Gibbs George

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Содержание

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PROLOGUE

At the piano a man sat playing the "Revolutionary Étude" of Chopin. The room was magnificent in its proportions, its furnishings were massive, its paneled oak walls were hung with portraits of men and women in the costumes of a bygone day. Through the lofty windows, the casements of which were open to the evening sky there was a vista of forest and meadow-land stretching interminably to the setting sun. The mosquelike cupola of a village church, a few versts distant, glimmered like a pearl in the dusky setting of wooded hills, and close by it, here and there, tiny spirals of opalescent smoke marked the dwellings of Zukovo village.

But the man at the piano was detached, a being apart from this scene of quiet, absorbed in his piano, which gave forth the turbulence which had been in the soul of the great composer. The expression upon the dark face of the young musician was rapt and eager, until he crashed the chords to their triumphant conclusion when he sank back in his chair with a gasp, his head bent forward upon his breast, his dark gaze fixed upon the keys which still echoed with the tumult.

It was at this moment that a door at the side of the room was opened and a white-haired man in purple livery entered and stood in silence regarding rather wistfully the man at the piano, who raised his head abruptly like one startled from a dream.

"What is it, Vasili?" asked the musician.

The servant approached softly a few steps.

"I did not wish to intrude, Highness, but – "

As the old servant hesitated, the young man shrugged and rose, disclosing a tall, straight figure, clad in a dark blue blouse, loose trousers and brown boots liberally bespattered with mud. The glow of the sun which shot across his face as he came forward into the light, showed swarthy features, level brows, a straight nose, a well turned chin, a small mustache and a generous mouth which revealed a capacity for humor. He was quite calm now, and the tones of his voice were almost boyish in their confidence and gayety.

"Well, what is it, Vasili?" he repeated. "You have the air of one with much on your conscience. Out with it. Has Sacha been fighting with you again?"

"No, Master, not Sacha," said the old man clearing his throat nervously, "it is something worse – much worse than Sacha."

"Impossible!" said the other with a laugh as he took up a cigarette from the table. "Nothing could be worse than a Russian cook when she gets into a rage – "

"But it is, Master – something worse – much worse – "

"Really! You alarm me." The Grand Duke threw himself into

an armchair and inhaled luxuriously of his cigarette. And then with a shrug, "Well?"

The old man came a pace or two nearer muttering hoarsely, "They've broken out in the village again," he gasped.

The Grand Duke's brow contracted suddenly.

"H-m. When did this happen?"

"Last night. And this morning they burned the stables of Prince Galitzin and looted the castle."

The young man sprang to his feet.

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes, Master. The word was brought by Serge Andriev less than ten minutes ago."

He took a few rapid paces up and down the room, stopping by the open window and staring out.

"Fools!" he muttered to himself. Then turning to the old servitor, "But, Vasili – why is it that I have heard nothing of this? To-day Conrad, the forester, said nothing to me. And the day before yesterday in the village the people swept off their caps to me – as in the old days. I could have sworn everything would be peaceful at Zukovo – at least, for the present – " he added as though in an afterthought.

"I pray God that may be true," muttered Vasili uncertainly. And then with unction, "In their hearts, they still love you, Highness. They are children – your children, their hearts still full of reverence for the Grand Duke Peter Nicholaevitch in whom runs the same blood as that which ran in the sacred being of the

Little Father – but their brains! They are drunk with the poison poured into their minds by the Committeemen from Moscow."

"Ah," eagerly, "they returned?"

"Last night," replied the old man wagging his head. "And your people forgot all that you had said to them – all that they owe to you. They are mad," he finished despairingly, "mad!"

The Grand Duke had folded his arms and was staring out of the window toward the white dome of the church now dyed red like a globule of blood in the sunset.

The old man watched him for a moment, all the fealty of his many years of service in his gaze and attitude.

"I do not like the look of things, Highness. What does it matter how good their hearts are if their brains are bad?"

"I must go and talk with them, Vasili," said the Grand Duke quietly.

The old man took a step forward.

"If I might make so free – "

"Speak – "

"Not to-night, Master – "

"Why not?"

"It will be dangerous. Last night their voices were raised even against you."

"Me! Why? Have I not done everything I could to help them? I am their friend – because I believe in their cause: and they will get their rights too but not by burning and looting – "

"And murder, Master. Two of Prince Galitzin's foresters were

killed."

The Grand Duke turned. "That's bad. Murder in Zukovo!" He flicked his extinguished cigarette out of the window and made a gesture with his hand.

"Go, Vasili. I want to think. I will ring if I need you."

"You will not go to Zukovo to-night?"

"I don't know."

And with another gesture he waved the servant away.

When Vasili had gone, the Grand Duke sat, his legs across the chair by the window, his arms folded along its back while his dark eyes peered out, beyond the hills and forests, beyond the reddened dome of the village church into the past where his magnificent father Nicholas Petrovitch held feudal sway over all the land within his vision and his father's fathers from the time of his own great namesake held all Russia in the hollow of their hands.

The Grand Duke's eyes were hard and bright above the slightly prominent cheek bones, the vestiges of his Oriental origin, but there was something of his English mother too in the contours of his chin and lips, which tempered the hardness of his expression. The lines at his brows were not the savage marks of anger, or the vengefulness that had characterized the pitiless blood which ran in his veins, but rather were they lines of disappointment, of perplexity at the problem that confronted him, and pity for his people who did not know where to turn for guidance. He still believed them to be his people, a heritage from his lordly parent,

his children, who were responsible to him and to whom he was responsible. It was a habit of thought, inalienable, the product of the ages. But it was the calm philosophy of his English mother that had first given him his real sense of obligation to them, her teachings, even before the war began, that had shown him how terrible were the problems that confronted his future.

His service in the Army had opened his eyes still wider and when Russia had deserted her allies he had returned to Zukovo to begin the work of reconstruction in the ways his awakened conscience had dictated. He had visited their homes, offered them counsel, given them such money as he could spare, and had, he thought, become their friend as well as their hereditary guardian. All had gone well at first. They had listened to him, accepted his advice and his money and renewed their fealty under the new order of things, vowing that whatever happened elsewhere in Russia, blood and agony and starvation should not visit Zukovo.

But the news that Vasili brought was disquieting. It meant that the minds of his people were again disturbed. And the fact that Prince Galitzin had always been hated made the problems the Grand Duke faced none the less difficult. For his people had burned, pillaged and killed. They had betrayed him. And he had learned in the Army what fire and the smell of blood could do…

With a quick nod of resolution he rose. He would go to them. He knew their leaders. They would listen to him. They must *listen…*

He closed the piano carefully, putting away the loose sheets of music, picked up his cap and heavy riding crop from the divan,

on his way to the door, pausing, his hand on the bell-rope as a thought brought a deeper frown to his brow… Why had Conrad Grabar, his chief forester, said nothing to-day? He must have known – for news such as this travels from leaf to leaf through the forest. Conrad! And yet he would have sworn by the faithfulness of his old friend and hunting companion. Perhaps Conrad had not known…

The Grand Duke pulled the bell-rope, then went to the window again and stood as though listening for the voices of the woods. Silence. The sun had sunk, a dull red ball, and the dusk was falling swiftly. The aspens below his window quivered slightly, throwing their white leaves upwards as though in pain. The stately pines that he loved, mute, solemn, changeless, filled the air with balsam, but they gave no answer to his problem. It was difficult to believe that, there, in the restless souls of men war could rage. And yet…

He peered out more intently. Beyond the pine forest, a murky cloud was rising. A storm? Hardly. For the sun had set in a clear sky. But there was a cloud surely, growing in darkness and intensity. He could see it more clearly now, billowing upward in grim portent.

The Grand Duke started and then stared again. The cloud was of smoke. Through the woods, tiny lights were sparkling, picked out with ominous brilliancy against the velvet dusk. Peter Nicholaevitch leaned far out of the window, straining his ears to listen. And now he seemed to hear the crackle of flames, the distant sound of hoarse voices, shouting and singing.

And while he still listened, aware that a great crisis had come into his life, there was a commotion just below him, the sound of voices close at hand and he saw a man come running from the woods, approaching the gateway of the Castle.

He recognized him by the gray beard and thickset figure. It was Boris Rylov, the Huntsman, and as he ran he shouted to some one in the courtyard below. The Grand Duke made out the words:

"They're burning the Hunting Lodge – where is the Master – ?"

Peter Nicholaevitch waited at the window no longer, but ran out of the room and down the flight of stairs into the great hall below. For he knew what had happened now. The Red Terror had come to Zukovo.

He went out to the garden terrace, crossing quickly to the courtyard where he met the frightened group of servants that had assembled.

Boris, the Huntsman, much out of breath was waving his arms excitedly toward the cloud of smoke rising above the pine trees, now tinged a dirty orange color from beneath.

"They came from all directions, Master," he gasped, "like the black flies upon a dead horse – hundreds – thousands of them from the village and all the country round. I talked with the first that came, Anton Lensky, Gleb Saltykov, Michael Kuprin and Conrad Grabar – "

"Conrad – !" gasped the Grand Duke.

"Yes, Highness," muttered Boris, his head bowed, "Conrad Grabar. They tried to restrain me. Michael Kuprin I struck upon

the head with a stick – and then I fled – to warn your Highness – that they mean to come hither."

The face of the Grand Duke, a trifle pale under its tan, was set in stern lines, but there was no fear in his manner as he quickly questioned, his eyes eagerly scrutinizing the frightened men and women about him while he spoke to them with cool decision.

"Thanks, Friend Rylov – you have done me a service I shall not forget." Then to the others, "If there are any of you who fear to remain with me, you may go. I cannot believe that they will come to Zukovo Castle, but we will close the gate to the courtyard at once. I will talk with them from the terrace wall."

