

**BURTON
FREDERICK
RUSSELL**

THE MISSION OF
POUBALOV

Frederick Burton

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Frederick R. Burton

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CHAPTER I.

THEIR WEDDING MORNING

Ivan pulled aside the curtain and looked up at the sky. It was as clear as crystal, as blue as the eyes of his beloved, the promise fulfilled of a perfect day. On a window cornice across the street a tiny bird perked his head toward the sun and chirped noisily. To a lively imagination kindled by fond anticipations the twittering of the bird would have seemed like music. So it was to Ivan. His heart responded with unformed melodies, and some of their stray notes found their way humming to his throat as he hastened his toilet.

A long process it was in spite of his haste. Every outer garment, though but yesterday brought by the tailor, had to be brushed with exquisite care, and when it came to adjusting his tie, what with finding in the light of this beautiful morning that not one of the numerous assortment seemed to be bright enough for the occasion, and having rejected all in turn, and having selected one at last that might be made to do, and having found the knot and loosed it – well, time had passed, and under ordinary circumstances patience might have gone with it. Ordinary, the circumstances were not, and if they had been I presume any tie could have, and would have been thrown together in a shape not less pleasing than that which finally caused him to turn from the mirror in cheerful despair and ring for breakfast.

Mrs. White was prompt in responding to the summons, for she had been expecting it with quivering anxiety for the last half hour. Good soul! With eggs at thirty-five cents a dozen she nevertheless plunged two in hot water every four minutes, in order that her lodger might not trace the slightest sense of disappointment, on this eventful day, to her.

"I do hope his last breakfast here will be a pleasant one," she said when her daughter protested against the extravagance.

There was certainly nothing in the plain breakfast to call for criticism. Ivan might not have noticed it if there had been, for his thoughts were elsewhere, and his emotions were stirred by causes at once more delicate and more powerful than appetite; but Mrs. White was probably in the right. It would have been a pity to permit any chance of a jarring note however slight in the harmony that pervaded his being.

Ivan greeted his landlady gayly, and attacked his meal as if there were no such thing as love in the world, love that makes man melancholy, that destroys the delights of good living, that drives him to the production of gloomy wails in more or less eccentric verse. There was no such love for him. Out of the storm and stress of an eventful career, in which misfortune had rained its blows upon him with undue severity, love had arisen like the comforting glow of a home hearth fire, and it shone upon his exile with naught in its beams but serenity and peace. Ivan was happy.

Breakfast was hardly begun when Mrs. White again appeared.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Mr. Strobel," she said hesitatingly; "I didn't like to disturb you, but he seemed very anxious, and so I said I would see if you were at home."

She laid a card upon the breakfast table and waited.

Ivan glanced at it and frowned. So, there must needs be a cloud upon this day to remind him, as if he needed it! how surely the sun of happiness was shining for him. Alexander Poubalov! What could he be doing in America, and what could have led him to call at just this juncture? Bah! there could be no significance in it, nothing but a memory of troublous experiences could be evoked by his

presence, nothing connected with that past could possibly intervene now between him and the new life upon which he was joyously entering.

Mrs. White was sorely distressed, for she saw that her lodger was disturbed, and in her motherly heart she wished that she had told the stranger below one of those white lies that have come to be regarded as not sinful in that they effect at least a postponement of evil. She might have said that Mr. Strobel was engaged, or that he had given up his room a week before. Both statements would have been true enough for the Recording Angel's book, goodness knows!

"If you had only just gone, or if he had come an hour later," she murmured plaintively.

"Oh, there's nothing the matter," cried Ivan, lightly; "I was simply wondering what in the world he could want with me. I haven't seen him for five years. Show him up, please."

Not half satisfied that nothing was the matter, Mrs. White obeyed, and presently Alexander Poubalov stood upon the threshold. He was a distinguished-looking man, tall, swarthy, middle-aged, a remarkable contrast to his fair-haired fellow countryman, Ivan Strobel.

"I am indeed glad to see you, Strobel," he said, his deep tones vibrant as a church bell; "may I come in?"

"I received your card and I sent for you," replied Ivan, coldly. He had risen and was standing by the breakfast table.

"I shall be sorry if I have disturbed you, for I had no such purpose in calling upon you. Pray go on with your breakfast," and Poubalov took a step or two forward, as if waiting for an invitation to sit down.

"To what purpose, then, may I attribute your call?" asked Ivan, without stirring.

"You are in haste, my friend," replied Poubalov, smiling; "you have probably learned the American habit of putting business ahead of all other things; but I see, too, that there may be some especial reason to-day for hurry. You are dressed to go out, and you have packed your trunks – "

"It is quite like you," interrupted Ivan, "to note every detail and attach some significance of your own to it. You are right, however, on this occasion. Time is precious with me to-day. I am to be married at noon."

"Ah! married! Strobel," and Poubalov made as if he would extend his hand, "I wish you would permit me to congratulate you."

"It is unnecessary," responded Ivan, remaining like a statue by his chair.

Poubalov shrugged his shoulders and looked disappointed.

"As you will," he said, "and perhaps it would be as well to postpone my call, as it seems you regard it as an unhappy intrusion."

"If you have any business other than that attending to a spy in general," said Ivan, "I shall be pleased if you will dispatch it now. If, on the contrary, you still have any interest in my movements, I will give you my itinerary, and you can follow me if you like. I will only suggest that we are not in Russia, and that it is not my intention to go outside the jurisdiction of the United States."

"You need only tell me, if you have no objection," replied Poubalov, "where I may look for you some time after your wedding journey."

Ivan picked up Poubalov's card and wrote an address upon it. "I shall live there," he said, handing the card to his caller. "I expect to return in two weeks."

Poubalov read the card and thoughtfully placed it in his pocketbook. "If I knew how to, Strobel," he remarked gravely, "I would assure you that you need have no anxiety on my account during your honeymoon, or afterward; but I see clearly that now, as heretofore, you will place no reliance whatever upon my words, and that you discredit my motives."

"You speak truly," said Ivan; "but we will not discuss the reasons for my distrust. You know them even better than I do. You may spare yourself any words. I shall not be disturbed by anxiety."

"On another occasion, then, I may hope for a somewhat extended conversation. Good-morning. My good wishes would doubtless be repugnant to you."

Ivan bowed silently and Poubalov withdrew.

"Strange that I should be pursued after all this lapse of time, and to this far country," thought Ivan; "but I have done right. I have nothing to fear from Poubalov or the government whose paid spy he is."

He looked at his watch, and, resuming his place at the table, hastily swallowed a cup of coffee. Mrs. White's eggs remained unbroken.

A carriage was waiting for him at the door and it was time that he should go, for the wedding was to take place at Rev. Dr. Merrill's little church in Roxbury, four miles away. With moderate driving and no accident he would be there in time to meet the bridal party at the door. A happy farewell to his landlady and her daughter, and he was off.

He did not notice that as his coupé turned into Somerset Street from Ashburton Place, a closed carriage left its position not far from Mrs. White's door and followed. If he had observed it he would have thought nothing of it, for in Boston other persons besides bridegrooms employ public conveyances, and it is not always that a cabman is employed to drive a fare to a wedding.

Ivan's coupé rolled gently down Park Street, and just as it reached the corner of Tremont, one of the forward wheels came off. The passenger was precipitated forward, and the driver with difficulty kept his seat. He climbed down in a moment, angry and bewildered. He could discover no break about his vehicle, but there was the wheel upon the ground, there was the body leaning forward, straining upon the shafts, disconcerting the horse —

"Open the door!" cried Ivan, imperatively; "I can't be shut up here!"

The driver got the door open after a little trouble and Ivan crawled out.

"I don't see how it happened," began the driver.

"No matter. It can't be helped in a minute, can it? I must have another conveyance."

A crowd was quickly gathering, and as Ivan looked around him he caught the eye of the driver of the closed carriage.

"Are you engaged?" called Ivan. Then, as the driver signified his willingness to take a fare, Ivan recoiled. The carriage looked as if it were on the way to a funeral. He hated presentiments and despised himself for the momentary feeling of discomfort.

"You can pull down the curtains, sir, after you get in," said the driver as if he had noticed his prospective passenger's discomfort. "Where to, sir?" he continued with his hand on the door.

Ivan told him and with a "Hurry, please," bolted into the carriage.

The driver sprang to his seat as if his salvation depended on his speed, lashed his horse heavily, and the carriage fairly leaped through the crowd and down Tremont Street. It was a beautiful June morning and the passenger was on his way to his own wedding, but he did not lower the curtains of the gloomy carriage.

A gentle quiver of excitement stirred the congregation that filled the little vine-covered church on Parker Avenue as the clock tolled the noon hour and the organist began to play softly, his fingers weaving scraps of melody into a vague but pleasing harmony like the light that filtered through the stained glass windows. This was but the suggestion of a coming outburst of harmony, for presently, as the joyful procession would be ready to move, he would open all the gates of sound and flood the edifice with the triumphal strains of the Wedding March, strains that seem light and music, too, to all listeners and beholders. Within the vestibule the bridal party awaited the coming of the groom. There, too, were Ivan's two friends, to do him honor by marching with him; one a Russian like himself, the other an American. With smiling faces they all endeavored to conceal annoyance that was speedily turning to anxiety over Ivan's delay.

Clara Hilman, as lovely a bride as ever donned the orange-decked veil, stood with palpitating heart beside her uncle and guardian, Matthew Pembroke. With awkward words he was trying to soothe what he felt must be her fears. All about them were pretty children dressed to follow the bride, and Clara's dearest girl friends. Within the chancel Dr. Merrill waited, wondering a little, but not

permitting himself to attach hasty blame to anybody for this embarrassing hitch in the proceedings. The organist looked inquiringly at the group that had found places in the choir loft and they returned his gaze by shakes of the head.

"You are more nervous than I am, uncle," said Clara with an attempt at bravery, though her trembling lips betrayed her; "he will be here."

"There he is!" cried Ralph Harmon, one of Ivan's friends, as a carriage was seen to turn into the avenue from a street a little way off, and come hurrying toward the church. "Be ready to tell the organist," he whispered to a boy who stood near.

