

THE CHESS PLAYERS

By Olive M. Briggs

ILLUSTRATIONS BY S. IVANOWSKI



HERE were three of us dining together that night in my Paris studio, Count Nicot, Tony DeJong, and myself.

The Count was slim and small and dark, very foreign looking, with a short mustache which he twirled incessantly. DeJong was big and blonde, with a hearty laugh and honest blue eyes. His skin was ruddy and bronzed like a sailor.

Dinner was over. We were lingering over our wine and smoke, enjoying the quiet of the dimly lit studio, and DeJong had just finished a yarn of the sea—a weird tale of shipwreck, revenge and a woman, which had left us all shivering—when Nicot's voice broke the lull suddenly. It was a low voice, magnetic, with a carrying quality.

"That's a queer thing, DeJong; one of the queerest I ever heard. You experienced that really yourself, did you?"

The Count and I both looked up with interest.

DeJong was engaged in filling his pipe. He wedged the tobacco well in with his thumb, and held the match to the bowl before answering.

"Experienced it myself?" he said, "what? Why of course I experienced it. There's nothing so queer in this world as the truth. Don't you know that, gentlemen?"

"Sacré!" exclaimed Nicot. "Monsieur, you are right! To some, such an outcome would seem unlikely, but I've seen strange things in the course of my life. Where women are concerned everything is possible. Black skins or white, Asiatics or Europeans, it makes no difference. When their love, their passion, their jealousy is aroused, it is like the spark at the end of the gunpowder fuse. The strongest man—if he takes fire—whiff, bang, gone, good-bye!"

The Count laughed as he spoke.

"Take the Russian case of Klafsky, for example—the most extraordinary affair that

was. All the European papers were full of it a few years ago. You remember? In Paris the feeling ran very high, in Zurich and Geneva they held mass meetings, and in Milan there was a riot. But no one knew the real facts of the case; no one ever will know. The Russian police force were as mystified as the Central Revolutionists. Both were equally in the dark, and both equally swore vengeance. It was a curious situation."

"Klafsky!" cried DeJong, "Klafsky! . . . Wait a moment, Monsieur. Where have I heard that name before? It sounds familiar."

"My dear sir," said the Count—he began to twirl the ends of his mustache impatiently—"of course you have heard it. Am I not telling you? At the time the thing happened, for a fortnight there, the press, the people, the whole world was interested."

"What!" I exclaimed, "You don't mean that Marx affair in Switzerland? The Russian police spy who—"

"The same," said Nicot. "No wonder you stammer. Who? What? Where? Why? Exactly—was he Marx or was he Klafsky? Was he a police spy, or was he a Revolutionist? . . . Those are the questions that two great counter organizations have been asking themselves many times over, and are still asking themselves to-day. So far as I know, they have found no answer, and they never will."

"I suppose there's a reason for that," said Tony.

The Count gave a quick glance over his shoulder. "Dites, mon ami—are the walls thick?"

"So-so!"

"No one beyond?"

"No one." I laughed.

"Or upstairs there?" He pointed to the staircase.

"Oh, that's all right." I said.

"Mais——" The Count gave a protesting shrug with his shoulders, pointing

to the back of the valet as he cleared the table.

"That's all right, Nicot. He doesn't know English. But still, if you like—shall I send him away?"

This by-play was in gestures, under our breath.

"Eh bien, if you please, mon ami—yes."

DeJong and the Count both waited in silence, smoking abstractedly, while I beckoned to the servant, whispering to him in French some order or other. Then the valet vanished, leaving the dishes.

"Thank you," said Nicot, "it is always wiser to take precautions." He glanced again behind him as if still undecided, hesitated a moment, and then went on. "You will give me your word of honor, gentlemen? I count on that. Otherwise I shouldn't dare to speak. Not a breath, not a syllable of what I am going to tell you will ever be repeated, not even to your wives?"

DeJong interrupted him with a roar of laughter.

"Good heavens, man!" he exclaimed, throwing his pipe down, "All this Russian secretiveness is enough to develop nerves in a cow! In America we shout everything on the housetops, and don't care a continental! . . . There are no police spies in Paris, are there?"

"Aren't there?" said Nicot—"My dear fellow, if ever you have occasion to speak of Russian affairs on this side of the water, take my advice—whether it be Paris or Basle, Cologne, the Riviera or Constantinople, look over your shoulder first, and drop the tone of your voice low. Not for your own sake, you understand, but for those whose names you happen to mention. Many a tragedy has come from careless talk in a train or a restaurant, a story told lightly, or an opinion repeated. Even with the utmost caution sometimes, a stray word let fall may prove a matter of life or death."

