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THE TWISTED RING

HERE was blood on everything in the room. It was on the desk at which the dead man had been seated; it was scattered over the papers; it lay in a blot on the carpet; in the last desperate struggle it had spurted from the window curtains and walls, the very atmosphere of the chamber seemed imbued with it. A horrible murder had been committed.

Tadi Pelouski, chief of the secret police at St. Petersburg, had paid the penalty of his outspoken hostility to nihilism.

My name is Alfred Casagene. I am 30 years of age, and am a detective.

The following telegram to the department of secret police in Paris had resulted in my taking the next train to the Russian capital:

"Pelouski fatally stabbed early morning Nihilists. Send best man at once. Must be stranger to Russia. Ours too well known. Expense no object."

Four days later fashionable St. Petersburg was apprised of the arrival in the capital of a young French gentleman rich and famous had it been known that he had come to Russia.

On making myself known at police headquarters I was at once taken to the scene of the tragedy. Nothing had been disturbed. I found it as described in the opening paragraph of this story.

The police were entirely at sea in regard to the identity of the murderer. Gurloff placed the case in my hands, and I at once proceeded to make an examination of the material before me.

The assassin had evidently gained admittance to the chief's apartment during the day, had remained concealed until nightfall, when escape was comparatively easy, and had then sprung upon his victim from behind.

Pelouski had turned to confront his murderer, but not quickly enough to avoid the knife, the first blow from which had struck him in the left breast, the second one lower down, squarely about the region of the heart.

The murderer had then caught him by the throat to prevent his crying out and held him while he slowly bled to death.

Diligent inquiry elicited the fact that a woman had been the last visitor to the chief, a woman high in society, the Baroness Woronsko. Suspicion, however, in no way attached to her; in fact, she was one of the most trusted spies in the employ of the government.

However, I immediately set Pierre Chaffaud to shadow her movements. My impression that she would bear watching was confirmed when I received his report.

The Baroness Woronsko, while in the employ of the government, was in reality a Nihilist of the worst description.

Soon the question narrowed itself down to this: Assuming her to be necessary to the murder of Pelouski, who was the brutal assassin? It was absurd to suppose that a frail, slight woman like the Baroness Woronsko could overcome a strong, courageous man like Paul Pelouski.

I had one clue, a clue, so slight that it had been overlooked by the Russian police, but one which no really first class detective would have passed unnoticed. On the dead man's throat were the black marks of the fingers which had strangled him. The thumb of the right hand had been pressed violently into the skin of the neck so as to produce a deep abrasion.

I at once took a careful cast of this thumbmark with the finest wax, thus reproducing every line exactly.

I know that the impressions of no two thumbs in the world are alike. In the prison, mark in China, remember, and there serve the same purpose as the roguish gallery in America to identify the criminals.

One other clue I had to guide me. A plain twisted ring worn by the murderer had left its mark distinctly on the flesh. I caused the impression of the hand, ring and all to be photographed.

Furnished, only with these slight clues I now set out to find the murderer of Paul Pelouski. Instinct told me, I suppose, to look for him in the best society of the capital. My Parisian letters of introduction were duly opened to me the best houses. In particular I sought the society of the Baroness. I soon discovered that she was an abandoned intrigante. During her husband's absence on his country estates she unscrupulously amused herself with a lover, one Rudolph Plesh, a Hungarian of handsome appearance and very finely educated. I soon discovered this man to be a real Nihilist. The Baroness for the time was absolutely infatuated with him.

During all this time you may suppose that I kept a sharp lookout for the twisted ring. I did nothing of the kind. Amid the mass of jewelry nightly displayed in the drawing-rooms of St. Petersburg one might as well have searched for a needle in a bundle of hay. No; I only hoped to meet that as a confirmatory evidence when I had found my man.

And I was fast finding him. Already I had gained the confidence of the Nihilists. During the third month Rudolph Plesh confided to me the outline of a plot to assassinate the czar.

Bombs were to cut no figure in this last attempt. A peculiar and singularly treacherous method was to be employed. People would never perhaps know how the emperor met his death. But who was to inflict it?

The circle to which I now belonged, no Plesh told me, had drawn lots to decide this and the choice had fallen

upon me. I was to become the assassin. But the details would not be couched to me until the night before the day set for the execution of the plot.

That evening I was to attend at the house of the Baroness Woronsko when I should receive full instructions.

The baroness' house was in the Nevskoi Prospect. It was a huge mansion surrounded by ornamental grounds. Before noon, completely disguised, Pierre Chaffaud took occasion to thoroughly reconnoiter the place.

Night came. A brilliant ball was in progress. The baroness had never looked so lovely. In the prime of her womanhood, her figure was displayed to the greatest advantage in evening dress. I looked around me. Plesh, Dakoutak, Philobosh and Cherkamlin—all were there. The gathering was honeycombed with the Nihilistic element.

I felt my hand suddenly grasped and turning around found myself confronted by—Gurloff. He was without disguise of any kind. I regarded him with wonderment. The second in command of secret police, he must be well known to these people.