The waiting procession fell into partial disarray as every one craned his or her neck to see the bridegroom step from the carriage which now halted at the steps. All, nearly all, could see through the open doors as the driver dismounted and opened the door.

A shiver of disappointment passed over the wedding party. An old, bent man issued from the carriage, leaning heavily on a cane and hobbled up the steps.

"This is stranger than Ivan's delay!" exclaimed Harmon in a whisper to his Russian colleague; "I don't believe old Dexter ever went to a wedding before unless it was his own, and I never knew he was married."

"Who is he?" asked the Russian.

"Old Dexter is all I can say. He's a kind of miser and money-lender combined, I think. I don't believe he's any friend of Ivan's."

"No. He's bowing to Mr. Pembroke."

Very ceremoniously but with a halting movement, the old man had taken off his hat to Mr. Pembroke and passed on into the church. Mr. Pembroke had bowed stiffly in return and then bent over his niece to speak to her.

Clara was by this time plainly disturbed. It was a quarter past the hour, and the congregation itself was getting nervous. A few persons came out into the vestibule to learn what caused the delay. The organist's flitting harmonies became monotonous, intolerable, and the rector within the chancel was not so impatient as alarmed.

A few minutes later the organist stopped altogether. The rector joined the wedding party in the vestibule. Clara had been taken to a room in the vestry by her guardian.

"If he should come now," said Mr. Pembroke, gravely, "I don't believe we could go on. The strain has been too great for Clara."

Dr. Merrill spoke to her as only a clergyman can speak to a parishioner, and minutes dragged along.

At last when an hour had passed, and there was yet no word from Ivan, the rector dismissed the congregation, and the members of the wedding party went homeward, wondering and sorrowful.

CHAPTER II. AN EXPLANATION SUGGESTED

"Wait for me a moment, Paul," said Ralph Harmon as the people began to pour out of the church.

He went to the room in the vestry where Clara Hilman sat pale and tearless. With her were Mr. Pembroke, his daughter Louise, and two or three other young ladies who were intimate friends of the unfortunate bride. Ralph did not approach the group, but paused at the door and looked significantly at Miss Pembroke. She went to him at once, and, unseen by the others, he took both her hands in his and said:

"I am going to Strobel's room and shall take Palovna with me. If I find any trace or news, as I undoubtedly shall, I will go directly to your house and report. You may tell Miss Hilman so if you think it will relieve her."

"Clara, dear!" exclaimed Miss Pembroke, impulsively, "Ralph is going to find Ivan, and will come back as quickly as he can to tell you."

For several minutes the bride had been sitting as if petrified, making no answer to the well-meant questions of her friends, unconscious apparently of their tearful sympathy, but at this announcement her eyes were lit by just a gleam of gratitude and she tried to speak to Ralph. Her lips quivered with unformed words, and she turned appealingly to her uncle.

"Come," she faltered, "let us go home."

Ralph bowed and returned immediately to the vestibule, where Paul Palovna waited for him. Both were accosted by many of the outgoing audience, but they shook their heads and hurried down the steps and up the street to the nearest line of cars. They said little to each other on the way to Ashburton Place, for they were oppressed with forebodings, and the consciousness that they had nothing upon which to base speculation.

Once Ralph exclaimed desperately, "What can have happened!" and Paul answered, "He must have fallen violently ill." Both hoped that this might be the case, and neither believed it. Mrs. White knew them both, for they were frequent callers upon her lodger, and her surprise, therefore, passed all bounds when she met them at the door and heard them ask as with one voice, "Where is Strobel?"

"Where?" she repeated, "where should he be? Haven't you seen him?"

"No," replied Ralph, "he did not come to the church, and the rector dismissed the congregation."

Mrs. White threw up her hands and sank into a chair. "Why – why –" she stammered, "he left here all dressed and gay as could be."

"Did he seem quite well?" asked Paul.

The good lady remembered her surprise and disappointment at finding Ivan's eggs unbroken, his breakfast almost untasted and she told the young men about it.

"That signifies nothing," said Paul; "I don't wonder he didn't care to eat. Did he appear to be troubled about anything?"

"Not when he went away," answered Mrs. White; "I thought he seemed put out when the strange gentleman called."

"There we have it!" exclaimed Paul, eagerly. "Who was the caller and what was his business, if you happen to know?"

"I don't know either. I never saw the gentleman before. He was here only a few minutes. He sent up his card, and though I looked at the name, I couldn't remember it, for it had a strange look, something like yours."

"May we go to his room? The card may still be there."

"I don't think it is," said Mrs. White, rising to follow the young men who were already half way up the stairs; "I don't remember seeing it when I cleaned up."

When Ralph and Paul had vainly examined the catch-alls, the vases, and every probable place into which a visitor's card might have been tucked, the Russian asked what had been done with the contents of the waste basket.

"My daughter Lizzie helped me," replied Mrs. White, "and took the waste papers downstairs. I'll ask her to find them and look for the card."

She left the room, and while she was gone the young men moved about nervously, repeatedly asking who the caller could have been, what possible connection his call could have had with Ivan's failure to appear at his wedding, and all manner of questions, vain and irritating, that arise when men are confronted by an emergency that teems with mystery. Mrs. White reported that her daughter had gone out and that the waste paper from Mr. Strobel's room had been burned.

"Lizzie may have seen that card," she said, "and I'll ask her when she comes in. I can't think where she can have gone."

"Was she here when the stranger called?" asked Ralph.

"Oh, yes, and until after Mr. Strobel started away. I didn't know that she had left the house, and I can't imagine what she went out for. Perhaps she'll be back soon."

"Do you know where Strobel hired his carriage?" inquired Paul.

"No, I don't. Lizzie might, for I remember he said something to her about it the day before. I wonder where she – "

"He probably ordered his carriage from Clark & Brown," said Ralph to Paul. He had no intention of ignoring Mrs. White's motherly anxiety about her daughter, but he saw no reason for attaching significance to her absence, and his mind was burdened with a growing conviction that something serious had happened to his friend.

"Suppose we make some inquiries," responded Paul. "If you will go to Clark & Brown's office, I will take a run around all the hotel cab-stands in the vicinity. He might have left his order at the Tremont House or in Bosworth Street, you know."

"I'm agreed," said Ralph. "We must get hold of the man who drove him. One of us is likely to succeed. Suppose, as Strobel may after all turn up at any minute, we meet here as soon as we can. I'll take in the Revere House as well as Clark & Brown's."

"I wish you would meet here, gentlemen," interposed Mrs. White; "Lizzie may be back then."

"I hope she will be, Mrs. White," said Ralph. "She may be able to tell us something about Strobel. It seems strange that he hasn't sent some word."

"I begin to fear that we shall find him at a hospital, badly injured," remarked Paul.

"Oh, I hope not!" exclaimed Mrs. White. "I declare! it makes me feel dreadfully about Lizzie."

The young men departed at once upon their errands. It was Paul Palovna who came upon a clew. He found where Ivan had engaged his carriage, and he went to the livery stable, which was in the South End, to find what had become of the driver and his passenger. He arrived there just after the driver had come in with his damaged carriage.

"I started in with the gentleman," said the driver, "but I broke down at the corner of Tremont and Park Streets and he went along with somebody else."

"Who was it?" asked Paul.

"I don't know. I never saw the cabman before."

"Whose rig was it?"

"I don't know that, either. I never saw the horse before, and the carriage was like hundreds of others that you might see in Boston any day."

Paul tried to think what ought to be done next.

"Did Mr. Strobel have a second accident?" asked one of the stable proprietors.

"I fear so," replied Paul; "we haven't seen him, and as he was going to his own wedding, his failure to turn up is rather alarming."

"Going to be married, was he?" the stableman spoke thoughtfully. "Then I guess you'll find that he has been made the victim of a practical joke. I suppose he had plenty of friends who were aware of his intentions?"

"Certainly, but I cannot imagine," said Paul with some indignation, "that any of them would have carried a joke to the extent of keeping him away from his wedding."

"Perhaps not," admitted the stableman, "but it looks as if some one had deliberately tried to delay him. Don't you know how the accident happened to our carriage?"

"No. What was the matter?"

"Somebody had loosened the nut of the forward right wheel so that it was bound to come off before they had gone very far. The breakdown was no accident."

"You are sure of this, I suppose," exclaimed Paul; "but when could it have been done?"

"When Mike was waiting in front of the door to Mr. Strobel's place. You'd better tell this gentleman what you told me, Mike."

"I waited there a good half hour before Mr. Strobel came out," replied the driver. "And while I was there a fellow crossed the street and spoke to me. He stood in the street kind o' leaning on the wheel. 'Go'n' to take Mr. Strobel to his wedding?' says he. 'I'm go'n' to take a gent of that name,' says I 'but I don't know nothing 'bout his wedding.' 'That's what 'tis,' says he, 'and a very fine man he is, and a fine day it is for the ceremony; and that's a fine horse you have,' and all that kind of palaver, till I thought he'd talk me blind. After a while he said good-morning, and went on, bad luck to him."

Paul looked at the stableman in surprise. "Could the nut have been removed then without the driver knowing it?" he asked.

"Yes, but it wasn't necessarily removed. It may have been started. You get up on the seat and sit back indifferently, as a driver would be likely to sit. Just try it. I want you to be satisfied."

Paul climbed to the driver's seat on the coupé, and the stableman leaned over the wheel.

"You see," said the latter, "unless you bent over and looked down sharply you wouldn't make out what I was up to, and not having any reason to suspect a trick, you'd likely sit still; more likely than not, if you was an ordinary driver, you'd look the other way most of the time; and – but I don't need to talk any longer for here is the nut!" and he held up a small wrench in which was the nut of the wheel by which he was standing.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed Paul, smiling, in spite of his anxiety, at the dexterous way in which the stableman had proved that the trick might have been done. "What sort of man was this, Mike, who talked to you?"

"I dunno, sir. Medium sized, young, I should say."

"Would you know him again?"

"I would that!"

"By the way, did you see anybody call at the house while you were waiting?"

"Yes, a gentleman went in. I heard him ask for Mr. Strobel, and he came out again inside of five minutes."

"What was he like and where did he go?"

"I couldn't tell you what he was like. I paid no attention to him. He went away toward Somerset Street. The fellow at the wheel was talking to me as he went along."