"Master! Highness!" broke in the Huntsman violently, "you do not understand. You cannot stay here. They are mad. They will kill you. It is for that they come – "

"Nevertheless – I mean to stay – "

"It is death – "

"Go thou, then, and Vasili, and Ivan. For before they burn Zukovo, I mean to talk with them – "

"It is madness – !"

"Come, Highness," broke in Leo Garshin, the head-groom, eagerly, "I will put the saddle upon Vera, and you can go out of the iron gate from the stable-yard into the forest. Nothing can catch you and you can reach the river – "

"No, Leo – " put in the Grand Duke kindly. "I shall stay."

The servants glanced at one another, appalled at the Master's attitude. Some of them, had already disappeared into the Castle

but others, less timorous, had already rushed to close the courtyard gate.

"You say they are many, Friend Rylov?" he asked again.

"As the hairs of your head, Master – from Ivanovna, Jaroslav – everywhere – and women, Highness, more terrible than the men – "

"And the leaders – ?"

"Dmitri Sidorov of the Zemstvo and Michael Kositzin and Anton Lensky. See, yonder! Where the road turns from the clearing – they come!"

The keen eyes of Boris saw further through the forest than those of most men but in a moment those of the Grand Duke Peter confirmed him. Figures were moving in the twilight, along the roads and bypaths.

To Peter Nicholaevitch they seemed like a great river which had flooded over its banks seeking new levels. Behind them the flames from the wooden hunting lodge roared upward painting a lurid sky. He saw that the flood came rapidly, and above the roar of the flames came the sound of voices singing the Russian version of the "Marseillaise." The Grand Duke stood at the terrace wall watching their approach. He knew that if they meant to attack the Castle the gate could not hold long, but he had hope that he might still be able to prevail upon them to listen to him. In a moment they saw him and began running forward toward the courtyard gate. He recognized individuals now – Anton Lensky, Michael Kuprin, with his head tied in a dirty handkerchief – and Conrad Grabar.

The defection of his old instructor in wood-lore disturbed him. Conrad must have known what was to happen and he had said nothing. If Conrad had turned against him, what hope had he of prevailing against the others?

The singing died away and in its place, shouts and cries burst forth in a bedlam. "Open the gate!" "Let us in!"

The Grand Duke had heard that note in men's voices in the Carpathian passes, and he knew what it meant, but while his gaze sought out the fat figure of Michael Kositzin who was the leader of the uprising, he held up his hand for silence.

There was a roar of voices.

"Peter Nicholaevitch wishes to speak."

"It is our turn to speak now."

"Nasha pora prishlà," (*our time has come*).

"Let the little master speak."

"We know no little masters here!"

"No, nor old ones!"

"Smiert Bourjouiam" (*Death to the bourgeoisie*).

But as the young Grand Duke began to speak the voices of the most rabid of the peasants were hushed for a moment by the others.

"My friends and my children" he began, "one word before you do something that you will forever regret. I am your friend. I am young – of the new generation. I have kept abreast of the new thought of the time and I believe in the New Life that is for you and for us all. I have proved it to you by bringing the New Life to

Zukovo by peaceful means, by friendliness and brotherhood while other parts of Russia near by are in agony and darkness." (Cries of "That is true.") "It was in my heart that I had brought the Revolution to Zukovo, a Revolution against the old order of things which can be no more, implanting in you the strong seeds of Peace and Brotherhood which would kill out the ugly weeds of violence and enmity."

Here a hoarse voice rang out: "Fire – only fire can clean." Then the reply of a woman, "Yes, Tovaristchi, *it is the only way."*

Peter Nicholaevitch tried to seek out the speakers with his gaze. One of them was Michael Kuprin whom when a child the Grand Duke had seen flogged in this very courtyard.

"There are sins of the past," he went on, raising his voice against the low murmur of the mob, "many sins against you, but one sin does not wash out another. Murder, rapine, vengeance will never bring peace to Zukovo. What you do to-day will be visited on you to-morrow. I pray that you will listen to me. I have fought for you and with you – with Gleb Saltykov and Anton Lensky, against the return of Absolutism in Russia. The old order of things is gone. Do not stain the new with crime in Zukovo. I beseech you to disperse – return to your homes and I will come to you to-morrow and if there are wrongs I will set them right. You have believed in me in the past. Believe in me now and all may yet be well in Zukovo. Go, my friends, before it is too late – "

The crowd wavered, murmuring. But just then a shot rang out and the cap of the Grand Duke twitched around on his head.

A roar went up from near the gate, "Nasha pora prishlà! *Break in the gate!" cried the voices and there were those of women among them shouting* "Tovaristchi! *Forward!"*

Over the heads of those in the front ranks, Peter Nicholaevitch saw some men bringing from the forest the heavy trunk of a felled pine tree. They meant to break down the gate. He knew that he had failed but still he stood upright facing them. Another shot, the bullet this time grazing his left arm. The sting of it angered him.

"Cowards!" he yelled, shaking his fist at them. "Cowards!"

A volley followed but no other bullets struck him. Behind him in the Castle doorway he heard the voice of Boris Rylov, calling to him hoarsely.

"Come, Master. For the love of God! There is yet time."

There was a crash of the heavy timbers at the gate.

"Come, Master – "

With a shrug Peter Nicholaevitch turned and walked across the terrace toward the Castle. "Bolvany!" *he muttered. "I've finished with them."*

Boris and Vasili stood just within the door, pleading with him to hurry, and together they made their way through the deserted kitchens and over past the vegetable gardens to the stables, where Leo Garshin awaited them, the saddles on several horses. Behind them they could now hear the triumphant cries as the courtyard gate crashed in.

"Hurry, Master!" cried Garshin eagerly.

"Where are the others?" asked the Grand Duke.

"Gone, Highness. They have fled."

Boris Rylov was peering out past an iron door into the forest.

"There is no one there?" asked Garshin.

"Not yet. They have forgotten."

"Come then, Highness."

But the Grand Duke saw that the aged Vasili was mounted first and then they rode out of the iron gate into a path which led directly into the forest. It was not until they were well clear of the buildings that a shout at one side announced that their mode of escape had been discovered. Men came running, firing pistols as they ran. Boris Rylov, bringing up the rear, reined in his horse and turning emptied a revolver at the nearest of their pursuers. One man fell and the others halted.

Until they found the other horses in the stables pursuit was fruitless.

Peter Nicholaevitch rode at the head of the little cavalcade, down the familiar aisles of the forest, his head bowed, a deep frown on his brows. It was Vasili who first noticed the blood dripping from his finger ends.

"Master," he gasped, "you are wounded."

"It is nothing," said the Grand Duke.

But Vasili bound the arm up with a handkerchief while Leo Garshin and Boris Rylov watched the path down which they had come. They could hear the crackling of the flames at the Hunting Lodge to the southward and the cries of the mob at the Castle, but there was no sign of pursuit. Perhaps they were satisfied to

appease their madness with pillage and fire. Half an hour later Boris pointed backward. A new glow had risen, a redder, deeper glow.

"The Castle, Master – " wailed Vasili.

Peter Nicholaevitch drew rein at a cross-path, watched for a moment and then turned to his companions, for he had reached a decision.

"My good friends," he said gently, "our ways part here."

"Master! Highness!"

But he was resolute.

"I am going on alone. I will not involve you further in my misfortunes. You can do nothing for me – nor I anything for you except this. Vasili knows. In the vault below the wine-cellar, hidden away, are some objects of value. They will not find them. When they go away you will return. The visit will repay you. Divide what is there into equal parts – silver, plate and gold. As for me – forget me. Farewell!"

They saw that he meant what he said. He offered these few faithful servitors his hand and they kissed his fingers – a last act of fealty and devotion and in a moment they stood listening to the diminishing hoof-beats of Vera as the young master went out of their lives.

"May God preserve him," muttered Vasili.

"Amen," said Boris Rylov and Leo Garshin.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCING PETER NICHOLS

The British refugee ship *Phrygia* was about to sail for Constantinople where her unfortunate passengers were to be transferred to other vessels sailing for Liverpool and New York. After some difficulties the refugee made his way aboard her and announced his identity to the captain. If he had expected to be received with the honor due to one of his rank and station he was quickly undeceived, for Captain Blashford, a man of rough manners, concealing a gentle heart, looked him over critically, examined his credentials (letters he had happened to have about him), and then smiled grimly.

"We've got room for one more – and that's about all."

"I have no money – " began the refugee.

"Oh, that's all right," shrugged the Captain, "you're not the only one. We've a cargo of twenty princes, thirty-two princesses, eighteen generals and enough counts and countesses to set up a new nation somewhere. Your 'Ighness is the only Duke that has reached us up to the present speakin' and if there are any others, they'll 'ave to be brisk for we're sailin' in twenty minutes."

The matter-of-fact tones with which the unemotional Britisher made this announcement restored the lost sense of humor of the Russian refugee, and he broke into a grim laugh.

"An embarrassment of riches," remarked the Grand Duke.

"Riches," grunted the Captain, "in a manner of speakin', yes. Money is not so plentiful. But jools! Good God! There must be half a ton of diamonds, rubies and emeralds aboard. All they're got left most of 'em, but complaints and narvousness. Give me a cargo of wheat and I'm your man," growled the Captain. "It stays put and doesn't complain," and then turning to Peter – "Ye're not expectin' any r'yal suite aboard the *Phrygia*, are ye?"

"No. A hammock for'rad will be good enough for me."

"That's the way I like to 'ear a man talk. Good God! As man to man, I arsk you, – with Counts throwin' cigarette butts around an' princesses cryin' all over my clean white decks an' all, what's a self-respectin' skipper to do? But I 'ave my orders to fetch the odd lot to Constantinople an' fetch 'em I will. Oh! They're odd – all right. Go below, sir, an' 'ave a look at 'em."