"You smile, sir?" he turned to DeJong gravely, "but unless you have personal acquaintance with these matters; unless the tragedies, their cause and effect, are brought home to you closely, specially, you cannot understand. For my part, my father was a Frenchman, my mother was a Pole, so I am three-quarter socialist and one quar-

ter—" He looked from one face to the other slowly. "If the case had been reversed, I should have been three-quarter revolutionist probably instead. As it is, I sympathize and I comprehend. I do not approve! No!"

The Count's eyes flashed.

"I approve of no system, no society, no cause that puts a man in the position of Klafsky. Whatever his motives were, whatever his real character and purpose, it was a terrible problem he had to face. Whatever you may say of him, he faced it squarely. He did what he thought was right as he saw it. Can any man do more? There is no question of political sympathies in this case, gentlemen, because both sides abused and reviled him alike. He had lived between two fires for a dozen years or more—it takes a fairly brave man to do that—and the first time his foot slipped, they both let loose on him.

"If Klafsky were alive now—pray heaven he is not—he is either lying at the bottom of some dungeon in Russia, or the Tribunal of Terror have him fast in their clutches. They vowed they'd get him sooner or later, that there wasn't a prison in all the Tsar's dominions strong enough or deep enough to hide him from their vengeance, so they may have succeeded. Either fate is unspeakable."

We all shuddered, and again the Count glanced over his shoulder, swiftly, fleetingly, behind and about him.

"You give your word, gentlemen?"

As he said this, he stretched out his right hand solemnly, and DeJong and I each shook it in turn, one after the other, across the table. Then the Count sat back and folded his arms.

"You probably think," he said, "most people do, that all Russian tragedies are enacted in Russia; but some of the most pitiful dramas I know have taken place right here in Paris; and in Switzerland, where the exiles congregate, the terrible stories I could tell you are countless. You remember when Bazilief was extradited? . . . He was tracked to Bern by a Russian spy, and then disappeared; lay low for a while like a fox under cover. It wasn't until nearly a year later, the poor fellow tried to get marriage papers for the sake of his child that had just been born—to legalize the Nihilistic ceremony which had

been interrupted. In a second he was pounced on. All those months some one had been watching, listening, waiting for just that very thing. They knew he would try it sooner or later.

I was in Bern at the time; and his young wife—the girl who had escaped with him from Warsaw—she was at the station with the baby in her arms to see him taken back. Bazilieff, when his case was tried, only made one request. "Extradite me, if you must," he said, "but marry us first." The Russian Church refused. So the boy—he was just twenty-two they told me—he was rushed back to Petersburg under strong police guard, and heaven only knows what became of him there! . . . The one little slip, you see; the mistake they made for love of one another. Their very honesty and morality killed them. Some one had talked.

The reason I mention this case to you, gentlemen, is because of Klafsky's connection with it. Nobody guessed it of course at the time, nobody imagines now outside of official circles; but from this you can see the double nature of the man, and the blacker side of the life he was leading. Condemn him if you please. All Europe condemned him a few years ago, even the side he had been serving, even the side he was driven to serve—even Nadine. But before you judge, let me tell you what happened."

Nicot took up his glass of wine, emptied it, and set it down again on the table. Both DeJong and I were listening intently. Again came that quick, instinctive glance around, searching the shadows. The Count then resumed.

"Yes—well, it happened one August. I had a friend with me, a man by the name of Reuss, from Bavaria, and we were travelling together through the Bernese Oberland; lounging in the valleys or climbing to the heights; doing a peak or two here or there, according to our fancies and the weather conditions. Reuss was a painter. You know his work, perhaps, mon ami?"

"Oh, very well," I said, "of the Munich set I think, was he not?"

"Just so; a rank impressionist but a good fellow. He was making little magenta daubs of the Alps as we went along—regular blotches, with the paint stuck on all at sixes and sevens. His sense of beauty

was a trifle distorted, to my mind at least; but for all that, it was he who first saw Nadine. This is how it occurred."

We were on our way to Interlaken; and the boat from Thun was just out of the river, at the point where they turn, you know, into the lake. We had come on at Scherzigen with a big crowd, for those boats are always packed in the season, and were threading our way in and out through the benches, trying to find places. Suddenly I felt Reuss give a jog to my elbow.