This was all the information of value that Paul could obtain, although he asked many more questions. He found Ralph waiting for him in Ivan's room, and Mrs. White was there, overcome with anxiety on account of the continued absence of her daughter.

"I think," said Ralph when he had heard his friend's report, "that we'd better speak of this at police headquarters."

"Are you going to say anything about Lizzie?" asked Mrs. White.

"Certainly not, unless you wish it. She will doubtless come in before evening."

"I don't know," murmured the landlady, despairingly; "she didn't say a word about going out, and I'm dreadfully afraid! I can't find her little traveling bag –"

She stopped suddenly as Paul wheeled about and glanced at her with a startled glance. There was a moment of silence, and then the Russian said quietly: "I will come back early in the evening, Mrs. White, and if your daughter has not appeared, I'll help you to make inquiries. We must look after Strobel now."

The young men reported the circumstances at police headquarters and then went to Roxbury. It was five o'clock when they arrived at Mr. Pembroke's house, and they cherished a hope that some word from Ivan, if not Ivan himself, would be found there. They were disappointed. Louise Pembroke told them that nothing had occurred except that Clara had succumbed to the shock and strain, and was under the care of a physician.

"About an hour ago she broke down and cried," said Louise, "and the physician said it was the best thing that could have happened to her. He would have been afraid to have Ivan return before that. Now she is not in any immediate danger."

"Are you going to tell her what we have done?" asked Ralph.

"Yes. I'll do so now."

Louise found her cousin calm and hopeful.

"Ralph has come back," said Clara. "I heard the bell, and knew it must be he. Well?"

"Ralph says, dear," replied Louise, "that Ivan started for the church in a carriage, and that there was a breakdown on the way that appears to have been caused by a trick. He then took another carriage, and after that they do not know what became of him."

"Lou," said the sufferer, "I suppose people would expect that I should feel humiliation most of all, but I don't, and if I did I should no longer feel it now that I know Ivan started for the church. Don't you see? He meant to come, of course! Something dreadful has happened to him –" Her eyes filled with tears, and she paused a moment before continuing: "There must be more details, of course, but I am not well enough yet to hear them. Ask Ralph and Paul to come to-morrow morning, will you, please? I must talk with them."

"I will," replied Louise; "Ivan may come before that."

Ralph went to his home immediately after leaving Mr. Pembroke's, but Paul, who had no other home than a furnished room in a lodging house, returned according to his promise to see Mrs. White. He felt that there might be a chance that the daughter, Lizzie, could throw some light on Ivan's movements, but he had no doubt whatever that she herself had returned. He reached the house just as a postman was leaving it. Mrs. White stood in the hall, the door remaining open, nervously opening a letter. When she had read it she screamed, and would have fallen to the floor had not Paul sprung forward to catch her. She recovered in a moment sufficiently to sob:

"I'm so glad you've come. Lizzie has gone! Read what she says."

Paul took the letter which she tremblingly handed him and read:

"Dear Mother: I am going away and shall not come back for a long time. Do not be anxious, and do not try to find me. You are not to blame for anything, and I cannot now tell you why I go. Some time I may do so, and I may write to you. I don't know yet. Do not think unkindly of me. You will know some time that it is best. I love you and –"

Two words here had been laboriously scratched out. Then came the signature, "Lizzie." Paul made out the erased words to be "I love."

In spite of himself a dreadful fear came over him, a fear of something more painful for all of Ivan's friends to bear than an accident, no matter how serious.

CHAPTER III. AN IMPERFECT VISION

Ivan Strobel had been a lodger in Mrs. White's house for more than two years. During the greater part of that period he had been the only lodger, and from the beginning his relations with his landlady had been more as if he were a friend of the family than merely a tenant. His evenings were not infrequently spent in Mrs. White's sitting-room, where his strongly domestic nature found some comfort in reading aloud to the old lady and her daughter, or in playing cards, or in telling them stories of European life. Sometimes his friends would call, and find him there instead of in his own room, and more than once he had been the target for good-humored chaffing relative to his supposed fondness for the landlady's daughter.

On such occasions Strobel laughed lightly, as if it were out of the question that anybody should seriously harbor a supposition that he was in love with Lizzie. That was in the comparatively early days of his residence there; and one afternoon, about a year before his eventful wedding morning, Ralph Harmon and Paul Palovna called together and found him in his own quarters, serving Russian tea to Mrs. White and her daughter. He was evidently delighted to see his friends, and he promptly set glasses of the fragrant, hot beverage before them. Mrs. White was enthusiastic in her praise of the tea, as well she might be, for Russians are past-masters in the art of tea-brewing, and Ivan was one of the most skillful; and she slyly intimated that the woman who would have the first place in his future household would do well to place him in charge of the kitchen.

Ivan smiled and blushed as if pleased at the allusion, and while his friends commended the idea with noisy laughter, Miss Lizzie sat silent, sipping her tea with downcast eyes. Shortly afterward the ladies withdrew, and Palovna immediately began to tease Strobel about Lizzie.

"On my word, Ivan," he cried, "you begin very badly. If you show her what a fine hand you have for kitchen-work, you'll never have any time to yourself after you're married. It's a fine thing to serve tea to your friends when you're a bachelor, but fancy a man setting the kettle to boil for his wife! Great Scott! what a picture!"

Both visitors laughed heartily, but Strobel, with a grave smile, held up one hand deprecatingly.

"I don't mind your raillery in the least," he said, "but it does injustice to the young lady who is the innocent subject of it rather than myself. I'm glad you came in as you did, for I have something to tell you, and, in fact, it was to tell Mrs. White and Lizzie the same thing that I invited them to take tea with me. I am engaged to Miss Hilman."

"I'm mighty glad to hear it, and I congratulate you," exclaimed Ralph, jumping up and grasping Ivan by the hand.

"And I, too," said Paul, not less sincerely; "pardon my joking. I hadn't suspected that the wind blew from that direction. When is it to be?"

Then Strobel told them about his plans, and from that day until this minute, when Paul stood by the weeping landlady, with her daughter's incoherent letter in his hand, he had never associated Ivan and Lizzie in any other way than as ordinary friends. When, earlier in the afternoon, Mrs. White had said something that seemed to suggest the possibility that they had gone away together, Paul's indignation had been aroused, and it was with an effort that he had mastered his tongue, which fairly burned to deny such an outrageous assumption. He had dismissed the thought later, with the conviction that Mrs. White could not have realized the true significance of her words.

Now, utterly at a loss to account for his friends' absence, he was compelled to face any suggestion that arose and make the best of it.

"There is at least some comfort in this, Mrs. White," he said, unsteadily; "you know that your daughter is alive, and she says she may write to you. She would not have written this had she meant to hide herself completely from you."

The mother's anguish was not to be tempered with this argument. The poignant fact remained that her daughter had gone away, deserted her home, and neglected deliberately to take her mother into her confidence.

"How could she?" moaned Mrs. White; "why, oh, why has she done this?"

Paul had hard questions to ask, hard for him as well as for her.

"Mrs. White," he said, "you have shown me Lizzie's letter; will you let me help you if I can?"

"Yes, yes!" she answered eagerly, raising her tearful eyes. The very proffer of sympathy and assistance helped to restore her to some degree of composure, and she opened the door to the sitting-room. "I forgot where we were," she said apologetically; "please come in and sit down."

Paul complied, and, still with the letter in his hand, began: "I shall have to ask questions that would be impertinent if you had not said that I might try to help you. Do you – was Lizzie engaged?"

"Oh, no!" replied Mrs. White, with a little gasp; "what made you think so?"

"I don't think so, and what I really tried to ask was whether she were in love with anybody?"

Mrs. White looked doubtfully at him. Her eyes were dry now, and she toyed nervously with her apron.

"My daughter didn't tell me she was going away," she answered slowly after a minute; "if she wouldn't tell me that, how should you expect that she would speak to me of her love – if she did love anybody?"

Paul was somewhat nettled at this apparent effort to juggle with his question. The situation seemed to him too serious to admit of anything but the most complete frankness.

"I don't ask how you know, or why you don't, Mrs. White," he said as gently as he could; "I simply asked for a statement of fact."

The landlady looked down at the floor, evidently trying to frame an answer. Paul would have dropped the matter right there, disgusted at her reticence if not her indirection, had he not been determined to learn everything possible that might throw light upon the fate of his friends. So he began on another tack.

"Weren't you invited to Strobel's wedding, Mrs. White?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied promptly, not suspecting the ultimate aim of the question; "both of us received invitations."

"Why didn't you go?"

"Lizzie didn't want to go. She said weddings always made her feel solemn, and I didn't want to go without her."

"Wasn't there a deeper reason, Mrs. White, for your daughter's reluctance to go to Ivan Strobel's wedding?"

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Palovna," said the landlady, glancing at him and averting her eyes.

Paul wanted to tell her that she was trying to dodge him, but he controlled himself and said:

"I mean that in my opinion your daughter was hopelessly in love with Ivan."

This statement did not provoke the storm that Paul had expected. Mrs. White's reserve had prepared him for an outburst of denials, indignant tears and the like, but the old lady sat very still, her hands clasped upon her lap, and after a little silence she spoke dreamily:

"Lizzie never told me, but I guessed as much long ago, poor, dear girl!"

Paul's heart sank as he felt his fears growing to conviction that the flight of Lizzie White was closely connected with the disappearance of Ivan Strobel. He was not disloyal to his friend even in his thoughts; he kept insisting to himself that Ivan was not the man to play all his friends double, but even as he rebelled against this possible explanation of the matter, reason interposed its stern voice to

say that if, after all, Strobel had discovered that he loved Lizzie and not Clara, this was the probable course he would take to avoid facing the comments and criticisms of his friends; and although he repelled the explanation with all his will, he nevertheless felt a dreadful sense of doubt.

"Mrs. White," he said gravely, "have you any reason to think that Strobel and your daughter went away together?"

The landlady started as if she had been shot.

"Of course not!" she cried; "how could you think such a thing? Why should you insult my poor child – " and she broke down and sobbed bitterly.