But Peter Nicholaevitch shook his head. He had been doing a deal of quiet thinking in those starry nights upon the Dnieper, and he had worked out his problem alone.

"No, thanks," he said quietly, "if you don't mind, I think I'd rather preserve my incognito."

"Incognito, is it? Oh, very well, suit yourself. And what will I be callin' your Highness?"

"Peter Nichols," said the Grand Duke with a smile, "it's as good as any other."

"Right you are, Peter Nichols. Lay for'rad and tell the bos'n to show you up to my cabin."

So Peter Nichols went forward, avoiding the cargo aft, until within a day's run of the Bosphorus when he found himself accosted by no less a person than Prince Galitzin who had strolled out to get the morning air. He tried to avoid the man but Galitzin planted himself firmly in his path, scrutinizing him eagerly.

"You too, Highness!" he said with an accent of grieved surprise.

The Grand Duke regarded him in a moment of silence.

"It must be evident to you, Prince Galitzin, that I have some object in remaining unknown."

"But, Your Highness, such a thing is unnecessary. Are we not all dedicated to the same misfortunes? Misery loves company."

"You mean that it makes you less miserable to discover that I share your fate?"

"Not precisely that. It is merely that if one holding your liberal views cannot escape the holocaust that has suddenly fallen there is little hope for the rest of us."

"No," said the Grand Duke shortly. "There is no hope, none at all, for us or for Russia."

"Where are you going?"

"To America."

"But, your Highness, that is impossible. We shall all have asylum in England until conditions change. You should go there with us. It will lend influence to our mission."

"No."

"Why?"

"I am leaving Russia for the present. She is outcast. For, not content with betraying others, she has betrayed herself."

"But what are you going to do?"

Peter Nicholaevitch smiled up at the sky and the fussy, fat, bejeweled sycophant before him listened to him in amazement.

"Prince Galitzin," said the Grand Duke amusedly, "I am going to do that which may bring the blush of shame to your brow or the sneer of pity to your lips. I am going to fulfill the destiny provided for every man with a pair of strong hands, and a willing spirit – I am going to work."

The Prince stepped back a pace, his watery eyes snapping in incomprehension.

"But your higher destiny – your great heritage as a Prince of the Royal blood of Holy Russia."

"There is no Holy Russia, my friend, until she is born again. Russia is worse than traitor, worse than liar, worse than murderer and thief. She is a fool."

"All will come right in time. We go to England to wait."

"I have other plans."

"Then you will not join us? Princess Anastasie, my daughter, is here. General Seminoff – "

"It is useless. I have made up my mind. Leave me, if you please."

Prince Galitzin disappeared quickly below to spread the information of his discovery among the disconsolate refugees and it was not long before it was known from one end of

the *Phrygia* to the other that the fellow who called himself Peter Nichols was none other than the Grand Duke Peter Nicholaevitch, a cousin to his late Majesty Nicholas and a Prince of the Royal blood. Peter Nichols sought the Captain in his cabin, putting the whole case before him.

"H-m," chuckled the Captain, "Found ye out, did they? There's only a few of you left, that's why. Better stay 'ere in my cabin until we reach Constantinople. I'd be honored, 'Ighness, to say nothin' of savin' you a bit of bother."

"You're very kind."

"Not at all. Make yourself at 'ome. There's cigarettes on the locker and a nip of the Scotch to keep the chill out. Here's a light. You've been worryin' me some, 'Ighness. Fact is I didn't know just how big a bug you were until to-day when I arsked some questions. You'll forgive me, 'Ighness?"

"Peter Nichols," corrected the Grand Duke.

"No," insisted the Captain, "we'll give you yer title while we can. You know we British have a bit of a taste for r'yalty when we know it's the real thing. I don't take much stock in most of my cargo aft. And beggin' yer 'Ighness's pardon I never took much stock in Russia since she lay down on the job and left the Allies in the lurch – "

"Captain Blashford," said the Grand Duke quietly. "You can't hurt my feelings."

"But I do like you, 'Ighness, and I want to do all that I can to 'elp you when we get to anchor."

"Thanks."

"I take it that you don't want anybody ashore to know who ye are?"

"Exactly. Most of these refugees are going to England. I have reasons for not wishing to go with them."

"Where then do you propose to go?"

"To the United States," said the Grand Duke eagerly.

"Without money?"

"I'd have no money if I went to England unless I subsisted on the charity of my friends. My branch of the family is not rich. The war has made us poorer. Such securities as I have are in a vault in Kiev. It would be suicide for me to attempt to reclaim them now. I'm going to try to make my own way."

"Impossible!"

The Grand Duke laughed at the Englishman's expression.

"Why?"

"Yer 'ands, 'Ighness."

The Grand Duke shrugged and grinned.

"I'll risk it. I'm not without resources. Will you help me to a ship sailing for America?"

"Yes – but – "

"Oh, I'll work my passage over – if nobody bothers me."

"By George! I like your spirit. Give me your 'and, sir. I'll do what I can. If the *Bermudian* hasn't sailed from the Horn yet, I think I can manage it for ye."

"And keep me clear of the rest of your passengers?" added

His Highness.

"Righto. They'll go on the *Semaphore*. You stay right 'ere and mum's the word." And Captain Blashford went out on deck leaving Peter Nichols to his cigarette and his meditations.

Many times had the Grand Duke Peter given thanks that the blood of his mother flowed strongly in his veins. He was more British than Russian and he could remember things that had happened since he had grown to adolescence which had made the half of him that was English revolt against the Russian system. It was perhaps his musical education rather than his University training or his travels in England and France that had turned him to the *Intelligentsia*. In the vast republic of art and letters he had imbibed the philosophy that was to threaten the very existence of his own clan. The spread of the revolution had not dismayed him, for he believed that in time the pendulum would swing back and bring a constitutional government to Russia. But in the weeks of struggle, privation, and passion a new Peter Nicholaevitch was born.

The failure of his plans in the sudden flood of anarchy which had swept over Zukovo, the treachery of those he had thought faithful and the attempt upon his life had changed his viewpoint. It takes a truly noble spirit to wish to kiss the finger that has pulled the trigger of a revolver, the bullet from which has gone through one's hat. From disappointment and dismay Peter Nicholaevitch had turned to anger. They hadn't played the game with him. It wasn't cricket. His resolution to sail for the United

States was decided. To throw himself, an object of charity, upon the mercies of the Earl of Shetland, his mother's cousin, was not to be thought of.

To his peasants he had preached the gospel of labor, humility and peace, in that state of life to which they had been called. He had tried to exemplify it to them. He could do no less now, to himself. By teaching himself, he could perhaps fit himself to teach them. In England it would perhaps be difficult to remain incognito, and he had a pride in wishing to succeed alone and unaided. Only the United States, whose form of government more nearly approached the ideal he had for Russia, could offer him the opportunities to discover whether or not a prince could not also be a man.

To the Princess Anastasie he gave little thought. That their common exile and the chance encounter under such circumstances had aroused no return of an entente toward what had once been a half-sentimental attachment convinced him of how little it had meant to him. There were no royal prohibitions upon him now. To marry the Princess Anastasie and settle in London, living upon the proceeds of her wealthy father's American and British securities, was of course the easiest solution of his difficulties. A life of ease, music, good sportsmanship, the comfort that only England knows… She was comely too – blond, petite, and smoked her cigarette very prettily. Their marriage had once been discussed. She wanted it still, perhaps. Something of all this may have been somewhere

in the back of Prince Galitzin's ambitious mind. The one course would be so easy, the other —

Peter Nicholaevitch rose and carefully flicked his cigarette through the open port. No. One does not pass twice through such moments of struggle and self-communion as he had had in those long nights of his escape along the Dnieper. He had chosen. Peter Nichols! The name amused him. If Captain Blashford was a man of his word to-night would be the end of the Grand Duke Peter Nicholaevitch, and the Princess Anastasie might find some more ardent suitor to her grace and beauty.

She did not seek him out. Perhaps the hint to Galitzin had been sufficient and the Grand Duke from his hiding place saw her pretty figure set ashore among the miscellany of martyred "r'yalty." He turned away from his port-hole with a catch of his breath as the last vestige of his old life passed from sight. And then quietly took up a fresh cigarette and awaited the Captain.

The details were easily arranged. Blashford was a man of resource and at night returned from a visit to the Captain of the *Bermudian* with word that all was well. He had been obliged to relate the facts but Captain Armitage could keep a secret and promised the refugee a job under his steward who was short-handed. And so the next morning, after shaving and dressing himself in borrowed clothes, Peter Nichols shook Captain Blashford warmly by the hand and went aboard his new ship.

Peter Nichols' new job was that of a waiter at the tables in

the dining saloon. He was a very good waiter, supplying, from the wealth of a Continental experience, the deficiencies of other waiters he had known. He wore a black shell jacket and a white shirt front which remained innocent of gravy spots. The food was not very good nor very plentiful, but he served it with an air of such importance that it gained flavor and substance by the reflection of his deference. There were English officers bound for Malta, Frenchmen for Marseilles and Americans of the Red Cross without number bound for New York. Girls, too, clear-eyed, bronzed and hearty, who talked war and politics beneath his very nose, challenging his own theories. They noticed him too and whispered among themselves, but true to his ambition to do every task at the best of his bent, he preserved an immobile countenance and pocketed his fees, which would be useful ere long, with the grateful appreciation of one to whom shillings and franc pieces come as the gifts of God. Many were the attempts to draw him into a conversation, but where the queries could not be answered by a laconic "Yes, sir," or "No, sir," this paragon of waiters maintained a smiling silence.

"I'm sure he's a prince or something," he heard one young girl of a hospital unit say to a young medico of the outfit. "Did you ever see such a nose and brows in your life? And his hands – ! You can never mistake hands. I would swear those hands had never done menial work for a thousand years."

