St. Petersburg?"

"In St. Petersburg?" asked Kallash in astonishment.

"Yes, in St. Petersburg! A whole series of underground rivers, wide enough for a boat to pass through. I have rowed along them several times. Does not that offer a new sensation, something quite unlike St. Petersburg?"

"Yes, it is certainly novel," answered Count Kallash, now interested. "Where are they? Pray show them to me."

"There is one a few yards off. Shall we enter? You are not afraid?" she said with a smile of challenge.

"By no means—unless you command me to be afraid," Kallash replied in the same tone. "Let us enter at once!"

"Kasimir, turn under the arch!" and the boat cut across the canal toward a half circle of darkness. A moment more and the darkness engulfed them completely. They were somewhere under the Admiralty, not far from St. Isaac's Cathedral. Away ahead of them was a tiny half circle of light, where the canal joined the swiftly flowing Neva. Carriages rumbled like distant thunder above their heads.

"Deuce take it! it is really rather fine!" cried the count, with evident pleasure. "A meeting of pirates is all we need to make it perfect. It is a pity that we cannot see where we are!"

"Light a match. Have you any?" said the baroness. "I have, and wax matches, too." The count took out a match and lit it, and the underground stream was lit by a faint ruddy glow. The channel, covered by a semicircular arch, was just wide enough for one boat to pass through, with oars out. The black water flowed silently by in a sluggish, Stygian stream. Bats, startled by the light, fluttered in their faces, and then disappeared in the darkness.

As the boat glided on, the match burned out in Count Kallash's fingers. He threw it into the water, and opened his matchbox to take another.

At the same moment he felt a sharp blow on the head, followed by a second, and he sank senseless in the bottom of the boat.

"Where is the money?" cried Bodlevski, who had struck him with the handle of the oar. "Get his coat open!" and the baroness deftly drew the thick packet from the breast pocket of his coat. "Here it is! I have it!" she replied quickly.

"Now, overboard with him! Keep the body steady!" A dull splash, and then silence. "To−night we shall sleep secure!"

They counted without their host. Princess Anna had also her scheme of vengeance, and had worked it out, without a word to her brother. When Natasha and Bodlevski entered their apartment, they found the police in possession, and a few minutes later both were under arrest. Abundant evidence of fraud and forgery was found in their dwelling, and the vast Siberian solitudes avenged the death of their last victim.