Palovna was miserable. He saw that he had utterly misinterpreted Mrs. White's reluctance in answering his questions; that, far from suspecting that Lizzie's departure might be an elopement with Ivan, she had instinctively tried to guard her daughter's secret.

"I am exceedingly sorry that I have hurt you," said Paul, contritely, "I don't think, cannot think that they have gone together; but, you see, I am in such a maze of anxiety about Strobel, everything is so strange and uncertain, that I – I hardly knew what I said."

He paused, and Mrs. White, still sobbing, uttered some words of which the only one he understood was "cruel," and he promptly accepted it as applied to himself.

"I can only repeat that I am sorry," he said. "Here is your letter. I fear I can be of no help to you unless you want me to take some message for you."

"No – you cannot do anything now – I know you didn't mean it. Please come again to-morrow – when I can think – please, Mr. Palovna."

So Paul left the house, wondering whether Mrs. White felt any unhappier than himself.

He turned into Pemberton Square, and went as far as the door to police headquarters, halted abruptly and turned away. He could not be the one to fasten a suspicion of such a character upon his missing friend. If it were true that he had eloped, that ugly fact would be established soon enough without his giving any hints to the police detectives who were assigned to hunt for Ivan.

The doctor had ordered Clara Hilman to bed, and under the first prostration of the blow she had willingly obeyed; but as evening came on and her mind cleared, she felt stronger, and at supper time she arose and dressed. She did not go down to the dining-room, and Louise brought delicacies to her chamber. She wished that Ralph and Paul would return, for she felt that she could talk with them now, and she longed intensely for any word, however insignificant, concerning her lover's movements. Louise sat with her, making well-intended efforts to distract her attention from the subject that was so terribly engrossing, and offering the comfort of hopeful assurances when it was evident that Clara could think of nothing else.

The fact was that Louise disturbed Clara. Her thoughts were fixed in their own channel, and so obstinately clung there that it grew wearisome to attend to the interruptions that Louise was constantly making. So Clara said at last:

"I think, dear, if you will forgive me, I would like to be alone a little while. I will call if I want anything."

"To be sure, Clara," responded Louise, rising at once and putting her arms affectionately around her cousin; "I will go to my own room, and will come the minute you need me. Shall I get you anything to read?"

"No, I cannot do anything but think, and I must think. Don't be alarmed. I am not going to let myself become ill."

There was a faint, sweet smile upon her sad lips as she spoke, and, left to herself, she sat leaning slightly forward, her chin upon one hand, the other clinched upon her lap, gazing intently at the wall which she saw not. In its place was the carriage in front of Mrs. White's house, and as she watched it she saw the house door open and Ivan, her Ivan, come forth. She saw him turn to say good-by to the kind-hearted landlady, saw the happy smile upon his face, saw him enter the carriage, saw it start slowly away.

This much of her lover's wedding journey was as clearly before her as if it were now occurring, and she were at a window in the house across the way from Mrs. White's in Ashburton Place. Her nerves strained to their utmost tension, she tried to follow the carriage. She could see that it turned into Somerset Street, but when it seemed to be at Beacon she could not tell which way it went. That it was still moving was apparent, but there was a confusion of vehicles and persons, streets and buildings, there was a pause – somewhere – was Ivan getting out? Was that he taking another carriage? Oh! why was not Paul here to tell her just what happened at this point, wherever it was? Why had she not heard his report when he was there to make it?

Suddenly the confusion gave way, and the familiar wall was before her, but still she saw it not. Now she was listening. Did she hear her lover's name? Was it spoken in anger? It must be! it must be! They were speaking of him; who were they? In this house? where else if she heard it? Could it be that she had heard nothing? To her ear there was no tangible sound save the ticking of the clock on the mantel. Clara arose and crossed the room, staggering with weakness, and placed her hand upon the door. One instant she waited as if in doubt, and then she opened it very softly. Yes! there were voices below; they were in the library; that was her uncle speaking. Had she a right to listen? She stole to the head of the stairs and looked down. The library door was closed. The voice was an unintelligible murmur, nothing more.

Down the stairs she crept and came to the library door.

"Are you money-mad?" It was her uncle who spoke. "Don't you know that it hasn't come, that such a thing can't be effected in a moment?"

"And I tell you, Mat Pembroke," said a harsh voice, "that you've got – "

The voice suddenly stopped, and the speaker, the infirm old man who had arrived late at the church while the wedding party was waiting in the vestibule, half rose from his big chair and pointed with a bony, trembling hand over Mr. Pembroke's shoulder.

Mr. Pembroke turned about and saw Clara Hilman with wide-open eyes and pale face standing just within the doorway.

"Forgive me, uncle," she said in a voice scarce above a whisper; "I thought you were speaking of Ivan, and I – I came down to say that I am going to find him."

She swayed slightly as she finished, and Mr. Pembroke ran forward and took her in his arms.

CHAPTER IV. CLARA'S SEARCH BEGINS

Clara had not fainted in her uncle's arms, but she nestled against him quivering and sobbing; and again it was fortunate for her that the excited, pent-up forces of her brain had broken through in a flood of tears.

"You see, Dexter!" cried Mr. Pembroke in broken accents, "how my poor girl suffers. There, there, Clara, better get back to your bed and try to sleep. I thought Louise was looking after you."

"She has been with me," replied Clara, "but I sent her away. I wanted to think. Has nothing been heard from Ivan?"

"Nothing yet, my dear. You shall know it as soon as we do even if it comes at three in the morning."

Attracted by her cousin's voice, Louise appeared at this moment and led Clara upstairs, scolding her gently for having left her room. Clara was greatly subdued, and urged no longer to be left alone. Through the rest of the evening she sat quietly listening to Louise, and feeling no return of that tenseness of the nerves that had preceded and accompanied her waking dream.

In the morning she was better, stronger in every way. She met her uncle and cousin at breakfast, and although she was very quiet she seemed more like her natural self than they had expected. Every newspaper had something to say about the disappearance of Ivan Strobel, and the reporters, apparently, had interviewed everybody directly interested in him except the unhappy bride herself. The newspapers were in a pile by her uncle's plate when she surprised him by entering the room and taking her place at the table.

"I'd like to see the papers, uncle," she said after responding to his greetings.

Mr. Pembroke glanced nervously at his daughter, and laid his hand irresolutely on the pile.

"I am afraid you won't find anything of comfort in them, my dear," he said.

"No matter," she replied, "I don't expect to. Don't try to keep them from me. I shall get them later if I do not read them now."

Mr. Pembroke passed them all to her except one which he opened and pretended to read himself. He had already been through it, and he did not intend, if he could help it, that she should see it.

Clara intently read the account of the interrupted wedding in the first paper she took up, pausing only once to exclaim, "Then the reporters were here last evening!"

"Yes," said Mr. Pembroke, "they were coming and going until long after midnight."

"I almost wish I could have seen some of them," murmured Clara as she continued to read. The report told with fair accuracy about the break-down at Park and Tremont Streets and the explanation of it given by the stableman. Mrs. White was quoted, and as much as the reporter could imagine was made of the visit to Strobel by the mysterious stranger. Then there were interviews with the missing man's employers, State Street bankers, and the highly gratifying intelligence was set forth that there was no reason to suppose that Strobel had tampered with the funds or in any way betrayed his trust. Clara blushed with indignation as she read that the books would be examined in the morning, with a view to discovering whether Strobel had been guilty of any irregularities.

"The idea that Ivan should be suspected of dishonesty!" exclaimed Clara, laying the paper down and taking up another.

"People will think anything and everything," said her uncle, "and you must be prepared for the worst insinuations and speculations."

Clara read the next account in silence. It was much longer than the first, and a great deal of attention and imagination had been devoted to the romantic aspect of the situation. Clara was described as utterly prostrated by the blow, dangerously ill, refusing to see her most intimate friends;

and the intended union of the beautiful orphan with the Russian exile was dwelt upon with appropriate grace and picturesqueness. She blushed for herself this time and laid the paper down impatiently.

"I shall show them," she said, "if they pay any further attention to the affair, that I am not prostrated by the blow, hard as it is."

"What do you mean, Clara?" asked Mr. Pembroke and Louise together.

"Just what I said last evening, uncle. I am going to find Ivan."

"Why! dear, what can you do?" cried Louise, pityingly.

"Do? I don't know yet what the details will be, but I can search for him. What better, what else could I do? If we had been married, and Ivan had disappeared, would it not be my duty as well as my inclination to turn the world upside down to find him? Should it make any difference just because the formal word had not been spoken that was to make us husband and wife?"

Her voice trembled a little at the end of this brief speech, and her eyes were moist, but she took up a third paper resolutely and began to read. She had debated her situation thoroughly in the long hours of the previous day and evening, and her determination to devote herself to the search for her lover was not the effect of a temporary hallucination. Her uncle and cousin said nothing for the present either to dissuade or encourage her, Louise, at least, feeling that in due time Clara would see the futility of attempting anything on her own account as long as experienced detectives were in the field. Mr. Pembroke left the room for a moment, and when he returned the paper he had been reading was folded and hidden in his pocket. There was still another before Clara, and when she had read it she pushed them all away, saying:

"They're as much alike as if the same man had written them all."

Mr. Pembroke was relieved that she did not notice that one of the morning papers was not included in the lot she had read.

Hardly had they finished breakfast when the bell rang, and a reporter for an evening paper inquired for news of Mr. Strobel and Miss Hilman's health. Mr. Pembroke frowned with annoyance, but Clara was for seeing the young man.

"I don't want to be pictured as a useless, waiting, tear-drenched weakling!" she cried when uncle and cousin remonstrated. "Publicity? notoriety? what could be worse than the notoriety I have already acquired? Let me see him, please, so that he may have no excuse for describing me as a broken-down, useless incumbrance."

"I will speak to him first," said Mr. Pembroke, hastily. "Wait here a minute. I'll send for you when I have heard what it is he wants."

So Clara and Louise remained at the breakfast table, and a few minutes later Mr. Pembroke opened the door and said with an assumption of cheerfulness:

"There! you see, sir, the young lady is bearing her trouble more bravely than the morning papers announced. This is Miss Hilman, Mr. Shaughnessy, and my daughter, Louise."