Then it suddenly flashed across me—Gurloff is also one of them. Nihilism has penetrated to the police department.

I had the fourth dance with the Baroness Woronsko. It was marked waits on my program. She danced superbly. I myself understood the divine art. As to the strains of enchanting music we floated down the long ballroom I could not but wish myself a thousand miles away from St. Petersburg. I went back with me to betray that splendid creature. I am a Frenchman and I have to confess that she affected me powerfully.

The music ceased and she led me into a conservatory. We were hardly seated when she spoke and said:

"I am the one chosen to instruct you by our circle. To-morrow you will be presented to the emperor. Being a foreigner, he will extend you the royal hand, as is his custom."

She paused and glanced nervously around. Quitting my seat for a moment she parted the thick shabbers and peered out through the glass into the darkness.

"I thought I heard a sound in the garden," she said.

I knew it was the noise occasioned by Pierre Chaffaud and the men with him in scaling the wall surrounding the grounds.

"Oh, it is nothing," I said, but feeling all the time very much like a villain. "Do not be alarmed."

She returned seated herself by my side and resumed:

"You have been chosen by our circle to rid the world of this tyrant. Take this ring. No one need know it is your hand ring. Its touch is death if you are not extremely careful. Keep it in its case, and just before you are admitted to the audience place it on your finger. The slightest contraction of your finger will pierce the hand you hold with a small hollow needle."

Behind the case's handle in your own receptacle, for a moment. During that brief interval you can inject into his palm a deadly poison. It is action is sufficiently slow to afford you ample opportunity to make your escape."

A HORRIBLE MURDER HAD BEEN COMMITTED.

Horror-stricken, I gazed upon the deadly ring. To my amazement it was an exact counterpart of the ring in the photograph.

"Whose ring is this?" I gasped, recoiling from her. Could she be a murderer?

The ring was Gurloff's, she answered in a low tone. "It was suited to the purpose and he contributed it to the cause. It was fitted, as you see it now by the Hungarian, Rudolph Plesh."

I felt it all now. Gurloff had himself murdered his chief at the order of the circle and had sent to Paris for a detective, thinking to thus divert suspicion by apparently taking extraordinary pains to discover the perpetrators of the crime.

A sudden look of terror passed over the face of the baroness. I saw at once that I had done something or let fall some exclamation to arouse her suspicions or had Gurloff discovered me to her and was simply luring me on. If the latter, she had repented early of playing with the fire. With a swift movement she passed me and standing for a moment in the door of the conservatory uttered a peculiar cry. In an instant a crowd of desperate men gathered in the doorway, foremost among them Gurloff.

"You thought to learn all our secrets and betray us," hissed Gurloff, pointing his finger at me. "He is a moucharaf, gentlemen. Seize him. Your lives depend upon it."

The crowd dashed forward, at their head the murderer of Pelouski.

"Down with the moucharaf!" they yelled, and a dozen hands were on my throat.

"Crash! Bang! Thud!" Pierre Chaffaud and his men were breaking into the conservatory from the outside. The next moment the crowd scattered like chaff, but I never relaxed my hold on Gurloff's throat. He was beaten almost into insensibility and secured.

Two weeks afterward he was arraigned for the murder of Chief Pelouski and convicted on purely circumstantial evidence. The twisted ring was proved to be his property and was in his possession on the night of the commission of the crime. The suppression of the truth of his right

hand exactly corresponded with the wax impression taken from the dead man's throat. He suffered death on the scaffold.

The baroness, Plesh, and many members of the circle were exiled to the gold placer mines in Siberia. The ring with which I had been proposed, murder the czar was sent for by that dignitary. He caused the poison to be injected into the paw of a hound, and the animal died in great agony. Then the ruler of all the Russians sent for me.

"You are a French detective?" "Yes, sir."

"I am sorry for it. If you had not been a detective, I would have made you a noble. I shall instruct my secretary to give you 100,000 rubles. The best place on my staff of secret police is yours, if you care to fill it."

"I am a Parisian."

"I understand," he interrupted good humoredly. "You cannot live away from Paris. They all say that."

The audience was over. I left his presence and returned to Paris a comparatively rich man. I would not live in Russia if I could, and if I tried to, I don't think the Nihilists would let me.

Don't be looking at those who make higher professions than you do, to see if you can't find ugly spots on them. There is no nourishment in any such diet.

To be happy at home is the ultimate result of all ambition, the end to which every enterprise and labor tends, and of which every desire prompts the prosecution.

SAVED.

Jack had been against them so long and Jack seemed to be on the verge of losing his mind over it. Poor Jack! No body would buy his pictures any more. Nobody wanted to give him orders for drawings. Lucy, too, had felt the tide against her, she didn't quite know why. She certainly wrote better stories than when she first began, stronger, clearer, more tersely expressed. Sometimes she wondered if it was because she had used up all her plots and could contrive no more. Still she worked on, but her last became heavier daily, for she had the additional task of trying to keep up her husband's courage.