"Sacrement! . . . Look over there, will you?"

"Where?" said I, staring about me. The confusion of tourists was anything but inviting.

"Straight ahead, at the bow! The chess-players—see! Push along, Nicot, I want to get a nearer view of her profile."

"Bon Dieu!" I exclaimed.

We elbowed our way to the end of the boat.

Beyond the benches, at the extreme bow, was a little group of people, unmistakably Russians, three men and two women. Two were seated on the capstans close together, with their backs against the rail; the others clustered about them. The couple on the capstans held a chess-board between them, on which the eyes of all five were riveted. What struck me in a flash was the extraordinary absorption of the whole party. Evidently the tourists, with their crowding and chatter, did not exist for them. They were as unconscious of their surroundings as though alone by themselves on a desert island; the curious glances passed by them unheeded. Either the panorama of snow mountains was an old story, or they were indifferent to Alpine scenery, for not one of the group paid the slightest attention.

The afternoon was unusually beautiful. One of those clear, crisp days after a storm, and the horns of the Blümli glistened like silver. Off in the distance rose the Bernese range, Jungfrau, Mönch and Eiger, all three, silhouetted in white against the blue of the summer sky; the clouds drifting off from their summits like smoke, delicate, fleecy, hardly to be distinguished from the snow-fields themselves. There were white-caps on the lake; and the wind came whistling under the awnings, sharp, bracing, straight from the glaciers.

"Get nearer, can't you?" said Reuss softly, "Push ahead to the rail. There's a woman ahead with a veil a yard broad, I can't see a thing! . . . Sacré, but that's odd! Nicot, I say—it can't be a tournament?"

"They are Russian students, that's clear," I whispered back, "and they must be chess fiends to play in the midst of a crowd like this. I'd give something to be able to watch their moves! . . . Let me pass please, madame."

We edged still closer, beyond the last bench, and stood against the rail, holding on to our hats. The Russians were now within close range. Reuss began to gaze fixedly across at the Blümli, and I followed suit, lifting my field glasses.

"Colossal, isn't it?" he exclaimed with enthusiasm.

"Superb!"

"Couldn't have had a better day for the view!"

"No! Ma foi—we're in luck!"

But all this finesse was lost on our neighbors; they never turned an eyelash. From where we stood now, we could make out the board. From the look of it, and the increasing absorption of the circle, the game seemed to be a close one.

"Hiss-st, Reuss!" I whispered, "is that your profile there?"

"Yes," he whispered back, "the girl at the board. That's a rare head, isn't it? Look at the brow, and the curves of the cheek and the chin—they're exquisite. She's winning, too, if I'm not mistaken. What wouldn't I give to get her on canvas like that, with the hood of her cape drawn over her hair, and her curls blown in the wind! . . . How old would you make her?"

"About twenty or thereabouts; not more. Sacrement, she is winning!"

The girl suddenly lifted her eyes and looked around. She held her opponent's black knight in her hand, and her gaze sought that of the Russian who was nearest us. He was so near that, as their eyes met, we caught her expression, almost as if it were meant for ourselves. It was a curious one, and instinctively we wondered what the man was like, what his look could have been to call forth the other. The girl's hand trembled as she put the knight down; and she lifted her hand to her hood for a moment, as if to draw the folds closer. The

other slowly advanced a rook; then she castled to the left and the game went on.

Her opponent was a black-eyed, anæmic young fellow, poorly dressed, roughly shaven, unhealthy looking. He also seemed nervous. Another man of the same type stood directly behind him. At his elbow, watching closely, was the other woman heavily built, very Slavic in feature. She might have been his sister, and her eyes never wavered from the board for a second. When the black knight vanished, she gave a quick sigh of relief, or disappointment—it was hard to tell which.

The Russian who was standing beside the girl, was a man of a different stamp, much older. He was a tall, athletic looking fellow, with a loden cape slung over his shoulders, a cap on his head pulled down over his eyes, and something about him that was distinguished, apart, irresistible, compelling. One of those strong personalities that make themselves felt by their presence alone, without the necessity for speech or action. His back was turned to us, so all we could see was his thick black hair slightly tinged with gray, and the freedom and picturesqueness of his poise as he stood there. He was smoking, and his face was bent over the chess players.

"What do you take him to be, Reuss—the tall one? He seems a sort of leader."