Mr. Shaughnessy, thus introduced, entered the room bowing with old-fashioned extravagance. His head was bald as an egg, and his face was three-fourths concealed by a grizzly beard. The "young man" could no longer look forward to his sixtieth birthday. He wore gold-bowed eyeglasses, and in one hand he held hat and note-book and in the other a stub of a pencil.

"Char-r-med, ladies," he said, "to see you looking so fine upon this gr-rievous occasion. May I ask, Miss Hilman, how you passed the night?"

What with surprise at her uncle's maneuver in bringing the reporter to the breakfast room, and amusement at the courtly yet business-like manners of the "young man," Clara could not have repressed a smile if she had tried; and before she could reply, Mr. Shaughnessy had whipped his note-book to the top of his hat and written the significant mnemonic, "smile."

"I slept quite as usual, thank you," replied Clara.

"I am delighted to hear it," said Shaughnessy; "health, Miss Hilman, is the greatest pr-rop in time of trouble. Have you any obser-rvation to make upon Mr. Strobel's absence? Any theor-ry to account for it?"

"No theory, Mr. Shaughnessy, though I hope to have one some time later in the day. I should like to have you tell your readers that I have absolute faith in Mr. Strobel, and that I expect any theory as to his disappearance to accord with honorable conduct on his part."

"Yes, yes," said the reporter, scribbling away for dear life, that he might not lose a word of this important utterance. "Do I understand you to say that you expect to have news of your – Mr. Strobel before the day is over?"

"I shall devote all my time to searching for him."

"Clara!" exclaimed Louise, while Mr. Pembroke turned away with a despairing shrug. Shaughnessy looked doubtingly at Mr. Pembroke, and then said:

"May I have the honor of calling on you later, then?"

"I shall be glad at any time," replied Clara, "to give you any information in my power." Shaughnessy made a note.

"I hope you will pardon me seeming imper-rtinence, Miss Hilman," he continued, "but me city editor commanded me to obtain photographs of yourself and Mr. Strobel."

Louise sighed and looked genuinely alarmed; but Clara thought a moment, and answered that she would loan the reporter pictures if he would be sure to return them uninjured.

"I shall be sure to do so," he answered, "and I commend your decision. It saves me a lot of trouble, for, of course, I must obey me city editor; he's a tyrant, Miss Hilman, and if you did not give me the pictures, I should have to get them elsewhere."

Clara smiled as she left the room to get the photographs, and when she had given them to Shaughnessy he took his departure, promising to call again.

"How could you give him the pictures, Clara?" asked Louise reproachfully.

"Mine will do no harm," answered Clara, quietly; "didn't you hear him say he was bound to get it anyway? Moreover, it may help in discovering Ivan, if only they will print a good likeness of him."

Clara was right in one respect at least. Nearly every evening paper published pictures of herself and Ivan, and nobody at the Pembroke house could have told where the originals were obtained.

"Now I must keep my word and begin the search," said Clara after the reporter had gone.

"You're not going to leave the house, I hope?" exclaimed her uncle.

"Certainly, uncle," she replied; "I feel quite well, and I will not overtax myself. I can stand anything better than staying idle here."

"I am strongly disposed to forbid you," said Mr. Pembroke, anxiously; "you are sure to have a most disagreeable and painful experience."

"Please don't go!" cried Louise, who had read the paper that Mr. Pembroke had concealed.

"I am sorry to displease you both," returned Clara, "but if I am forbidden to go I shall have to disobey."

"Then Louise must go with you," said her uncle.

"I should like to have her. Will you, Lou, dear?"

Louise was only too anxious to accompany her cousin, and accordingly they left the house together just in time to escape a squad of reporters representing the other evening papers. Clara had arranged her programme the night before, and left word at the house for Ralph and Paul, should they come in her absence, to go to Ivan's room. Mrs. White had seen Clara on the few occasions when Mr. Strobel had served afternoon tea to his intended and other friends, and she fell into a great flurry of agitation when she recognized her at the door.

"Come in," she stammered as she led the way; "of course I am glad to see you, for I am certain you cannot believe it."

Louise tried to check the landlady from making the inevitable revelation, but Clara laid one hand on her cousin's arm and asked:

"Believe what, Mrs. White?"

"Why, what's in the paper," replied the landlady; "you've read the papers, I suppose? I presumed that was why you came."

"I read the papers," said Clara, "and I came to inquire about Ivan. Do you refer to the suggested irregularities in his accounts? Of course I do not believe anything of that kind."

"Dear, no! I didn't suppose you did. I meant about my daughter Lizzie."

"Your daughter!" exclaimed Clara in a low voice, while Louise hid her face in her hands. "What do you mean? Let me see the paper."

More agitated than ever, Mrs. White produced a copy of the paper that Mr. Pembroke had withheld from his niece.

"I must have overlooked this," said Clara, wonderingly, as she saw that the account differed in style from those she had read. The reporter of this paper, sharper than his rivals, had somehow discovered that Lizzie White had left her home, and he set forth the circumstances with every delicate turn that language would allow to suggest a connection between her flight and Ivan's disappearance.

"It is shrewdly suspected by the friends of Strobel," so the story ran, "that as the time of his marriage approached, he found his fancy for Miss White stronger than his love for Miss Hilman, and that he chose elopement with the former as less dishonorable than marriage with the latter."

The writer then proceeded to an elaborate explanation of how Strobel might himself have arranged the wheel of his coupé so that it would fall off, and how he might then, by previous understanding with the second cabman, who was also conveniently missing, have been driven to the Park Square railroad station, where he waited for Miss White. It was entirely possible that they might have taken the one o'clock train for New York, if not the noon train.

Clara was very pale when she laid the paper down, but her faith in Ivan was not so much as touched by doubt.

"It's an outrage," she said quietly.

"I knew you wouldn't believe it!" exclaimed Mrs. White.

"Believe it! of course it isn't true! It's not possible!"

There was a ring at the door just then, and Mrs. White excused herself to answer it.

She opened upon Ivan's mysterious visitor, Alexander Poubalov.

CHAPTER V. THE AGENT OF THE CZAR

"Good-morning," said Poubalov, gutturally; "this is Madame White, I believe?"

"Yes, sir," replied the landlady, impressed at once by the stranger's deferential manner, and believing that through him the mystery would be cleared away; "won't you come in?"

"Thank you, yes. I have called to inquire for my friend Strobel."

"You are not the first, sir," said Mrs. White, opening the door to the sitting-room. "There are two here now who will be glad to see you. Miss Hilman, this is the gentleman who called on Mr. Strobel yesterday morning. Miss Hilman was to have married him, you know, and this is Miss Pembroke," and having thus awkwardly initiated a new scene, Mrs. White took refuge in the nearest chair.

Poubalov was as near to showing surprise as he ever permitted himself to come, and Clara, rising impulsively, went directly to him and said:

"Then you can tell me something about Mr. Strobel, can you not?"

"I can tell you nothing," he answered gravely; "I came for information myself."

Clara looked into his eyes searchingly, and went back to her chair feeling that her greatest hope had been dashed to the ground.

"I feel the awkwardness of my position, ladies," continued Poubalov (I make no attempt to suggest his dialect, which was at times almost unintelligible, as there was nothing of a humorous or trivial character in his conversation). "Every newspaper makes me out as a possible foe to Mr. Strobel, a mysterious ogre going about seeking to destroy young men, and perhaps I should not blame anybody for supposing that I might have been concerned in preventing Mr. Strobel's marriage, but I assure you that I was not. I did not know of his intentions until yesterday morning, when he told me about it himself. I am as much surprised as anybody to read of his disappearance."

Poubalov paused and with marked deliberation took out his card case.

"It was but natural," said Clara, tremulously, "that we should hope that you could throw some light on his movements, for knowing nothing except that somebody had called on him unexpectedly, we could not fail to attribute something significant to the visit."

"Especially," put in Mrs. White, "as the young men and I hunted the house over for your card and couldn't find it."

"All very natural," responded Poubalov, imperturbably, "and it was a circumstance of the utmost triviality in itself that lent color to my mysterious coming and going. You remember, Mrs. White, do you not, that you took my card to Mr. Strobel?"

"Yes, indeed, and he – I don't want to give offense – he didn't seem particularly pleased to see it."

"So you told the newspaper men. I am not in the least offended. Here is the card you took to him. I asked Mr. Strobel where I might call upon him after his wedding tour, and he wrote that address upon my own card. Of course I took it away with me." He handed the card to Clara, adding: "I want you to see that I am concealing nothing, and if my voluntary return to this house did not signify anything, your suspicions should certainly be relieved by seeing that Strobel himself made a semi-appointment with me at his future home."

"I hope, Mr. Poubalov," said Clara, with her eyes upon the card, "that you will forgive us for cherishing any unjust suspicions. At the worst, they were vague, and everything is so confusing."

"I feel that there is nothing to forgive," began Poubalov, graciously, when Mrs. White interrupted, her mind naturally intent upon her own trouble:

"And such horrid things as they say, too! You said you had read the papers?"

"Yes, all of them."

"Did you read about my daughter?" and the distressed mother rose, and, taking the newspaper from Clara's lap, thrust it into his hands. Without looking at it, Poubalov answered:

"I read it."

"And what do you think of it?" cried Mrs. White, stemming a fresh flood of tears.

Poubalov's brows contracted slightly as a sign that he disapproved forcing this question forward at the time, and with a grave glance at Clara he replied:

"I do not think. I watch, ask questions, and listen."

Clara hardly knew whether to be encouraged or depressed by this answer. Unless this man were an intimate friend of Ivan, it was perhaps not to be expected that he should see the folly of supposing for an instant that the missing man had eloped with Lizzie White.

"Mr. Poubalov," she said, "the reports in the newspapers do not throw the least light on this matter. I have no criticism to make on their statements of fact, but their conjectures of every kind are idle. They do not even disturb me."

Poubalov bowed as if to signify that he heard and understood.

"The cause of his disappearance," she continued after a moment, "it is yet to be found. The newspapers have not even hinted at it."

"You have an idea, then," he said, "as to the correct explanation?"

"No, not one," she answered; "I can only think of accident; but had there been any accident so serious as to render him unconscious and helpless, the police would have discovered it and reported it by this time, would they not?"