Jack was a good fellow, one of the best of fellows. But his nature was sensitive and he was easily cast down. And just now he seemed on the verge of despair. Things were going pretty badly with them. The little household bills to be paid, thearder, pretty well cleaned out, clothes being getting to look rusty. "And still," said Lucy, trying to look brave, "it might be worse. One of us might be ill. That would be terrible. No, let us try to keep up courage and go bravely ahead. God will not forget us."

She tried to doable work. She tried new magazines and papers with her product of this, but the answers came slowly and discouragingly.

Sometimes when Jack was not by she gave vent to her disappointment. "If I were a dressmaker I might earn more. But I never learned dress-making. Perhaps it would have been better. There are a good many poor dressmakers. I know, still I could have made myself a good worker. And then Jack! Jack wouldn't have cared for me then. Well, well, courage again!"

Jack came home rather late that night. His eyes were bloodshot, his face looked wild.

"I've about given up," he said. He stood shivering from the cold. He had lived on the fifth floor, and muttered dark things about one quick way out of it.

Lucy shuddered. She drew him away from the window.

"Dearest," she said, "come, help me with supper. I've been working to this very minute. If you'll grind the coffee for me, well soon have something hot and good to eat and drink."

He obeyed sullenly and in silence. Lucy tried to keep up cheerful talk and to assume a smile, though she felt heartbroken.

It was hard bearing the burden all alone, doing all the comforting and constructing all the hopes, unsubstantial as they might be.

Two, who could comfort each other would not be so badly off, she felt, as one who had to do it all.

Jack Lewis was not a coward; he was honest and brave and industrious. But he had lost his grip for the time and feared not to get hold again.

They ate their little repast in silence. Lucy's heart was growing heavier. It was hard bearing the burden all alone, doing all the comforting and constructing all the hopes, unsubstantial as they might be.

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And yet the more she thought of it the less wicked it seemed—the more honorable and even necessary.



"COME, HELP ME WITH SUPPER."

There were things that she must do first, however. She must get the little rooms in order, and she must finish some writing, from which Jack might obtain a little money.

She went about her household tasks first. The dishes must be washed and put neatly away. The floor must be swept, papers picked up and arranged, tables straightened, curtains drawn. There was quite enough to keep her busy for over an hour.

It was 10 o'clock when she sat down to write.

Verbes? There was a rhyme running in her head that she fancied she could work out into a little poem. It was a dismal subject, to be sure—a theme of despair and death—but perhaps that was all the better. She could put more soul into it as a last effort.

She had worked for an hour and succeeded in completing a four-line stanza, when the door opened, and Jack came in.

She looked up eager, in spite of her self, for a single tender word or glance. But there was none. He threw his hat aside and went into the bedroom, where he fell heavily on the bed.

Had he been drinking? She could not believe it of her Jack.

She tried to go on making the verses. Tried and tried and tried, until after midnight. Then, worn to exhaustion, she was compelled to give up the effort.

Her husband was sleeping heavily. She did not awaken him. She undressed quietly and drew the coverlet over her and fell into exhausted slumber.

But as the quick dawn of a mid-June day approached she began to awaken and doze off again and re-awaken, with torturing thoughts of money that must be had and pages that must be written. On the unexpected torture that grew upon her, in her half-slumber she seemed trying to scream in order to let something out of her brain before it should split. There was such a horrible inner pressure.

At last, in a struggle she fully aroused, sat up and looked around her. It was not yet 7, but she arose and dressed and sat down to write.

But what should she write? She had no thoughts, no ideas, but those of her own present misery. Well, she would write those.

And she did.

One hour, two hours passed. Jack still slept.

Lucy was waiting her own story. The misery of her own heart. Her heroine was also a young wife, faithful and devoted, ready even to die, if need be to fulfill her part. She had become so interested in the troubles of this other woman, this reflection of herself, that her heart had forgotten to ache except vicariously.

And as she wrote on toward the close she began to pity the poor heroine and to feel first a regret that the poor woman should die, next a desire to help her from her fate. Poor poor Adela! It would be wrong, wicked to let her do such a foolish thing, when by patience and just a little struggling and all would come right. Adela's husband, George? No, he must not be struck down with this climate of misery. Poor George! He had all the sensitive, impulsive qualities of Jack. But how, how, how to save the young couple? Were there no, rich, relatives to appear, opportunely? Absolutely no helping hand?

Lucy drew a long, deep breath. Ting-a-ling! Ting-a-ling! The bell of the street bell, a shrill whistle blew in the street. She came, back to her own identity, lost for the time being. "The postman," she said dreamily, fetched the key and ran quickly down the several flights to the entrance.

There were three letters. Two for her husband, and one for her.

She tore open her own and scanned the contents hastily. Then she turned and ran—ran without stopping—surely never anyone ran so quickly up so many steps of stairway.

Gasping she burst into the room and rushed to her husband still sleeping. "Jack, Jack, dear, wake up, Jack. They have taken my story—they have sent me a check. Oh, we are saved, saved!"

And then she broke down and sobbed for joy.

The story of Adela was made to end pleasantly. And Lucy will always have a peculiar tenderness for that particular child of her brain.