"I don't know," he whispered, "but I've run across that fellow before somewhere. Where, for the life of me, I can't recall; perhaps it will come to me later! . . . Ha—Nicot!"

"Sh-h-h!"

"There's something up between him and the girl."

"Looks like it."

"There's something up between the whole lot of them, something more than we think."

I nodded.

"There's more at stake than a mere game of chess. From the absorption of them all and the way they take it, you'd suppose it was a matter of life or death. Sacré! . . . That's queer!"

"What?"

"Pretend to be admiring the Blümli, Nicot; don't attract attention. Mon Dieu, did you see that?"

The young man had made a move with his queen; the girl brought hers forward.

He advanced a black bishop; the girl moved her knight. Just as pretty a play as you ever saw. "Check king!" she said.

At this exclamation, the tall man behind her threw away his cigar and made a motion as if to protest. His manner was strange, half startled, like one who is fighting for self-control. The girl glanced up again. She was smiling faintly, and he laid his hand on her shoulder, coming nearer. When she felt his touch—it was plain to see—a little shiver seemed to run through her, and the blood rushed away from her cheeks and lips, leaving her pale almost as he was. Several more moves were made in silence.

With each play the intensity of the atmosphere seemed to increase. The waits were interminable, the manoeuvres intricate, the outcome still uncertain. The two were well matched and were evidently playing a very strong game. But why such emotion? Why such extraordinary interest? It was out of all proportion. Reuss shrugged his shoulders.

"These Russians must be an excitable set," he muttered, "Either that, or——"

"Or what?"

"They are playing for a purpose, and to win or lose means more than we think it does."

Scarcely had he whispered these words in my ear than the tall Russian turned, and we caught his face full. The agony expressed in it I shall never forget. It was as if you saw a man in the midst of a death struggle. Fear, even terror, were written large in every feature, in every line, but the fear and the terror were not for himself. The struggle was not for his own life. Although we were only a few feet away, and his gaze was straight toward us, it was clear enough that he saw nothing, he felt nothing, he heard nothing. His mind was absorbed in something apart.

Whether the touch on her shoulder communicated his thought to the girl or not, she began shivering again; and all of a sudden she dashed her queen forward.

"Check king! . . . Check king!"

The tone of her voice was indescribable. It was triumphant like a battle cry; and then in the midst her breath seemed to fail her. Her opponent gave a quick exclamation, which the man and the woman behind him echoed. It seemed one almost of

satisfaction. Instantly, as if stunned, the tall Russian passed his hand over his eyes, hiding them from the light. It was the gesture of one who is drawing on a mask. Then his hand dropped, in a flash he was changed. The expression was gone, and his manner careless.

"She's winning," said Reuss, "and for some reason that tall fellow there, the leader—parbleu, now where have I seen him before? . . . Look, Nicot."

The girl had thrown back her head with a laugh, an odd little laugh, like a child half pleased with itself, half frightened.

"Boje moi!" she cried, "my God—it's checkmate!"

For a moment all five of them seemed transfixed. Nobody moved, nobody spoke; they all stood staring down at the chess-board.

"That's a funny thing," said Reuss softly. "She's won sure enough, but she's pale as death! I don't understand this exalted strain. Why don't they congratulate her? What's the matter with them?"

Before I could answer, the spell broke.

The Russians began to talk excitedly together, gesticulating freely. One of the young men folded the chess-board up, slipping the chessmen into his pocket. The boat had just left Beatenbucht. As we watched, the girl rose slowly, unsteadily, to her feet, and drew aside a little, back toward the rail where the tall man was leaning. The two put their heads close and they spoke in a whisper, but Reuss and I were very near. As we understood Russian we could not help hearing. This is what they said, word for word, as I remember it. The girl's voice first, soft as a breath.

"Well—it's settled now, Marx."

The man murmured something.

"Don't worry. It shall all be carried out just as you planned, to the very letter. Can I not do it as well as he? . . . Why are you sad?"

"You are too young, Nadine, for this sort of business. You ought not to have drawn for the game at all. If I had dreamed—but Mieke is one of our best players, and he told me, he swore to me——"

"I know," the girl interrupted contemptuously, "he wanted to do it himself. It was she!" A little backward thrust of her

elbow indicated the other woman, who was still talking, gesticulating behind them. "She was frightened for him." The fool! Bah—they're poor stuff for patriots! I'm not afraid, Marx! I'm not that sort."