"They would if your police are nearly as efficient as those of European cities," said Poubalov, "and I have no doubt they are so to the extent of such emergencies as this case presents."

"Then, don't you see, the whole mystery is confined to two general solutions; either Mr. Strobel was seized by enemies and carried away; or he had some powerful reason for absenting himself, and disappeared voluntarily."

The Russian was surprised and deeply impressed by the young lady's clearness of vision, and Louise, listening with rapt attention, was simply amazed to hear her cousin reason so calmly when every word she uttered must have cost her pain.

"And which of these hypotheses," asked Poubalov, guardedly, "do you consider the more probable?"

"I have no means of judging between them," replied Clara, "for I have no fact except the disappearance to justify either one. It seems as if there must be some other theory, if I could only think what it is."

"There is no other," said Poubalov, "if you eliminate accident, as I think you properly do."

"Then I must consider what grounds there might be for supporting both hypotheses. As I discard as utterly worthless all the suggestions in the newspapers, I must suppose that Mr. Strobel had enemies, and that these enemies were powerful enough either to abduct him in broad day on a crowded thoroughfare, or cause him such sudden fear that he felt obliged to go into hiding."

Again was Poubalov surprised, for he could not himself have reasoned more clearly, or have stated his conclusions more concisely; but he simply nodded gravely, expressing neither convictions or emotions. Clara wished that he would speak. She had expressed her thoughts as they came to her there in Mrs. White's sitting room. It was thinking aloud rather than a statement of previously formed conclusions. Now she saw to just what end her arguments were bringing her, and she almost shrank from it. Summoning her utmost resolution she looked straight at the sombre face of the Russian and added:

"I have no knowledge of Ivan's enemies, Mr. Poubalov; isn't it possible that you can give some information on that phase of the case?"

"Yes, it is," replied Poubalov, without hesitation. Then he paused a moment before he continued: "Were not the case so serious and for you so distressing, I should feel that I must compliment you on your unusual faculty for analyzing a situation. Far from taking offense at your continued suspicion of me, I am really pleased."

"I have not said that I suspected you."

"You did not need to, Miss Hilman. Your reason tells you that Mr. Strobel was happy and confident of the future until suddenly one Poubalov appears before him like the ghost of past misfortunes and as a prophet of new ones."

"I assure you," interrupted Clara again, "that I did not know that you were not an intimate friend of Mr. Strobel's; I spoke simply of natural inferences."

"My dear young lady," said the Russian, "you were helpless in the hands of your own reason."

Clara was silent. She felt instinctively that her analysis was correct and that she was facing, if not one of Ivan's enemies, at the least a man who represented all that might be hostile to him; and when she had endeavored to withdraw some of the force of her reasoning, he himself had held her to her conclusions and clinched them.

"It was my intention," continued Poubalov, "to learn from Mrs. White who you were, that I might solicit the privilege of calling upon you and laying before you what is in my knowledge concerning Mr. Strobel, for I fear that I may –"

He stopped abruptly and looked from one to another of the wondering ladies.

"Go on, please," exclaimed Clara, now stirred by a growing agitation; "if you can give us the faintest light it would be cruel to withhold it."

"May I hope that no offense will be taken," said Poubalov, "if I say that I planned to tell these things to you only? I will be pleased to call at your own convenience."

"No, no!" replied Clara, rising; "I must know now. Tell me here. Mrs. White, may we step into your dining-room?"

Louise and the landlady had risen at the same moment, and Mrs. White said:

"If Miss Pembroke doesn't object, she and I will go out. Only, Mr. – sir, if you have anything to say about my daughter, I wish you would let me hear it!"

"It was not my intention to mention her, madame," replied Poubalov.

Louise went to Clara's side and kissed her.

"You are so brave, dear!" she said.

Clara gave Louise a grateful look as she and Mrs. White withdrew, and turned expectantly to the Russian.

"Pray sit down, Miss Hilman," he said; "what I have to say may not be as important and useful to you as you hope, but I preferred, and with good reason, as I think you will see, to discuss the matter with you alone. It was on my tongue to say that I may have been innocently a part of the cause that sent Mr. Strobel into hiding."

"Yes," whispered Clara, eagerly; "go on!"

"Miss Hilman, I am an agent of the czar."

Poubalov paused as if he expected this announcement to disturb, or otherwise impress his listener seriously, but she merely looked straight at him, as she did when he began to speak.

"Strobel knew me in that capacity," he continued, "years ago when we were in Russia. Has he ever told you about his life there?"

"A little," replied Clara, very doubtful how much she ought to reveal to this man who represented the autocratic, relentless power that had destroyed the fortune of the Strobel family and made Ivan himself an exile.

"You find it difficult to be frank with me," said Poubalov, "and I am not surprised, but you must remember that I am setting the example. It is quite the habit of thoughtless persons to apply an opprobrious epithet to my occupation and call me a spy. Well, then, I, Alexander Poubalov, spy,

paid by the government of Russia, tell you who I am, and tell you that at one time Ivan Strobel had reason to fear me."

The door bell rang while Poubalov was speaking and Clara heard Mrs. White pattering through the hall to answer it.

The man at the door was known to the landlady as Strobel's tailor, an undersized, forlorn-looking man who seemed always to be struggling with secret woe. She knew that Strobel had been kind to him, and helped him in more ways than mere patronage, and she knew that poor Litizki was as grateful and loyal as a dog. It was with sincere welcome, therefore, that she greeted him, and asked him into the house.

"I only came," said the tailor, "to ask if there is any news of Mr. Strobel? The newspapers say he has disappeared."

"We know nothing of him here," answered Mrs. White; "but come in, do! There's no telling who may say the word that will put us all on the right track. Miss Hilman is here, the lady he was to marry, you know. She's talking with a gentleman now in the parlor. I presume she may like to see you."

"I don't know that I can give her any help," said Litizki, following the landlady into the dining-room, "but I'll wait a few minutes, for I wanted to know something that the papers do not make clear."

He came to a sudden halt as he stepped into the dining-room, where the voices of the persons in the front room were heard much more distinctly than in the hall.

"Who is that talking?" he exclaimed in an excited whisper.

"It's a gentleman who called on Mr. Strobel yesterday," replied Mrs. White; "I can't think of his name."

"I should know that voice," muttered Litizki as if speaking to himself.

The rooms were separated by folding doors with glazed glass panels. On one of the panels there was a tiny spot where the opaque glaze had been rubbed or knocked off. Litizki applied his eye to that spot, and shaded the glass with his hand, straining to get a clear view of the man whose deep voice came to him like the distant rumble of an organ.

After a moment he straightened up and turned about, his sallow, depressed features gleaming with savage interest.

"I cannot see clearly," he whispered, "but if that is Alexander Poubalov, then the whole mystery of Strobel's disappearance is cleared away!"

CHAPTER VI. LITIZKI AT WORK

"It would have been perfectly natural," continued Poubalov, "for Strobel to suspect me at first blush of evil intentions, and I presume he did so; for, without inquiring what brought me to America and to him, he took pains to remind me that he was within the jurisdiction of the United States, and that it was not his purpose to set foot outside the limits of your country, of which I presume he is by this time a citizen."

"He has taken out his first papers," replied Clara.

"And, therefore, should have felt himself secure from one who, supposing he were hostile, yet acted as the official of a foreign and a friendly government. I give you credit, Miss Hilman, of drawing a correct conclusion from that statement of relations."

Poubalov paused, and Clara responded slowly:

"It ought to mean that he had other enemies than you or those whom you represent."

"Exactly; but why do you hedge – pardon the term – why do you set forth the conclusion with reservation? 'It ought to mean,' is what you said. Why not say it does mean?"

"Because I do not know whether you are telling me the truth."

Poubalov leaned back in his chair, and his dark face was momentarily illumined by an amused smile.

"May I light a cigarette?" he asked in a tone that seemed to say how patient he was under this continuance of suspicion that not even reason could dissipate. It was as if he had said, "With all your unexpected cleverness as a logician, Miss Hilman, you are yet a woman, and you cling desperately to woman's reasonless intuitions."

"Oh, pardon me if I am cruelly unjust," cried Clara, as clearly the woman in her quick relenting as she was in following her intuitions; "have patience with me! You must know how distressed I am, and how hard it is to think clearly. Your very admission that you are a paid spy suggests deceit and trickery – I suppose I am making the matter worse."

"By no means, Miss Hilman," replied Poubalov, holding a cigarette between his fingers; "we shall come to an understanding presently, I am sure. I never take offense, not even when my loyalty to the czar is doubted; and nothing you may say will prevent me from doing what I can to clear away the mystery surrounding Mr. Strobel."

"Please light your cigarette," said Clara; "if you wouldn't make me talk, we should get on better."

Poubalov smiled again, and when he had puffed a great cloud of fragrant smoke from his lips, he resumed:

"I will proceed as if you cherished no doubts as to my sincerity. It follows, from my analysis, that Mr. Strobel could have had no fear of harm coming to him from an official of Russia. He never had reason to fear me as an individual; in fact, the individuality of Alexander Poubalov long since disappeared in the person of the official agent. Poubalov has no enmities, no friendships; all men are hostile or friendly to him, as they are the enemies or the adherents of the czar, whom God preserve! The next step in the analysis is to suggest the nature of Mr. Strobel's present enemies. You did not tell me so, but I presume you are aware that when Mr. Strobel was younger he permitted his generous sympathies to be enlisted in what he would then have called 'the people's party' of Russia. Without going into details with which every intelligent person is more or less familiar, I will remind you that, incidental to the so-called democratic movement in Russia, was the organization of a secret society the avowed purpose of which was the disruption of the empire."

Poubalov paused, and puffed at his cigarette deliberately.

"You want me to say something," cried Clara in desperation, "and I don't know what to say."

"Pardon me," said the spy, suavely, "a woman of your cleverness will not resent it when I tell you that you misstate your difficulty. You could say much, perhaps, but you are afraid to."

Clara's silence was an admission that Poubalov had spoken correctly, and after giving her ample time to deny his accusation, he continued:

"You are afraid – and again you will pardon plain language – that you will involve your lover in fresh difficulties. Let me point out again that, so far as his offenses against the government of the czar are concerned, they were purely political offenses, and he is therefore in a perfectly secure asylum as long as he is on American soil, whether he be simply a refugee or a naturalized citizen. You must seek for his enemies, Miss Hilman, elsewhere than among the representatives of Russian authority."