All of which was quite true, but it made the waiter Peter uncomfortably careful. There were no women in the kitchen, but

there was an amatory stewardess, fat and forty, upon whom the factitious technique of the saloon fell with singular insipidity. He fled from her. Peter, the waiter, was already a good democrat but he was not ready to spread his philosophy out so thin.

He slept forward, messed abaft the galley, enriched his vocabulary and broadened his point of view. There is no leveler like a ship's fo'c'sle, no better school of philosophy than that of men upon their "beam ends." There were many such – Poles, Slovaks, Roumanians, an Armenian or two, refugees, adventurers from America, old, young, dissolute, making a necessity of virtue under that successful oligarchy, the ship's bridge.

In the Americans Peter was interested with an Englishman's point of view. He had much to learn, and he invented a tale of his fortunes which let him into their confidences, especially into that of Jim Coast, waiter like himself, whose bunk adjoined his own. Jim Coast was a citizen of the world, inured to privation under many flags. He had been born in New Jersey, U. S. A., of decent people, had worked in the cranberry bogs, farmed in Pennsylvania, "punched" cattle in Wyoming, "prospected" in the Southwest, looted ranches in Mexico, fought against Diaz and again with the insurgents in Venezuela, worked on cattle-ships and so, by easy stages, had drifted across the breadth of Europe living by his wits at the expense of the credulous and the unwary. And now, for the first time in many years, he was going home – though just what that meant he did not know. He

had missed great fortune twice – "by the skin of his teeth," as he picturesquely described it, once in a mine in Arizona and again in a land-deal in the Argentine. There were reasons why he hadn't dared to return to the United States before. He was a man with a grievance, but, however free in his confidences in other respects, gave the interested Peter no inkling as to what that grievance was.

No more curious acquaintanceship could possibly be imagined, but privation, like politics, makes strange bedfellows, and, from tolerance and amusement, Pete, as the other called him, found himself yielding, without stint, to the fantastic spell of Jim Coast's multifarious attractions. He seemed to have no doubts as to the possibility of making a living in America and referred darkly to possible "coups" that would net a fortune. He was an agreeable villain, not above mischief to gain his ends, and Peter, who cherished an ideal, made sure that, once safe ashore, it would be best if they parted company. But he didn't tell Jim Coast so, for the conversational benefits he derived from that gentleman's acquaintance were a liberal education.

We are admonished that they are blessed who just stand and wait, and Peter Nichols, three days out of New York harbor, found himself the possessor of forty dollars in tips from the voyage with sixty dollars coming to him as wages – not so bad for a first venture upon the high seas of industry. It was the first real money he had ever made in his life and he was proud of it, jingling it contentedly in his pockets and rubbing the bills luxuriously one against the other. But his plans required more

than this, for he had read enough to know that in the United States one is often taken at one's own estimate, and that if he wasn't to find a job as a ditch-digger, he must make a good appearance. And so it was now time to make use of the one Grand Ducal possession remaining to him, a gold ring set with a gorgeous ruby that had once belonged to his father. This ring he had always worn and had removed from his finger at Ushan, in the fear that its magnificence might betray him. He had kept it carefully tied about his neck in a bag on a bit of string and had of course not even shown it to Jim Coast who might have deemed it an excuse to sever their strange friendship.

Through the Head Steward he managed a message to Captain Armitage and was bidden to the officer's cabin, where he explained the object of his visit, exhibited his treasure and estimated its value.

The Captain opened his eyes a bit wider as he gazed into the sanguine depths of the stone.

"If I didn't know something of your history, Nichols," he said with a wink, "I might think you'd been looting the strong box of the Sultan of Turkey. Pigeon's blood and as big as my thumb nail! You want to sell it?"

"I need capital."

"What do you want for it?"

"It's worth a thousand pounds of English money. Perhaps more, I don't know. I'll take what I can get."

"I see. You're afraid to negotiate the sale ashore?"

"Exactly. I'd be arrested."

"And you don't want explanations. H-m – leave it with me over night. I'll see the Purser. He'll know."

"Thanks."

The Captain offered the waiter in the shell-jacket the hospitality of his cabin, but Peter Nichols thanked him gratefully and withdrew.

The result of this arrangement was that the ruby ring changed owners. The Purser bought it for two thousand in cash. He knew a good thing when he saw it. But Peter Nichols was satisfied.

CHAPTER II
NEW YORK

The Duke-errant had prepared himself for the first glimpse of the battlements of lower New York, but as the *Bermudian* came up the bay that rosy spring afternoon, the western sun gilding the upper half of the castellated towers which rose from a sea of moving shadows, it seemed a dream city, the fortress of a fairy tale. His fingers tingled to express this frozen music, to relieve it from its spell of enchantment, and phrases of Debussy's "Cathédrale Engloutie" came welling up within him from almost forgotten depths.

"*Parbleu!* She's grown some, Pete, since I saw her last!"

This from his grotesque companion who was not moved by concord of sweet sounds. "They've buried the Trinity clean out of sight."

"The Trinity?" questioned Peter solemnly.

"Bless your heart – " laughed Coast, "I'd say so – But I mean, the church – And that must be the Woolworth Building yonder. Where's yer St. Paul's and Kremlin now? Some village, – what?"

"Gorgeous!" muttered Peter.

"Hell of a thing to tackle single-handed, though, eh, boh?"

Something of the same thought was passing through Peter's mind but he only smiled.

"I'll find a job," he said slowly.

"Waitin'!" sneered Coast. "Fine job that for a man with your learnin'. 'Hey, waiter! Some butter if you please,'" he satirized in mincing tones, "'this soup is cold – this beef is underdone. Oh, *cawn't* you give me some service here!' I say, don't you hear 'em – people that never saw a servant in their own home town. Pretty occupation for an old war horse like me or a globe-trotter like you. No. None for me. I'll fry my fish in a bigger pan. *Allons!* Pete. I like you. I'll like you more when you grow some older, but you've got a head above your ears that ain't all bone. I can use you. What d'ye say? We'll get ashore, some way, and then we'll show the U. S. A. a thing or two not written in the books."

"We'll go ashore together, Jim. Then we'll see."

"Righto! But I'll eat my hat if I can see you balancin' dishes in a Broadway Chop House."

Peter couldn't see that either, but he didn't tell Jim Coast so. Their hour on deck had struck, for a final meal was to be served and they went below to finish their duties. That night they were paid off and discharged.

The difficulties in the way of inspection and interrogation of Peter Nichols, the alien, were obviated by the simple expedient of his going ashore under cover of the darkness and not coming back to the ship – this at a hint from the sympathetic Armitage who gave the ex-waiter a handclasp and his money and wished him success.

Midnight found Peter and Jim Coast on Broadway in

the neighborhood of Forty-second Street with Peter blinking comfortably up at the electric signs and marveling at everything. The more Coast drank the deeper was his cynicism but Peter grew mellow. This was a wonderful new world he was exploring and with two thousand dollars safely tucked on the inside of his waistcoat, he was ready to defy the tooth of adversity.

In the morning Peter Nichols came to a decision. And so over the coffee and eggs when Coast asked him what his plans were he told him he was going to look for a job.

Coast looked at him through the smoke of his cigar and spoke at last.

"I didn't think you'd be a quitter, Pete. The world owes us a livin' – you and me – Bah! It's easy if you'll use your headpiece. If the world won't give, I mean to take. The jobs are meant for little men."

"What are you going to do?"

"An enterprisin' man wouldn't ask such a question. Half the people in the world takes what the other half gives. You ought to know what half *I* belong to."

"I'm afraid I belong to the other half, Jim Coast," said Peter quietly.

"*Sacré – !*" sneered the other, rising suddenly. "Where you goin' to wait, Pete? At the Ritz or the Commodore? In a month you'll be waitin' on *me*. It'll be *Mister* Coast for you then, *mon garçon*, but you'll still be Pete." He shrugged and offered his hand. "Well, we won't quarrel but our ways split here."

"I'm sorry, Jim. Good-by."

He saw Coast slouch out into the street and disappear m the crowd moving toward Broadway. He waited for a while thinking deeply and then with a definite plan in his mind strolled forth. First he bought a second-hand suit case in Seventh Avenue, then found a store marked "Gentlemen's Outfitters" where he purchased ready-made clothing, a hat, shoes, underwear, linen and cravats, arraying himself with a sense of some satisfaction and packing in his suitcase what he couldn't wear, went forth, found a taxi and drove in state to a good hotel.

New York assimilates its immigrants with surprising rapidity. Through this narrow funnel they pour into the "melting pot," their racial characteristics already neutralized, their souls already inoculated with the spirit of individualism. Prepared as he was to accept with a good grace conditions as he found them, Peter Nichols was astonished at the ease with which he fitted into the niche that he had chosen. His room was on the eighteenth floor, to which and from which he was shot in an enameled lift operated by a Uhlan in a monkey-cap. He found that it required a rather nice adjustment of his muscles to spring forth at precisely the proper moment. There was a young lady who presided over the destinies of the particular shelf that he occupied in this enormous cupboard, a very pretty young lady, something between a French Duchess and a lady's maid. Her smile had a homelike quality though and it was worth risking the perilous catapulting up and down for the mere pleasure of handing her his room key. Having

no valuables of course but his money which he carried in his pockets there was no danger from unprincipled persons had she been disposed to connive at dishonesty.