The man gave her a sudden strange look, half proud, half tender, inscrutable; and his fist clenched as it rested on the rail.

"No," he said, "you're not—you're not, Nadine. You've got more courage in that little finger of yours than ten of Mieke put together. And you'll need it all to-night, all the nerve you have, child! . . . Are you sure of yourself?"

"Yes."

"You won't flinch?"

She threw back her head and her eyes flashed up at him. He studied them for a moment, staring down into their depths.

"Regardless of consequences—remember."

"I remember."

The girl laughed out, but her lip we saw was quivering. The man made a sudden movement as if to put his arm around her, a movement checked half-way as he realized the crowd. That the two understood one another was evident. The absolute trust in her face was beautiful.

"We're nearly there," he said, "we'll be in Interlaken directly. You know where to meet me to-night—and when?"

"The pavilion—eight o'clock—on the Harder path. You will bring the—"

"Sh-h-h!" he whispered, looking over his shoulder, "Yes, I'll have it all ready. You're to go to the Kursaal, you know, straight from there."

"Mélkoff is certain, is he?"

"Chut! . . . He has ordered a table reserved, and you're to have the next, number twenty-four."

As the Russian said this the girl blanched, shrinking back with instinctive recoil as from a blow. And then to our amazement we saw that she was trembling. There could be no doubt of the fact this time. In every limb, in every muscle she was trembling like a leaf.

Whether the man noticed or not, we could not tell. If he did, he made no comment. There was silence between them. The two stood side by side against the rail, staring down into the water.

By this time the boat was approaching the pier, and the passengers began to move

toward the gangway. Reuss and I went off to attend to our traps. It was all confusion. When we landed finally, hurrying along to escape the line of porters, we scanned the throngs in vain. The Russians had vanished.

Nicot stopped for a moment, filled his glass with wine, and took up another cigar. He glanced around the studio.

"This tale doesn't bore you I hope, gentlemen."

DeJong leaned forward, pushing the matches toward the Count. He looked preoccupied I thought, but his tone was full of warmth.

"Go on, Nicot, go on! . . . But stop, man, light your cigar first."

"Presently," said Nicot, "thanks! . . . The servant may be back."

"That's so," I exclaimed, "We're both on pins and needles, Count! By George, I remember distinctly when the picture of Marx first came out in the papers. Cossack type—wasn't he? Strong-featured, dark-browed, striking-looking fellow? And Nadine, a pretty little wistful-eyed thing? . . . Not much of the criminal about either one of them. He didn't look a traitor, and as for that child—well, you can't tell much from a newspaper print."

The Count shook his head.

"Nor from the human countenance either, study it as you may. You're a portrait painter, my friend, so you'll bear me out in this! Far from understanding others, we shall probably be puzzled by ourselves some day. As far as I can make it—in any very strongly developed individuality, there are a number of different characters involved. Which of them finally wins out is determined by what—influence, circumstances, training—who can say? With Marx, they had all combined to make him what he was—up to a certain period. He didn't choose his career. Nature gave him certain talents; his country recognized and used them. To earn his bread he started—was forced you might say—along a certain road, just as most of us are. The line of least resistance or the line of most, according to our cravings. With him, it was the latter case. Struggle, danger, excitement—they were the very breath of life to him. His nerves were strong, his wits were keen, and he tried to



Dinner was over. We were lingering over our wine and smoke, enjoying the quiet of the dimly lit studio.—Page 199.

serve his country—did it, too, for twelve years. There's no doubt about that. Spy, agent as he was, he did his country good service. And then came the cross-roads; then came Nadine.

That I should have happened to be present in his life at that critical moment was curious enough. Still more curious, perhaps, that I witnessed the struggle. And the way it happened, gentlemen—that was the most curious part of all; the reason why, personally, no matter what the world says, I could never judge him harshly. Hearing, seeing what I did that awful night in Interlaken, watching a man's soul bared as it were, writhing, agonizing, on the rack, in torture—who am I to fling a stone? Who are you? Who are any of us? We can only be thankful to have escaped the test ourselves.

Well, that evening Reuss and I, of course, were ignorant of all this. We proceeded to our hotel, a small one, not far from the East station, and dined quietly under the plantain trees, looking over toward the Jungfrau. We were too tired and hungry to talk much, and it wasn't until the coffee that Reuss suddenly gave an exclamation and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Sacrement, Nicot!"

"What?"

"I know now where I've seen him!"

"Who?"