"You give me too much credit for cleverness," said Clara, "for I cannot follow you."

"You know that the secret society to which I referred adopted the term nihilism as a definition of its principles, do you not? And you must know, even if Mr. Strobel never told you so, that the Nihilists were bound by the most awful oaths never to betray the secrets of their association."

"Do you mean to say that Mr. Strobel was a Nihilist?"

"Certainly; that was what I was driving at from the beginning. It was for that he was compelled to fly from Russia, and that is why he cannot return to his native land. The government has done much to stamp out the curse of nihilistic propaganda, and many members of the society have fled. Some are in Switzerland, some in England, others are here, here in Boston. Far from the field of their evil machinations, they cherish still their destructive ambitions as applied to Russia; and, Miss Hilman, they still keep watch on one another. It would fare ill with any Nihilist in America should he venture to betray his former associates in any way."

"I suppose I understand you now" said Clara, slowly. "You mean that I must look for Ivan's enemies among the Russian exiles who live in Boston."

"Or elsewhere in America."

"If he really were connected with them in Russia, he would be the last man to betray them."

"Doubtless; but would they credit him with such loyalty? May they not have imagined that, under certain circumstances, he might be induced to betray them? And may they not have conveyed such definite and fearful threats that he found it necessary to disappear?"

"Do you mean by 'certain circumstances' his intended marriage?"

"No. I may not mean anything. We shall see some day whether I do or not."

"You speak in a constant succession of riddles. Why not continue your frankness, and be strictly open with me?"

Poubalov lit a fresh cigarette, and after a long scrutiny of the ceiling, responded:

"That is not my way, Miss Hilman. I am sincerely trying to suggest the clew to your difficult problem."

Clara took her own turn at reflection, and said at last:

"If Ivan felt obliged to disappear for a time, in order to escape his enemies, he would have managed to let me know."

"It would seem so," admitted Poubalov, rising; "and that brings you to your last alternative."

"Wait," exclaimed Clara, imperatively; "you bring me to the last alternative as if that were the end of my difficulties. Suppose it to be true that some Russian exiles, in a mistaken distrust of Mr. Strobel, have abducted him. Can you not suggest how I am to proceed to prove that and to rescue him?"

"I hope to be able to do so, Miss Hilman, in a short time, a few days at most, and I assure you that I shall henceforth give my undivided attention to searching for Mr. Strobel."

Clara knitted her brows in painful perplexity.

"A woman situated as I am," she said presently, "ought to be stirred by nothing but gratitude; but the one thing I can think to say is, why do you interest yourself so deeply in the matter?"

"Still distrustful," said Poubalov in his deepest tones. "Miss Hilman, I might resort to sophistry and direct deceit in answering your question. I might point out that the newspapers have placed me, though not as yet by name, in a disagreeable position from which it should be my earnest desire to extricate myself. I might declare that I was moved by friendship or admiration for Mr. Strobel. But it does not please me to practice arts of trickery with you. Public notoriety I care as little for as for the fly that buzzes harmlessly about my head. I never had friendship or admiration for Mr. Strobel, and I feel neither sentiment now. Alexander Poubalov's one sentiment is loyalty to his czar."

"You haven't answered the question."

"Because I cannot answer it without either deceit or the betrayal of my trust. But I shall nevertheless use every endeavor to find your lover. Will you care to hear from me from time to time?"

"Yes," replied Clara, after a moment's thought; "certainly, yes. I do thank you for speaking to me as you have, and I wish I could trust you. I almost do trust you."

"It would be too ungracious in me," responded Poubalov, "not to wish that you could trust me, and not to hope that some time in the near future you will find that in this matter you can do so absolutely."

"I suppose it would be vain to ask you what you are going to do?"

"As vain as for me to ask you to tell me all I would like to know about Mr. Strobel."

"Mr. Poubalov," exclaimed Clara, earnestly, "there can be no reason why I should withhold anything from you. Your own argument proves that; and, besides, you know more about Ivan's connection with the nihilistic movement than I ever dreamed of. You perceive the distrust that I cannot conquer, but you believe me, do you not?"

"Implicitly, Miss Hilman."

"Then I assure you that, to my knowledge, Mr. Strobel has not had anything to do with nihilistic propaganda in this country for three years at least. He used to write some on Russian topics, but he abandoned that when he went into business, and – I may say, when he became acquainted with me. I think I know all his friends, all his associates, and among them all there is but one Russian, a gentleman like himself."

"I am very glad to hear this," said Poubalov; "and now I will see what I can do. I cannot act as I would in Russia, but I can still accomplish something, I think. I hope to have the honor of calling upon you soon. I leave it entirely to you to speak of our conversation as you please, but I will go out without disturbing Madame White and your friend. Au revoir, Miss Hilman."

The distinguished-looking Russian bowed and left the room and immediately afterward Clara heard the outside door close upon him.

When Litizki, the forlorn-looking tailor, mentioned Poubalov's name, both Mrs. White and Louise Pembroke exclaimed "That's it!" and both came forward as if their anxiety were about to be dissipated at one stroke.

"Who is he?" asked Mrs. White, eagerly.

"He is – " began Litizki fiercely; "no! I must not speak. Let me go out, that I may watch him. He shall lead me to Ivan Strobel. Do not tell him that I have been here, do not mention my name."

"Dear me! it makes me more nervous than ever," said Mrs. White, laying a hand on Litizki's arm to restrain him. "Do you think, Mr. Litizki, that he has done anything to Mr. Strobel?"

"Think!" exclaimed the little tailor who seemed on fire with excitement, "it is the next thing to knowing! Not a word, remember!"

He tip-toed his way through the hall as if it were night and he were a thief, and cautiously opened the outside door. He touched his hand dramatically to his lips as he closed it behind him, leaving Mrs. White terrified and Miss Pembroke bewildered.

Litizki, even in a tumult of rage and desperation, was not a very impressive man to look at. It would have seemed that his fury could be quelled by a gentle cuff with the open hand, and that his whole being could be snuffed out with a vigorous pinch; but if ever man was terribly in earnest,

he was, and a close observer might have noted the danger signals in the formation of his head and in the hang of his lips. This was a man who might be stirred to such depths that his whole shallow nature would be in commotion, when discretion would be cast off like flecks of foam from an on-rushing wave; and then let an enemy be wary, for even a slender arm, like that of the little tailor, may strike a fatal blow!

It seemed a long, long time to Litizki that Poubalov continued his conversation with Miss Hilman. He dared not linger near the house lest the spy should see him from a window, or emerge suddenly from the doorway and so discover that eager eyes were directed to his movements. Litizki slunk into one doorway after another, never staying long in one, lest he be warned away with sufficient outcry to alarm Poubalov, whose ear, he believed, was acutely tuned to the slightest sounds, and who found untoward significance even in the vagrant breeze.

At last the door opened, and Litizki dodged into an open hall, only to flit out again as soon as he saw Poubalov turn toward Somerset Street. Arrived there, he turned down the hill, and then Litizki ran forward to the corner around which he peered cautiously. It would not have surprised him if his face had touched that of Poubalov as he did so, for it would have seemed to him but natural that the spy should think that he was followed and should wait there for the purpose of trapping his adversary. But, no; Poubalov was progressing calmly down the street, and at Howard he again turned to the left.

Litizki ran after, fearful of losing his man in the more crowded street, saw him cross Bulfinch into Bulfinch Place, and finally open the door of a lodging house with a latch-key.

"So!" thought the tailor, noting the number of the house and turning back, "he chooses his room within a stone's throw of Ivan Strobel's, and then takes a roundabout way to go from one house to the other. That is like him. Alexander Poubalov could not be direct in conversation or action even if he were intent upon a good deed – which would be impossible."

The suggestion was so grotesquely absurd that Litizki laughed and shuddered at once.

"Now," he reflected, "shall I tell the police where to look for Ivan Strobel, or shall I consult with his lady? I will go back and see her first."

CHAPTER VII. A DANGEROUS MAN

For some minutes after Poubalov left the house Clara sat motionless, reviewing the strange discourse of the Russian, trying to persuade herself one moment to trust him, and the next impulsively throwing aside the theories so finely spun from his innuendoes and circumlocutions. She shuddered at the thought of Ivan in the hands of such fanatics as she knew were included in the most rabid enemies of Russian polity, and as promptly felt such a solution of the mystery to be impossible. Equally impossible seemed the solution that premised a fear on the part of Ivan so great that he dared not let even his intended wife know of his whereabouts.

Removed from the influence of Poubalov's magnetic personality and his subtle arguments, Clara felt that it was to him rather than to the Nihilists that she must look for implacable hostility to Ivan. Yet why should Ivan, resident in and prospective citizen of the United States, fear him, an "official agent of a friendly government"? Fear? That was not like the Ivan she knew and loved! Was it not again impossible that her lover should have been so stirred by fear of anybody or anything as to take flight and conceal his hiding-place from her?

On the other hand, how could she know what influences had been suddenly applied to Ivan to make him take a seemingly indefensible if not impossible course? And what was more impossible, in any of the suggested solutions, than his very disappearance, which was a painful fact, although hard to realize even after nearly twenty-four hours had passed since the time set for his wedding?

The dining-room door was softly opened, and Mrs. White put in her head.

"Has he gone?" she whispered.

"Yes," replied Clara, starting up as if she had been aroused from sleep. "Come in."

Louise approached her cousin solicitously.

"We have had such a fright!" she said taking Clara in her arms; "I didn't know whether to be more alarmed when we could hear his deep voice than after the sound of it had ceased altogether."

"Why should you have feared?" asked Clara; "you couldn't suppose that I was in any danger in Mrs. White's house, could you?"

"No," answered Louise, "but the air is full of excitement; and while Mr. Poubalov was talking, another Russian came in who is friendly to Ivan. Mrs. White says he is a tailor, a very poor man whom Ivan befriended, and an exile like himself. He recognized Poubalov's voice, and declared positively that his presence here explained Ivan's fate. He was terribly agitated and refused to stay, saying that he must follow Poubalov. We couldn't tell what to make of it."