His bedroom was small but neat and his bathroom was neat but small, tiled in white enamel, containing every device that the heart of a clean man could desire. He discovered that by dropping a quarter into various apertures he could secure almost anything he required from tooth paste to razor blades. There was a telephone beside his bed which rang at inconvenient moments and a Bible upon the side table proclaimed the religious fervor of this extraordinary people. A newspaper was sent in to him every morning whether he rang for it or not, and every time he did ring, a lesser Uhlan brought a thermos bottle containing iced water. This perplexed him for a time but he was too much ashamed of his ignorance to question. You see, he was already acquiring the first ingredient of the American character – omniscience, for he found that in New York no one ever admits that he doesn't know everything.

But it was all very wonderful, pulsing with life, eloquent of achievement. He was in no haste. By living with some care, he found that the money from his ruby would last for several months. Meanwhile he was studying his situation and its possibilities. Summing up his own attainments he felt that he was qualified as a teacher of the piano or of the voice, as an instructor in languages, or if the worst came, as a waiter in a fashionable restaurant – perhaps even a head-waiter – which from the authority he

observed in the demeanor of the lord of the hotel dining room seemed almost all the honor that a person in America might hope to gain. But, in order that no proper opportunity should slip by, he scanned the newspapers in the hope of finding something that he could do.

As the weeks passed he made the discovery that he was being immensely entertained. He was all English now. It was not in the least difficult to make acquaintances. Almost everybody spoke to everybody without the slightest feeling of restraint. He learned the meaning of the latest American slang but found difficulty in applying it, rejoiced in the syncopation of the jazz, America's original contribution to the musical art, and by the end of a month thought himself thoroughly acclimated.

But he still surprised inquiring glances male and female cast in his direction. There was something about his personality which, disguise it as he might under American-made garments and American-made manners, refused to be hidden. It was his charm added to his general good nature and adaptability which quickly made Peter Nichols some friends of the better sort. If he had been willing to drift downward he would have cast in his lot with Jim Coast. Instead, he followed decent inclinations and found himself at the end of six weeks a part of a group of young business men who took him home to dine with their wives and gave him the benefit of their friendly advice. To all of them he told the same story, that he was an Englishman who had worked in Russia with the Red Cross and that he had come to the United States to get

a job.

It was a likely story and most of them swallowed it. But one clever girl whom he met out at dinner rather startled him by the accuracy of her intuitions.

"I have traveled a good deal, Mr. Nichols," she said quizzically, "but I've never yet met an Englishman like you."

"It is difficult for me to tell whether I am to consider that as flattery or disapproval," said Peter calmly.

"You talk like an Englishman, but you're entirely too much interested in everything to be true to type."

"Ah, really – "

"Englishmen are either bored or presumptuous. You're neither. And there's a tiny accent that I can't explain – "

"Don't try – "

"I must. We Americans believe in our impulses. My brother Dick says you're a man of mystery. I've solved it," she laughed, "I'm sure you're a Russian Grand Duke incognito."

Peter laughed and tried bravado.

"You are certainly all in the mustard," he blundered helplessly.

And she looked at him for a moment and then burst into laughter.

These associations were very pleasant, but, contrary to Peter's expectations, they didn't seem to be leading anywhere. The efforts that he made to find positions commensurate with his ambitions had ended in blind alleys. He was too well educated for some of them, not well enough educated for others.

More than two months had passed. He had moved to a boarding house in a decent locality, but of the two thousands dollars with which he had entered New York there now remained to him less than two hundred. He was beginning to believe that he had played the game and lost and that within a very few weeks he would be obliged to hide himself from these excellent new acquaintances and go back to his old job. Then the tide of his fortune suddenly turned.

Dick Sheldon, the brother of the girl who was "all in the mustard," aware of Peter's plight, had stumbled across the useful bit of information and brought it to Peter at the boarding house.

"Didn't you tell me that you'd once had something to do with forestry in Russia?" he asked.

Peter nodded. "I was once employed in the reafforestation of a large estate," he replied.

"Then I've found your job," said Sheldon heartily, clapping Peter on the back. "A friend of Sheldon, Senior's, Jonathan K. McGuire, has a big place down in the wilderness of Jersey – thousands of acres and he wants a man to take charge – sort of forestry expert and general superintendent, money no object. I reckon you could cop out three hundred a month as a starter."

"That looks good to me," said Peter, delighted that the argot fell so aptly from his lips. And then, "You're not spoofing, are you?"

"Devil a spoof. It's straight goods, Nichols. Will you take it?"

Peter had a vision of the greasy dishes he was to escape.

"Will I?" he exclaimed delightedly. "Can I get it?"

"Sure thing. McGuire is a millionaire, made a pot of money somewhere in the West – dabbles in the market. That's where Dad met him. Crusty old rascal. Daughter. Living down in Jersey now, alone with a lot of servants. Queer one. Maybe you'll like him – maybe not."

Peter clasped his friend by the hands.

"Moloch himself would look an angel of mercy to me now."

"Do you think you can make good?"

"Well, rather. Whom shall I see? And when?"

"I can fix it up with Dad, I reckon. You'd better come down to the office and see him about twelve."

Peter Sheldon, Senior, looked him over and asked him questions and the interview was quite satisfactory.

"I'll tell you the truth, as far as I know it," said Sheldon, Senior (which was more than Peter Nichols had done). "Jonathan K. McGuire is a strange character – keeps his business to himself – . How much he's worth nobody knows but himself and the Treasury Department. Does a good deal of buying and selling through this office. A hard man in a deal but reasonable in other things. I've had his acquaintance for five years, lunched with him, dined with him – visited this place in Jersey, but I give you my word, Mr. Nichols, I've never yet got the prick of a pin beneath that man's skin. You may not like him. Few people do. But there's no harm in taking a try at this job."

"I shall be delighted," said Nichols.

"I don't know whether you will or not," broke in Sheldon, Senior, frankly. "Something's happened lately. About three weeks ago Jonathan K. McGuire came into this office hurriedly, shut the door behind him, locked it – and sank into a chair, puffing hard, his face the color of putty. He wouldn't answer any questions and put me off, though I'd have gone out of my way to help him. But after a while he looked out of the window, phoned for his car and went again, saying he was going down into Jersey."

"He was sick, perhaps," ventured Peter.

"It was something worse than that, Mr. Nichols. He looked as though he had seen a ghost or heard a banshee. Then this comes," continued the broker, taking up a letter from the desk. "Asks for a forester, a good strong man. You're strong, Mr. Nichols? Er – and courageous? You're not addicted to 'nerves'? You see I'm telling you all these things so that you'll go down to Black Rock with your eyes open. He also asks me to engage other men as private police or gamekeepers, who will act under your direction. Queer, isn't it? Rather spooky, I'd say, but if you're game, we'll close the bargain now. Three hundred a month to start with and found. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," said Peter with a bow. "When do I begin?"

"At once if you like. Salary begins now. Fifty in advance for expenses."

"That's fair enough, Mr. Sheldon. If you will give me the directions, I will go to-day."

"To-morrow will be time enough." Sheldon, Senior, had

turned to his desk and was writing upon a slip of paper. This he handed to Peter with a check.

"That will show you how to get there," he said as he rose, brusquely. "Glad to have met you. Good-day."

And Peter felt himself hand-shaken and pushed at the same time, reaching the outer office, mentally out of breath from the sudden, swift movement of his fortunes. Sheldon, Senior, had not meant to be abrupt. He was merely a business man relaxing for a moment to do a service for a friend. When Peter Nichols awoke to his obligations he sought out Sheldon, Junior, and thanked him with a sense of real gratitude and Sheldon, Junior, gave him a warm handclasp and Godspeed.

The Pennsylvania Station caused the new Superintendent of Jonathan K. McGuire to blink and gasp. He paused, suit case in hand, at the top of the double flight of stairs to survey the splendid proportions of the waiting room where the crowds seemed lost in its great spaces. In Europe such a building would be a cathedral. In America it was a railway station. And the thought was made more definite by the Gregorian chant of the train announcer which sounded aloft, its tones seeking concord among their own echoes.

This was the portal to the new life in which Peter was to work out his own salvation and the splendor of the immediate prospect uplifted him with a sense of his personal importance in the new scheme of things of which this was a part. He hadn't the slightest doubt that he would be able to succeed in the work for which he

had been recommended, for apart from his music – which had taken so many of his hours – there was nothing that he knew more about or loved better than the trees. He had provided himself the afternoon before with two books by American authorities and other books and monographs were to be forwarded to his new address.

As he descended the stairs and reached the main floor of the station, his glance caught the gaze of a man staring at him intently. The man was slender and dark, dressed decently enough in a gray suit and soft hat and wore a small black mustache. All of these facts Peter took note of in the one glance, arrested by the strange stare of the other, which lingered while Peter glanced away and went on. Peter, who had an excellent memory for faces, was sure that he had never seen the man before, but after he had taken a few steps, it occurred to him that in the stranger's eyes he had noted the startled distention of surprise and recognition. And so he stopped and turned, but as he did so the fellow dropped his gaze suddenly, and turned and walked away. The incident was curious and rather interesting. If Peter had had more time he would have sought out the fellow and asked him why he was staring at him, but there were only a few moments to spare and he made his way out to the concourse where he found his gate and descended to his train. Here he ensconced himself comfortably in the smoking car, and was presently shot under the Hudson River (as he afterwards discovered) and out into the sunshine of the flats of New Jersey.

He rolled smoothly along through the manufacturing and agricultural districts, his keenly critical glances neglecting nothing of the waste and abundance on all sides. He saw, too, the unlovely evidences of poverty on the outskirts of the cities, which brought to his mind other communities in a far country whose physical evidences of prosperity were no worse, if no better, than these. Then there came a catch in his throat and a gasp which left him staring but seeing nothing. The feeling was not nostalgia, for that far country was no home for him now. At last he found himself muttering to himself in English, "My home – my home is here."