"The Russian—that tall fellow."

"Mon Dieu! . . . Where?"

Reuss gave me a queer look. "You heard that conversation, yes? . . . Odd, wasn't it? Did you understand the trend?"

"Not particularly. They seemed to be mixed up in something, and the chess figured as a blind. What did you make out of it, Reuss?"

"Why, they're Nihilists," he said, "They belong to that Central Revolutionary set. Those two were drawing lots there on the boat over the chess-board, and the little girl won. She'll be up to some deviltry tonight. I shouldn't be at all surprised if she meant to kill Melikoff. He's here in Interlaken. I looked it up in the Fremden list before I came down. A regular old Tartar too, with a list of crimes at his door. The only wonder is that they've let him live so long! There's her chance—the Kursaal, the table next reserved! . . . Parbleu, Nicot, what shall we do? We'll have to put a spoke in their wheel somehow."

"Call in the police," I said.

"Not enough to go on, man."

"Then—" All of a sudden a thought struck me. "Here, I have it! You go to the Kursaal, Reuss; and I'll try the pa-

vilion. If you keep an eye on table 24, I'll do the same with that couple up yonder. Eight o'clock was it—the Harder Promenade?"

"Yes. There's time enough still."

"All right. When that interview takes place I'll be present. I know that pavilion. We'll find out, Reuss, between us, and save the old Tartar from his fate a while longer. Fancy that sort of thing in peaceful little Interlaken!"

Reuss drew his brows together.

"It isn't the plot that puzzles me," he said, "I've run up against these people before and I recognize their ways. The girl's a tool of course; an excitable child, full of visions and fancies. You could see for yourself she was wax in his hands. Why, she'd walk into hell at a glance from that man! . . . No, it's the chief himself that disturbs me, their leader! What was it the girl called him, Nicot?"

"She spoke to him as Marx."

"Exactly—Marx! Well," Reuss gave a strange laugh, "the last time I saw him—I remember it now perfectly. It was six months or so ago, and I was painting the portrait of Glazov—ex-Governor of Elisabethopol, and a man of high position. He had something to do with the secret police, just what I don't know, but one day—it was in his private salon in the hotel at Nauheim—he was sitting to me. *Sacré*, how it all comes back! Suddenly there came a light tap at the door.

"Come in," said Glazov, "Is that you, Klafsky?"

"And in walked this fellow with a portfolio under his arm. The very same man, that I'd swear to. The same build, the same swing to his shoulders, the same deep-set, piercing eyes, the same strong, vibrating personality.

"Glazov excused himself for a moment, and the two proceeded to go over the portfolio right there before me. You know, Nicot, it's my business to study faces. Once I've studied them I never forget. That Klafsky was an agent, a Russian police spy reporting to his chief. They went over a long list of names together; and after some they put a cross, and after some they put a question. Whatever the report was, Glazov looked pleased as Punch.

"You'll get an order for this some day, Klafsky; you're the best man we have.

Why during the last years, since you've been on the force, every one of their schemes has miscarried. Thanks to you we've foiled them all, one after the other. If it hadn't been for you—the Minister of Education, the Minister of the Interior, the Vice-Governor of Ufa, Prince Androkofof, the Chief of Police of Vladikavkaz, the Grand-Duke Boris himself, and hosts of others—they were all doomed men, and they owe their lives to you."

With that Klafsky made a low bow and went out.

But that expression on the General's face, you can see it in the portrait now—the look that Klafsky brought there, the look of the cat when the bird is in its claws. It was Klafsky put the bird there. And now—ha-ha! His name is Marx, is it? A revolutionist—a leader? . . . Do you follow all this, Nicot?"

"No," said I, "I don't! It's a damned queer business. But if he's luring that Russian girl on to her death—these provocative agents, I've heard of them before—they are perfect devils! . . . Good-by, Reuss, I'm off. That Harder path will be a dark meeting place to-night. Don't forget the Kursaal!"

"Bah, Nicot! It's not Mélikoff I'm worried about—it's the girl! If that fellow really is Klafsky, why he'll head her off himself. The moment she's in deep enough, caught in his trap, he'll hand the proofs over secretly to the Russian police. She'll be in prison for life, just as quick as that—and she'll never know what struck her! Mélikoff! Parbleu, he's safe enough! They'll never let her touch him! . . . Well, good-by, Nicot, good luck!"