This little narration came as a new shock to Clara. She had told Poubalov that among all of Ivan's friends there was but one Russian, and she had in mind, of course, Paul Palovna. She had never heard of this tailor, and although it might not follow that Ivan would count among his friends a poor man whom he might have befriended, was it not a reasonable inference that this poor man was a Nihilist? and that if there were one brought to light, that there might be many others whose identity would ever remain unknown to her? Had she not heard how the great body of the nihilistic society was made up of the poor? and this man had recognized Poubalov! That was significant, surely; but just what inference of value she should draw from it was anything but clear.

While these thoughts and questions were chasing through her brain, Litizki and Paul Palovna arrived at the house, coming from different directions. Paul approached Clara with marked constraint.

"Do not be afraid, my friend," she said, extending her hand; "I am quite strong and hopeful. I have read the papers, all of them, and they do not disturb me. I cannot thank you enough for what you did for me yesterday."

"I am glad to hear you speak so bravely," responded Paul; "you mustn't feel indebted to me, however, for Strobel is the best friend I ever had, and it would be strange indeed if I did not try to find him. I suppose it is almost unkind to ask if there is any news?"

"There is none exactly, and yet I have heard some things that you can advise me about better than anybody else."

"Miss Hilman," interposed Mrs. White, "this is Mr. Litizki, the man Miss Pembroke was telling you about."

Clara, intent upon referring Poubalov's suggestions to Paul, had not seen the little tailor come in. Now she turned and confronted Litizki with mingled hope and alarm; hope that this man, whose positive utterance had been reported, might give her a definite clew; alarm lest he be one of the most irreconcilable of revolutionists, a man who would sacrifice friends and family for a cause that he imagined just. Her doubts increased as she saw the wild gleam in his small eyes, that lit up his sallow face and made it glow with fierce intensity. Ivan had befriended him; must she distrust him, too?

"I am glad to see you," she said with a quick resolution to win this man, and she surprised the tailor and made him speechless for the moment by grasping his hand warmly. "You have come to tell me something about Mr. Poubalov, or Mr. Strobel, or both?"

Litizki, embarrassed and awed by this queenly young woman who looked into his eyes so searchingly and withal so graciously, cleared his throat, shifted about on his feet, and a faint tinge of red actually found its way to his sunken cheeks.

"Yes," he answered after a moment, catching his breath with a gasp and swallowing as if he took oxygen into his system by way of his stomach; "yes, Miss Hilman, about both, if you please."

He paused, excitement and embarrassment making it difficult to say anything coherently.

"Poubalov?" said Paul, whose brows had contracted ominously when he heard the name, and who took advantage of the pause to ask, "What Poubalov is that?"

"Can there be more than one who would hound a poor Russian the world over?" rasped Litizki, turning upon Paul, intense excitement blazing again in his usually dull eyes; "it is none other than Alexander Poubalov, spy, informer, traitor!"

The little tailor trembled visibly as he hissed these words, and he turned to Clara as if to make certain that they should impress her deeply.

"What, in the name of all that is right, does Poubalov do here?" asked Paul.

"Do?" cried Litizki; "does he ever do anything but spy upon the poor? Ask what has he done here, and I will tell you that he has captured our Strobel, and has him bound in chains, waiting only a convenient and safe opportunity to convey him from the country to the presence of the little father¹ and then, Siberia, or –" and the tailor drew his hand significantly across his throat.

Clara observed Paul, not the tailor, during this extravagant speech. Would Palovna, an intelligent man, free from excitement, condemn and ridicule Litizki's assertions as wild and imaginary? No; he listened gravely and gave no sign that he discredited the tailor in the least. Noticing Clara's inquiring look, Paul said:

"We Russians, Miss Hilman, are inclined to credit almost any monstrosity in the way of crime, treachery and violence to men like Alexander Poubalov. To us he stands as guilty of anything with which he is charged until he incontestably proves himself innocent."

Clara's heart sank heavily, but she knew that she could trust Paul.

"May I tell you something?" she asked, and he followed her into the dining-room. There she hurriedly repeated the substance of Poubalov's discourse, laying especial stress upon his warning relative to distrustful Nihilists.

"It's a splendid argument," said Paul when she had finished; "I suppose you were attracted by his very frankness in admitting that he is a spy? That was a characteristic move. Mind you, I never

¹ Russian familiar name for the czar.

had trouble with Poubalov; I wouldn't know him if I saw him, but I know about him. He is a very prince of spies, a past-master in the art of deceit, and many, many shrewd men have been the victims of his seeming candor. You may be sure he masks some villainy beneath his frankness, for he never was known to do a disinterested act."

"He spoke as if he were here upon some mission," suggested Clara.

"Certainly, but he wouldn't tell you what that mission was. That it had to do with Strobel is certain. I don't want to alarm you unnecessarily, Miss Hilman, but Poubalov is a most dangerous man. It may be well for us that you have faced him, though we must necessarily have discovered his presence soon, and to see him is to suspect. We at least know where to look. Litizki is an impressionable, excitable man, but he may be right, nevertheless. I am sure that you can trust him, whether or not there is anything in Poubalov's nihilistic suggestions. And as to that, I don't believe there is – not with him about. Plenty of false notions prevail about the Russian revolutionists, and it would be to Poubalov's interest to arouse dread of them in your mind. Anything to distract attention and suspicion from himself."

They returned to the front room. Litizki had recovered from his excitement, and was more like his customary, depressed self, but though he spoke quietly it was with bitter emphasis and strong conviction.

"I believe," he said, "that Poubalov instigated if he did not take part in the abduction of Mr. Strobel. I am convinced that he has him now in hiding, and the question only is whether we are to inform the police or take action ourselves."

"The police," responded Paul, "would not proceed against Poubalov on the strength of our suppositions. He would intrench himself in his official position, and insist on compliance with all forms of law; and during the delay, if, indeed, he has Strobel in his power, he would spirit him away."

"So I think," said Litizki, "and as he won't dare to remove Strobel until the interest in his disappearance dies down, unless he were openly attacked in the manner you suggest, I intend, if Miss Hilman agrees, to hunt for our friend in my own way. I shall do so to-night. I must find him."

He looked inquiringly at Clara.

"I cannot say yes or no," she replied; "you are a friend of Mr. Strobel's and you will do what you think best. Only, let me know what you find."

There was a gleam of pleasure in Litizki's eyes, followed by an expression of sullen determination as he responded:

"You shall hear from me to-morrow."

"Lou," said Clara, "I think we had better go home now. I am feeling very worn. If any of you hear the least word, I wish you would come to see me."

As she prepared to leave she took occasion to whisper to Paul:

"I do not know that I do right in encouraging Litizki. My feeling is that the more there are at work and the more various the methods, the greater is the chance of success. May I leave it to you to prevent Litizki, if possible, from any act that would be indiscreet, or worse?"

"I will do what I can," said Paul; "but he is, after all, an irresponsible agent. I am inclined to think that good will come of his investigation, whatever he does."

It was the luncheon hour when the young ladies reached home, and Mr. Pembroke had arrived before them. His face expressed painful anxiety as he greeted his niece.

"My poor child," he said, "you have heard everything, I suppose?"

"I have heard a great deal, uncle," replied Clara, "and appreciate your motives in withholding the paper from me that published the wicked rumor that Ivan had eloped, but you should have known me better. Do you suppose, uncle dear, that that rumor disturbed me? I dismiss it more lightly than anything that has been said."

"Poor child! poor child!" sighed Mr. Pembroke.

"Why do you say that?" asked Clara, sitting down wearily. "Of course, I am sorrowful; nobody can realize what I suffer; but I am confident that Ivan has done no wrong, and I cannot believe that we shall not find him. I have returned to rest, not to give up the search."

"Clara, my dear girl," said her uncle, tenderly, "you'd best give it up. You have a great sorrow to bear, but I know how brave you are. There is no occasion for further search."

"No occasion! Uncle, what do you mean?"

"The detective assigned from headquarters to make an investigation has been to see me."

"Yes, yes! what did he say?"

"The worst possible, Clara. He is convinced that Strobel went to New York, if not with Lizzie White, then to join her there. It is the only possible explanation of his disappearance."

"No! no! you know nothing about it, and the detective is a fool!" cried Clara.

Mr. Pembroke was immensely surprised at this violent outbreak, when he had expected tears, prostration, the deepest grief. It occurred to him that perhaps his niece's mind had been unsettled by her trouble. She sat looking at him with blazing eyes, her face flushed, her foot nervously patting the floor.

"You are greatly excited, Clara," ventured her uncle, gently.

"Tell me what the detective said!" retorted Clara, imperiously.

"He has found that a closed carriage, such as we know Strobel took at the corner of Park and Tremont Streets, halted at the Park Square Station shortly after that time. The passenger was a young man who answered the description of Strobel. He paid the driver, went into the station, bought a ticket for New York, and immediately took his place in the train. It is further known that Lizzie White took a train from the same station at about the same hour."

"Is that all?" asked Clara, scornfully.

"My dear girl, is it not enough?"

"It is nothing, uncle, absolutely nothing. Has your detective seen the driver of the closed carriage?"

"I don't know; I suppose so."

"I must see the detective then. No, I am not going now. After luncheon. I shall not risk failure by neglecting to care for myself. Uncle dear," and she suddenly melted and put her arms around the old gentleman's neck, "forgive me, please, if I am impatient and hasty with you. I know Ivan as you do not; I know this accusation is not true. The detective has been mistaken, and I shall show him so, and all the world besides."

Mr. Pembroke sighed sadly.

"Your loyalty, my dear," he said, "is deserving of a better subject and a better fate."

CHAPTER VIII. IN THE HANDS OF THE ENEMY

Nothing would deter Clara from a trip to police headquarters after luncheon, and, as in the forenoon, her Cousin Louise accompanied her. As they entered the building in Pemberton Square, they met the infirm old man, Dexter, he who had arrived late at the church, he whom Clara had interrupted in conversation with Mr. Pembroke. He bowed to the young ladies with an attempt at graciousness, and reached for the shapeless, soft cap that covered his head, but he only succeeded in pulling the visor awry, and he passed them, mumbling about the weather.

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