After a while the mood of depression, recurrent moments of which had come to him in New York with diminishing frequency, passed into one of contemplation, of calm, like those which had followed his nights of passion on the Dnieper, and at last he closed his eyes and dozed. Visions of courts and camps passed through his mind – of brilliant uniforms and jeweled decorations; of spacious polished halls, resplendent with ornate mirrors and crystal pendant chandeliers; of diamond coronets, of silks and satins and powdered flunkies. And then other visions of gray figures crouched in the mud; of rain coming out of the dark and of ominous lights over the profile of low hills; of shrieks; of shells and cries of terror; of his cousin, a tall, bearded man on a horse in a ravine waving an imperious arm; of confusion and moving thousands, the creak of sanitars, the groans of men calling upon mothers they would never see. And then with a leap backward

over the years, the vision of a small man huddled against the wall of a courtyard being knouted until red stains appeared on his gray blouse and then mingled faintly in the mist and the rain until the small man sank to the full length of his imprisoned arms like one crucified…

Peter Nichols straightened and passed a hand across his damp forehead. Through the perspective of this modern civilization what had been passing before his vision seemed very vague, very distant, but he knew that it was not a dream…

All about him was life, progress, industry, hope – a nation in the making, proud of her brief history which had been built around an ideal. If he could bring this same ideal back to Russia! In his heart he thanked God for America – imperfect though she was, and made a vow that in the task he had set for himself he should not be found wanting.

Twice he changed trains, the second time at a small junction amid an ugliness of clay-pits and brickyards and dust and heat. There were perhaps twenty people on the platform. He walked the length of the station and as he did so a man in a gray suit disappeared around the corner of the building. But Peter Nichols did not see him, and in a moment, seated in his new train in a wooden car which reminded him of some of the ancient rolling stock of the St. Petersburg and Moscow Railroad, he was taken haltingly and noisily along the last stage of his journey.

But he was aware of the familiar odor of the pine balsam in his nostrils, and as he rolled through dark coverts the scent of the

growing things in the hidden places in the coolth and damp of the sandy loam. He saw, too, tea-colored streams idling among the sedges and charred wildernesses of trees appealing mutely with their blackened stumps like wounded creatures in pain, a bit of war-torn Galicia in the midst of peace. Miles and miles of dead forest land, forgotten and uncared for. There was need here for his services.

With a wheeze of steam and a loud crackling of woodwork and creaking of brakes the train came to a stop and the conductor shouted the name of the station. Rather stiffly the traveler descended with his bag and stood upon the small platform looking about him curiously. The baggage man tossed out a bundle of newspapers and a pouch of mail and the train moved off. Apparently Peter Nichols was the only passenger with Pickerel River as a destination.

And as the panting train went around a curve, at last disappearing, it seemed fairly reasonable to Peter Nichols that no one with the slightest chance of stopping off anywhere else would wish to get off here. The station was small, of but one room and a tiny office containing, as he could see, a telegraph instrument, a broken chair with a leather cushion, a shelf and a rack containing a few soiled slips of paper, but the office had no occupant and the door was locked. This perhaps explained the absence of the automobile which Mr. Sheldon had informed him would meet him in obedience to his telegram announcing the hour of his arrival. Neither within the building nor without

was there any person or animate thing in sight, except some small birds fluttering and quarreling along the telegraph wires.

There was but one road, a sandy one, wearing marks of travel, which emerged from the scrub oak and pine and definitely concluded at the railroad track. This, then, was his direction, and after reassuring himself that there was no other means of egress, he took up his black suitcase and set forth into the wood, aware of a sense of beckoning adventure. The road wound in and out, up and down, over what at one time must have been the floor of the ocean, which could not be far distant. Had it not been for the weight of his bag Peter would have enjoyed the experience of this complete isolation, the fragrant silences broken only by the whisper of the leaves and the scurrying of tiny wild things among the dead tree branches. But he had no means of knowing how far he would have to travel or whether, indeed, there had not been some mistake on Sheldon, Senior's, part or his own. But the directions had been quite clear and the road must of course lead somewhere – to some village or settlement at least where he could get a lodging for the night.

And so he trudged on through the woods which already seemed to be partaking of some of the mystery which surrounded the person of Jonathan K. McGuire. The whole incident had been unusual and the more interesting because of the strange character of his employer and the evident fear he had of some latent evil which threatened him. But Peter Nichols had accepted his commission with a sense of profound relief at escaping the other

fate that awaited him, with scarcely a thought of the dangers which his acceptance might entail. He was not easily frightened and had welcomed the new adventure, dismissing the fears of Jonathan K. McGuire as imaginary, the emanations of age or an uneasy conscience.

But as he went on, his bag became heavier and the perspiration poured down his face, so reaching a cross-path that seemed to show signs of recent travel he put the suitcase down and sat on it while he wiped his brow. The shadows were growing longer. He was beginning to believe that there was no such place as Black Rock, no such person as Jonathan K. McGuire and that Sheldon, Senior, and Sheldon, Junior, were engaged in a conspiracy against his peace of mind, when above the now familiar whisperings of the forest he heard a new sound. Faintly it came at first as though from a great distance, mingling with the murmur of the sighing wind in the pine trees, a voice singing. It seemed a child's voice – delicate, clear, true, as care-free as the note of a bird – unleashing its joy to the heavens.

Peter Nichols started up, listening more intently. The sounds were coming nearer but he couldn't tell from which direction, for every leaf seemed to be taking up the lovely melody which he could hear quite clearly now. It was an air with which he was unfamiliar, but he knew only that it was elemental in its simplicity and under these circumstances startlingly welcome. He waited another long moment, listening, found the direction from which the voice was coming, and presently noted the

swaying of branches and the crackling of dry twigs in the path near by, from which, in a moment, a strange figure emerged.

At first he thought it was a boy, for it wore a pair of blue denim overalls and a wide-brimmed straw hat, from beneath which the birdlike notes were still emitted, but as the figure paused at the sight of him, the song suddenly ceased – he saw a tumbled mass of tawny hair and a pair of startled blue eyes staring at him.

"Hello," said the figure, after a moment, recovering its voice.

"Good-afternoon," said Peter Nichols, bowing from the waist in the most approved Continental manner. You see he, too, was a little startled by the apparition, which proclaimed itself beneath its strange garments in unmistakable terms to be both feminine and lovely.

CHAPTER III
THE OVERALL GIRL

They stood for a long moment regarding each other, both in curiosity; Peter because of the contrariety of the girl's face and garments, the girl because of Peter's bow, which was the most extraordinary thing that had ever happened in Burlington County. After a pause, a smile which seemed to have been hovering uncertainly around the corners of her lips broke into a frank grin, disclosing dimples and a row of white teeth, the front ones not quite together.

"Could you tell me," asked Peter very politely as he found his voice, "if this road leads to Black Rock?"

She was still scrutinizing him, her head, birdlike, upon one side.

"That depends on which way you're walkin'," she said.

She dropped her "g" with careless ease, but then Peter had noticed that many Americans and English people, some very nice ones, did that.

Peter glanced at the girl and then down the road in both directions.

"Oh, yes, of course," he said, not sure whether she was smiling at or with him. "I came from a station called Pickerel River and I wish to go to Black Rock."

"You're *sure* you want to go there?"

"Oh, yes."

"I guess that's because you've never been to Black Rock, Mister."

"No, I haven't."

The girl picked a shrub and nibbled at it daintily.

"You'd better turn and go right back." Her sentence finished in a shrug.

"What's the matter with Black Rock?" he asked curiously.

"It's just the little end of nothin'. That's all," she finished decisively.

The quaint expression interested him. "I must get there, nevertheless," he said; "is it far from here?"

"Depends on what you call far. Mile or so. Didn't the 'Lizzie' meet the six-thirty?"

Peter stared at her vacuously, for this was Greek.

"The 'Lizzie'?"

"The tin 'Lizzie' – Jim Hagerman's bus – carries the mail and papers. Sometimes he gives me a lift about here."

"No. There was no conveyance of any sort and I really expected one. I wish to get to Mr. Jonathan K. McGuire's."

"Oh!"

The girl had been examining Peter furtively, as though trying vainly to place him definitely in her mental collection of human bipeds. Now she stared at him with interest.

"Oh, you're goin' to McGuire's!"

Peter nodded. "If I can ever find the way."

"You're one of the new detectives?"

"Detective!" Peter laughed. "No. Not that I'm aware. I'm the new superintendent and forester."

"Oh!"

The girl was visibly impressed, but a tiny frown puckered her brow.

"What's a forester?" she asked.

"A fellow who looks after the forests."

"The forests don't need any lookin' after out here in the barrens. They just grow."

"I'm going to teach them to grow better."

The girl looked at him for a long moment of suspicion. She had taken off her hat and the ruddy sunlight behind her made a golden halo all about her head. Her hands he had noted were small, the fingers slender. Her nose was well shaped, her nostrils wide, the angle of her jaw firmly modeled and her slender figure beneath the absurd garments revealed both strength and grace. But he did not dare to stare at her too hard or to question her as to her garments. For all that Peter knew it might be the custom of Burlington County for women to wear blue denim trousers.

And her next question took him off his guard.

"You city folk don't think much of yourselves, do you?"

"I don't exactly understand what you mean," said Peter politely, marking the satirical note.

"To think you can make these trees grow better!" she sniffed.

"Oh, I'm just going to help them to help themselves."

"That's God's job, Master."

Peter smiled. She wouldn't have understood, he thought, so what was the use of explaining. There must have been a superior quality in Peter's smile, for the girl put on her hat and came down into the road.

"I'm goin' to Black Rock," she said stiffly, "follow me." And she went off with a quick stride down the road.

Peter Nichols took up his bag and started, with difficulty getting to a place beside her.

"If you don't mind," he said, "I'd much rather walk with you than behind you."

She shrugged a shoulder at him.

"Suit yourself," she said.