"Gentlemen"—the Count paused—"when Reuss and I parted that night—he sipping his coffee on the hotel terrace, I striding down the Hoheweg off into the darkness—we both little dreamed what we had ahead of us. The moon, which had come up earlier in the evening, had gone under a cloud, so once out of the village it was black as pitch. The trees along the path loomed up like gaunt spectres. The forest stretched out mysterious and vast, silent as the grave. Below were the lights in the valley twinkling. Above were the stars. Beyond were the snow peaks. So I groped my way upward. The walk is twenty minutes, but it seemed hours.



Drawn by S. Ivanowski.

What struck me in a flash was the extraordinary absorption of the whole party.—Page 201.

You know that pavilion, don't you? It stands on a ledge overlooking the valley, and is charming in the sunshine; but at that time of night, you can imagine, the place was lonely as a cave. I stole in on tiptoe and hid myself in a shadowy corner, and waited and listened. It was nervous work. The waiting was even worse than the walk. It was too dark to see my watch face, and I dared not strike a match. Was it eight o'clock—was it past? Were they coming? Was it the wrong pavilion perhaps? Was there another beyond? Had I misunderstood, or had something kept them?

Just as I was asking myself these questions, standing first on one foot then on the other, peering out into the open space at the head of the path, all of a sudden a shadow crossed it. It passed so quickly, I could not be sure—and then came another. The shadows flitted across the entrance of the pavilion. A large one, a small one, and then—I could see nothing, but I heard breathing. The smaller shadow seemed to be panting.

"Sh-h-h!"

The hiss was so close that I started back.

"Did you hear anything, Marx?"

"Chut!"

"It must have been the leaves crackling."

"No—it was a movement."

"Perhaps it was your own!"

"Perhaps! . . . Come nearer, Nadine, come nearer! Tell me, you would go anywhere, you would do anything that I told you—would you?"

"Yes, Marx."

"No matter what the risk, no matter what the consequences—life imprisonment, even death?"

"Yes—Marx."

"Why would you, Nadine?"

"For the cause's sake," said the girl faintly. I could tell from the tone that her breath was still fluttering, but the words were unmistakable. "Are you not our chief? You have suffered everything, you have braved everything. You are our leader, and there is no one in all the revolutionary party who has done what you have done, who has been what you have been. Have you not planned the attacks for years now? And have we not always followed your call, blindly unflinching—at a demi-mot?"

"You have, Nadine! God help me—you have!"

The man's voice came suddenly hoarse, full of passion.

"You trust me so much then? . . . Ha!" he laughed aloud roughly, "You trust me as much as that, do you? . . . Speak! Why don't you speak?"

"Yes, yes—I trust you."

"Come then, douscha moja,* sit down beside me. Put your hand in mine, and let us look at the stars together. The night is too beautiful for the Kursaal, for vengeance! Forget it, little one. I love you. I love you as I never loved a woman before! . . . Come nearer, put your head on my shoulder. I love you!"

The girl gave a low cry. Whether she resisted him in the darkness, I could not tell. The man went on talking, pleading, in rough, passionate Russian phrases. "If you trust me as much as that, douschka,† then you love me too! You are so dear to me—so dear to me! God! Come closer. Let me look at your face, let me read your eyes, let me kiss you on your lips!"

For a moment or two there was silence in the pavilion, and all I could hear was their hurried breathing. Then the girl seemed to rouse."

"Is it time to go? Look! The music has just begun in the Kursaal. Don't you hear it from here? . . . Let me go, Marx, don't hold me. You are trying to test me, dearest. You think I'm afraid?"

"Stay with me," said the man.

"Let me go—Marx!"

"Is the murder of Mélikoff more than my love?"

"Murder!" The girl started so that I felt it from where I stood. "Murder! Why, hasn't the Tribunal tried him fairly and condemned him? Wasn't it you who planned it all, who signed the paper? Didn't you give out the orders yourself? What do you mean?"

"Nothing," said the man, "I've changed my mind, that's all. The orders are revoked."

"But the vow, Marx—you forget I am bound!"

"No matter."

"But it's too late now! You have telegraphed my name to head-quarters as the winner of the tournament. The committing

* My little soul.

† Soul.

tee will expect the second wire to-night. To back out at the last moment like this—you know what that means, Marx? You remember what happened to Tatiana?"

"Up to that time, the affair had turned out very much as I had supposed. Whether Klafsky loved the girl or not, he was holding her back, just as Reuss said he would.