In this position, Peter made the discovery that her profile was quite as interesting as her full face, but she no longer smiled. Her reference to the Deity entirely eliminated Peter and the profession of forestry from the pale of useful things. He was sorry that she no longer smiled because he had decided to make friends at Black Rock and he didn't want to make a bad beginning.

"I hope you don't mind," said Peter at last, "if I tell you that you have one of the loveliest voices that I have ever heard."

He marked with pleasure the sudden flush of color that ran up under her delicately freckled tan. Her lips parted and she turned to him hesitating.

"You – you heard me!"

"I did. It was like the voice of an angel in Heaven."

"Angel! Oh! I'm sorry. I – I didn't know any one was there. I just sing on my way home from work."

"You've been working to-day?"

She nodded. "Yes – Farmerettin'."

"Farmer – ?"

"Workin' in the vineyard at Gaskill's."

"Oh, I see. Do you like it?"

"No," she said dryly. "I just do it for my health. Don't I look sick?"

Peter wasn't used to having people make fun of him. Even as a waiter he had managed to preserve his dignity intact. But he smiled at her.

"I was wondering what had become of the men around here."

"They're so busy walkin' from one place to another to see where they can get the highest wages, that there's no time to work in between."

"I see," said Peter, now really amused. "And does Mr. Jonathan McGuire have difficulty in getting men to work for him?"

"Most of his hired help come from away – like you – But lately they haven't been stayin' long."

"Why?"

She slowed her pace a little and turned to look at him curiously.

"Do you mean that you don't know the kind of a job you've

got?"

"Not much," admitted Peter. "In addition to looking after the preserve, I'm to watch after the men – and obey orders, I suppose."

"H-m. Preserve! Sorry, Mr. what's your name – "

"Peter Nichols – " put in Peter promptly.

"Well, Mr. Peter Nichols, all I have to say is that you're apt to have a hard time."

"Yes, I'm against it!" translated Peter confidently.

The girl stopped in the middle of the road, put her hands on her hips and laughed up at the purpling sky. Her laugh was much like her singing – if angels in Paradise laugh (and why shouldn't they?). Then while he wondered what was so amusing she looked at him again.

"*Up* against it, you mean. You're English, aren't you?"

"Er – yes – I am."

"I thought so. There was one of you in the glass factory. He always muffed the easy ones."

"Oh, you work in a glass factory?"

"Winters. Manufacturin' whiskey and beer bottles. Now we're goin' dry, they'll be makin' pop and nursin' bottles, I guess."

"Do you help in the factory?"

"Yes, and in the office. I can shorthand and type a little."

"You must be glad when a summer comes."

"I am. In winter I can't turn around without breakin' something. They dock you for that – "

"And that's why you sing when you can't break anythin'?"

"I suppose so. I like the open. It isn't right to be cooped up."

They were getting along beautifully and Peter was even beginning to forget the weight of his heavy bag. She was a quaint creature and quite as unconscious of him as though he hadn't existed. He was just somebody to talk to. Peter ventured.

"Er – would you mind telling me your name?"

She looked at him and laughed friendly.

"You must have swallowed a catechism, Mr. Nichols. But everybody in Black Rock knows everybody else – more'n they want to, I guess. There's no reason I shouldn't tell you. I don't mind your knowin'. My name is Beth Cameron."

"Beth – ?"

"Yes, Bess – the minister had a lisp."

Peter didn't lack a sense of humor.

"Funny, isn't it?" she queried with a smile as he laughed, "bein' tied up for life to a name like that just because the parson couldn't talk straight."

"Beth," he repeated, "but I like it. It's like you. I hope you'll let me come to see you when I get settled."

"H-m," she said quizzically. "You don't believe in wastin' your time, do you?" And then, after a brief pause, "You know they call us Pineys back here in the barrens, but just the same we think a lot of ourselves and we're a little offish with city folks. You can't be too particular nowadays about the kind of people you go with."

Peter stared at her and grinned, his sense of the situation more keenly touched than she could be aware of.

"Particular, are you? I'm glad of that. All the more credit to me if you'll be my friend."

"I didn't say I was your friend."

"But you're going to be, aren't you? I know something about singing. I've studied music. Perhaps I could help you."

"You! You've studied? Lord of Love! You're not lyin', are you?"

He laughed. "No. I'm not lying. I was educated to be a musician."

She stared at him now with a new look in her eyes but said nothing. So Peter spoke again.

"Do you mean to say you've never thought of studying singing?"

"Oh, yes," she said slowly at last, "I've thought of it, just as I've thought of goin' in the movies and makin' a million dollars. Lots of good *thinkin'* does!"

"You've thought of the movies?"

"Yes, once. A girl went from the glass factory. She does extra ladies. She visited back here last winter. I didn't like what it did to her."

"Oh!" Peter was silent for a while, aware of the pellucid meaning of her "it." He was learning quite as much from what she didn't say as from what she did. But he evaded the line of thought suggested.

"You do get tired of Black Rock then?"

"I would if I had time. I'm pretty busy all day, and – see here – Mr. – er – Nichols. If I asked as many questions as you do, I'd know as much as Daniel Webster."

"I'm sorry," said Peter, "I beg your pardon."

They walked on in silence for a few moments, Peter puzzling his brain over the extraordinary creature that chance had thrown in his way. He could see that she was quite capable of looking out for herself and that if her smattering of sophistication had opened her eyes, it hadn't much harmed her.

He really wanted to ask her many more questions, but to tell the truth he was a little in awe of her dry humor which had a kind of primitive omniscience and of her laughter which he was now sure was more *at*, than with, him. But he had, in spite of her, peered for a moment into the hidden places of her mind and spirit.

It was this intrusion that she resented and he could hardly blame her, since they had met only eighteen minutes ago. She trotted along beside him as though quite unaware of the sudden silence or of the thoughts that might have been passing in his mind. It was Beth who broke the silence.

"Is your bag heavy?" she asked.

"Not at all," said Peter, mopping the perspiration from his forehead. "But aren't we nearly there?"

"Oh, yes. It's just a mile or so."

Peter dropped his bag.

"That's what you said it was, back there."

"Did I? Well, maybe it isn't so far as that now. Let me carry your bag a while."

Thus taunted, he rose, took the bag in his left hand and followed.

"City folks aren't much on doin' for themselves, are they? The taxi system is very poor down here yet."

Her face was expressionless, but he knew that she was laughing at him. He knew also that his bag weighed more than any army pack. It seemed too that she was walking much faster than she had done before – also that there was malicious humor in the smile she now turned on him.

"Seems a pity to have such a long walk – with nothin' at the end of it."

"I don't mind it in the least," gasped Peter. "And if you don't object to my asking you just one more question," he went on grimly, "I'd like you to tell me what is frightening Mr. Jonathan K. McGuire?"

"Oh, McGuire. I don't know. Nobody does. He's been here a couple of weeks now, cooped up in the big house. Never comes out. They say he sees ghosts and things."

"Ghosts!"

She nodded. "He's hired some of the men around here to keep watch for them and they say some detectives are coming. You'll help too, I guess."

"That should be easy."

"Maybe. I don't know. My aunt works there. She's housekeeper. It's spooky, she says, but she can't afford to quit."

"But they haven't *seen* anything?" asked Peter incredulously.

"No. Not yet. I guess it might relieve 'em some if they did. It's only the things you don't see that scare you."

"It sounds like a great deal of nonsense about nothing," muttered Peter.

"All right. Wait until you get there before you do much talkin'."

"I will, but I'm not afraid of ghosts." And then, as an afterthought, "Are you?"

"Not in daylight. But from what Aunt Tillie says, it must be something more than a ghost that's frightenin' Jonathan K. McGuire."

"What does she think it is?"

"She doesn't know. Mr. McGuire won't say. He won't allow anybody around the house without a pass. Oh, he's scared all right and he's got most of Black Rock scared too. He was never like this before."

"Are you scared?" asked Peter.

"No. I don't think I am really. But it's spooky, and I don't care much for shootin'."

"What makes you think there will be shooting?"

"On account of the guns and pistols. Whatever the thing is he's afraid of, he's not goin' to let it come near him if he can help it. Aunt Tillie says that what with loaded rifles, shotguns and pistols

lyin' loose in every room in the house, it's as much as your life is worth to do a bit of dustin'. And the men – Shad Wells, Jesse Brown, they all carry automatics. First thing they know they'll be killin' somebody," she finished with conviction.

"Who is Shad Wells – ?"

"My cousin, Shadrack E. Wells. He was triplets. The other two died."

"Shad," mused Peter.

"Sounds like a fish, doesn't it? But he isn't." And then more slowly, "Shad's all right. He's just a plain woodsman, but he doesn't know anything about making the trees grow," she put in with prim irony. "You'll be his boss, I guess. He won't care much about that."

"Why?"

"Because he's been runnin' things in a way. I hope you get along with him."

"So do I – "

"Because if you don't, Shad will eat you at one gobble."

"Oh!" said Peter with a smile. "But perhaps you exaggerate. Don't you think I might take two – er – gobbles?"

Beth looked him over, and then smiled encouragingly.

"Maybe," she said, "but your hands don't look over-strong."

Peter looked at his right hand curiously. It was not as brown as hers, but the fingers were long and sinewy.

"They are, though. When you practice five hours a day on the piano, your hands will do almost anything you want them to."

A silence which Peter improved by shifting his suitcase. The weight of it had ceased to be amusing. And he was about to ask her how much further Black Rock was when there was a commotion down the road ahead of them, as a dark object emerged from around the bend and amid a whirl of dust an automobile appeared.

"It's the 'Lizzie'," exclaimed Beth unemotionally.

And in a moment the taxi service of Black Rock was at Peter's disposal.

"Carburetor trouble," explained the soiled young man at the wheel briefly, without apology. And with a glance at Peter's bag —

"Are you the man for McGuire's on the six-thirty?"