The man, with his arms stretched out to the girl, his face white and haggard, full of despair.

"I do," said the man, "God help me! God help me!"

Just as he said this, the moon broke from behind the clouds; the rays fell across the path, illuminating it as with a search-light. At the door of the pavilion stood the two close together. The man, with his arms stretched out to the girl, his face white and haggard, full of despair—and she, gazing up at him like a startled bird. A strange scene, gentlemen!

The Count hesitated.

Melikoff's life was as safe as yours or mine; so at least I thought then. But what were the fellow's intentions toward Nadine? That he meant to hand her over—I never doubted it a moment. And then, my friends, the unexpected happened. Klafsky broke down.

Whether it was the look of adoration and loyalty in the girl's eyes, or whether it was his conscience awakened at last—heaven only knows! Suddenly he buried his head in his hands. It was the most intimate, the

most searching, the most terrible confession. He told her everything, he bared his life to her, he never spared himself for a single second; and the girl stood there stock still and gasping. It was as if he were thrusting a knife into her heart.

Those two figures in the moonlight I shall never forget. The shadowy path, the black outline of the mountains beyond, the pallor of their faces standing out against the darkness—and that voice, tense, low, broken, like a cry through the night. The tragedy of the situation, the hopelessness, seemed to catch him by the throat. From the first syllable to the last the girl scarcely breathed; but her face spoke for her. He looked into it, read and accepted the verdict. For a moment or two the silence was ghastly.

"Gentlemen," said Nicot, "what you would have done in my place I don't know, but crouching there hidden, watching those two, listening to what was never meant for any ears but hers, I felt like a thief. For any third person to be present unknown at such a scene as that—it seemed abominable, like desecration. You may blame me, perhaps, in the light of what followed. I turned my back on them and stole away without a sound.

What happened afterward up there in the night—no one knows, no one ever will know. Whether she forgave him, whether she won him over, whether he paid it as the price of her love, or whether he tried to prevent her and couldn't! I have puzzled over that question for years, and am no nearer the solution. One hour exactly after I reached the hotel, Reuss came rushing in pale as a ghost, with his eyes almost starting out of his head.

"Great heaven, Nicot—have you heard what's happened?"

"Mon Dieu! . . . What?"

"Mélkoff has just been shot!"

"Shot?"

"At the Kursaal, right in the midst of the music! Every one was very gay, drinking their beer and listening to the jodlers. I had been watching the General all the evening. He was with a large party, very near me; and the table behind, number twenty-four was empty; the only unoccupied table in the place! All of a sudden came the crack of a revolver, from somewhere right out of space it seemed—so sharp,

so sudden, so near! Everybody sprang to his feet in horror! And there lay Mélkoff with his arms across the table!"

"Well—" For a moment or two the Count was silent. "That was Reuss' report, word for word, and the rest of the story you know, gentlemen. It was all in the papers. Nadine was arrested, Klafsky disappeared. Mélkoff, poor fellow—he deserved it, but then—"

"Dead?" exclaimed DeJong.

"No, no!" said the Count impatiently, "Didn't you read the account, my friend? No more dead than you are! As a matter of fact it was fright that knocked him over. Any military man will tell you, in battle sometimes it happens that way. Mélkoff, the old sinner—his life had been threatened a score of times; and when he heard the crack, of course he thought he was gone, and fainted away out of sheer terror. That ball—" the Count laughed, "why didn't it kill him? . . . My friends, that ball was a blank cartridge."

"What?"

"No, you don't say!"

DeJong and I both gave exclamations.

"Exactly. That part of it wasn't mentioned in print. The fact never got out, but it's true for all that. The whole affair was hushed up by the authorities there in Interlaken. Nadine was whisked away. And then, forty-eight hours later, all Europe was ringing with the news. You remember? The news, the secret, gentlemen, that only her ears and mine had heard—Klafsky's confession.

"You read all about it, didn't you? The Russian government was furious. They had lost one of their best agents. Their trump card was taken, their hand forced, their trick exposed. Naturally they vowed vengeance. As for the Revolutionists, they were roused to a man! The entire party, especially those who had followed Klafsky's leading, when they realized—imagine! Twelve years they'd been his dupe, they'd been playing his chess games. Imagine what they must have felt! Heavy tragedians in spirit, and all their dramas, thanks to Klafsky, one after the other, turned into a farce! They were mad, they were crazy! If they could have gotten their fingers on him—sacrament, they'd have torn him to pieces!"