Peter admitted that he was and the boy swung the door of the tonneau open.

"In here with me, Beth," he said to the girl invitingly.

In a moment, the small machine was whirled around and started in the direction from which it had come, bouncing Peter from side to side and enveloping him in dust. Jim Hagerman's "Lizzie" wasted no time, once it set about doing a thing, and in a few moments from the forest they emerged into a clearing where there were cows in a meadow, and a view of houses. At the second of these, a frame house with a portico covered with vines and a small yard with a geranium bed, all enclosed in a picket fence, the "Lizzie" suddenly stopped and Beth got down.

"Much obliged, Jim," he heard her say.

Almost before Peter had swept off his hat and the girl had nodded, the "Lizzie" was off again, through the village street, and so to a wooden bridge across a tea-colored stream, up a slight grade on the other side, where Jim Hagerman stopped his machine and pointed to a road.

"That's McGuire's – in the pines. They won't let me go no further."

"How much do I owe you?" asked Peter, getting down.

"It's paid for, Mister. Slam the door, will ye?" And in another moment Peter was left alone.

It was now after sunset, and the depths of the wood were bathed in shadow. Peter took the road indicated and in a moment reached two stone pillars where a man was standing. Beyond the man he had a glimpse of lawns, a well-kept driveway which curved toward the wood. The man at the gate was of about Peter's age but tall and angular, well tanned by exposure and gave an appearance of intelligence and capacity.

"I came to see Mr. McGuire," said Peter amiably.

"And what's your name?"

"Nichols. I'm the new forester from New York."

The young man at the gate smiled in a satirical way.

"Nichols. That was the name," he ruminated. And then with a shout to some one in the woods below, "Hey, Andy. Come take the gate."

All the while Peter felt the gaze of the young man going over him minutely and found himself wondering whether or not this

was the person who was going to take him at a gobble.

It was. For when the other man came running Peter heard him call the gateman, "Shad."

"Are you Mr. Shad Wells?" asked Peter politely with the pleasant air of one who has made an agreeable discovery.

"That's my name. Who told you?"

"Miss Beth Cameron," replied Peter. "We came part of the way together."

"H-m! Come," he said laconically and led the way up the road toward the house. Peter didn't think he was very polite.

Had it not been for the precautions of his guide, Peter would have been willing quite easily to forget the tales that had been told him of Black Rock. The place was very prettily situated in the midst of a very fine growth of pines, spruce and maple. At one side ran the tea-colored stream, tumbling over an ancient dam to levels below, where it joined the old race below the ruin that had once been a mill. The McGuire house emerged in a moment from its woods and shrubbery, and stood revealed – a plain square Georgian dwelling of brick, to which had been added a long wing in a poor imitation of the same style and a garage and stables in no style at all on the slope beyond. It seemed a most prosaic place even in the gathering dusk and Peter seemed quite unable to visualize it as the center of a mystery such as had been described. And the laconic individual who had been born triplets was even less calculated to carry out such an illusion.

But just as they were crossing the lawn on the approach to the

house, the earth beneath a clump of bushes vomited forth two men, like the fruit of the Dragon's Teeth, armed with rifles, who barred their way. Both men were grinning from ear to ear.

"All right, Jesse," said Shad with a laugh. "It's me and the new forester." He uttered the words with an undeniable accent of contempt.

The armed figures glanced at Peter and disappeared, and Peter and Mr. Shad Wells went up the steps of the house to a spacious portico. There was not a human being in sight and the heavy wooden blinds to the lower floor were tightly shut. Before his guide had even reached the door the sound of their footsteps had aroused some one within the house, the door was opened the length of its chain and a face appeared at the aperture.

"Who is it?" asked a male voice.

"Shad Wells and Mr. Nichols, the man from New York."

"Wait a minute," was the reply while the door was immediately shut again.

Peter glanced around him comparing this strange situation with another that he remembered, when a real terror had come, a tangible terror in the shape of a countryside gone mad with blood lust. He smiled toward the bush where the armed men lay concealed and toward the gate where the other armed man was standing. It was all so like a situation out of an *opéra bouffe* of Offenbach.

What he felt now in this strange situation was an intense curiosity to learn the meaning of it all, to meet the mysterious

person around whom all these preparations centered. Peter had known fear many times, for fear was in the air for weeks along the Russian front, the fear of German shells, of poison gas, and of that worst poison of all – Russian treachery. But that fear was not like this fear, which was intimate, personal but intangible. He marked it in the scrutiny of the man who opened the door and of the aged woman who suddenly appeared beside him in the dim hallway and led him noiselessly up the stair to a lighted room upon the second floor. At the doorway the woman paused.

"Mr. Nichols, Mr. McGuire," she said, and Peter entered.

CHAPTER IV
THE JOB

The room was full of tobacco smoke, through which Peter dimly made out a table with an oil lamp, beside which were chairs, a sofa, and beyond, a steel safe between the windows. As Peter Nichols entered, a man advanced from a window at the side, the shutter of which was slightly ajar. It was evident that not content to leave his safety in the hands of those he had employed to preserve it, he had been watching too.

He was in his shirt sleeves, a man of medium height, compactly built, and well past the half century mark. The distinguishing features of his face were a short nose, a heavy thatch of brows, a square jaw which showed the need of the offices of a razor and his lips wore a short, square mustache somewhat stained by nicotine.

In point of eagerness the manner of his greeting of the newcomer left nothing to be desired. Peter's first impression was that Jonathan K. McGuire was quite able to look out for himself, which confirmed the impression that the inspection to which Peter had been subjected was nothing but a joke. But when his employer began speaking rather jerkily, Peter noticed that his hands were unsteady and that neither the muscles of his face nor of his body were under complete control. Normally, he would

have seemed much as Sheldon, Senior, had described him – a hard-fisted man, a close bargainer who had won his way to his great wealth by the sheer force of a strong personality. There was little of softness in his face, little that was imaginative. This was not a man to be frightened at the Unseen or to see terrors that did not exist. Otherwise, to Peter he seemed commonplace to the last degree, of Irish extraction probably, the kind of person one meets daily on Broadway or on the Strand. In a fur coat he might have been taken for a banker; in tweeds, for a small tradesman; or in his shirt as Peter now saw him, the wristbands and collar somewhat soiled from perspiration, for a laboring man taking his rest after an arduous day. In other words, he was very much what his clothes would make of him, betraying his origins in a rather strident voice meant perhaps to conceal the true state of his mind.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Nichols. Thought you were never comin'," he jerked out.

"I walked most of the way from Pickerel River. Something went wrong, with the 'Lizzie.'"

"Oh – er – 'Lizzie'. The flivver! I couldn't send my own car. I've got only one down here and I might need it."

"It doesn't matter in the least – since I'm here."

"Sit down, Mr. Nichols," went on McGuire indicating a chair. "You've been well recommended by Mr. Sheldon. I talked to him yesterday over long distance. He told you what I wanted?"

"Something. Not much," said Peter with a view to getting all the information possible. "You wanted a forester – ?"

"Er – er – yes, that's it. A forester." And then he went on haltingly – "I've got about twenty thousand acres here – mostly scrub oak – pine and spruce. I've sold off a lot to the Government. A mess of it has been cut – there's been a lot of waste – and the fire season is coming around. That's the big job – the all-the-year job. You've had experience?"

"Yes – in Russia. I'm a trained woodsman."

"You're a good all-round man?"

"Exactly what – ?" began Peter.

"You know how to look after yourself – to look after other men, to take charge of a considerable number of people in my employ?"

"Yes. I'm used to dealing with men."

"It's a big job, Mr. Nichols – a ticklish kind of a job for a furriner – one with some – er – unusual features – that may call for – er – a lot of tact. And – er – courage."

It seemed to Peter that Jonathan K. McGuire was talking almost at random, that the general topic of forestry was less near his heart to-night than the one that was uppermost in Peter's mind, the mystery that surrounded his employer and the agencies invoked to protect him. It seemed as if he were loath to speak of them, as if he were holding Peter off at arm's length, so to say, until he had fully made up his mind that this and no other man was the one he wanted, for all the while he was examining the visitor with burning, beady, gray eyes, as though trying to peer into his mind.

"I'm not afraid of a forester's job, no matter how big it is, if I have men enough," said Peter, still curious.

"And you're a pretty good man in a pinch, I mean – " he put in jerkily, "you're not easy scared – don't lose your nerve."

"I'll take my chances on that," replied Peter calmly. "I'm used to commanding men, in emergencies – if that's what you mean."

"Yes. That's what I mean. Er – you're an Englishman, Mr. Sheldon says."

"Er – yes," said Peter, "an Englishman," for this was the truth now more than ever before, and then repeated the story he had told in New York about his work in Russia. While Peter was talking, McGuire was pacing up and down the room with short nervous strides, nodding his head in understanding from time to time. When Peter paused he returned to his chair.

"You British are a pretty steady lot," said McGuire at last. "I think you'll do. I like the way you talk and I like your looks. Younger than I'd hoped maybe, but then you're strong – Mr. Sheldon says you're strong, Mr. Nichols."

"Oh, yes," said Peter, his curiosity now getting the better of him. "But it might be as well, Mr. McGuire, if you let me know just what, that is unusual, is to be required of me. I assume that you want me to take command of the men policing your grounds – and immediate property?"

"Er – yes. That will have to be put in shape at once – at once." He leaned suddenly forward in his chair, his hairy hands clutching at his knees, while he blurted out with a kind of relieved

tension, "No one must come near the house at night. No one, you understand – "

"I understand, sir – " said Peter, waiting patiently for a revelation.

"There'll be no excuse if any one gets near the house without my permission," he snarled. And then almost sullenly again – "You understand?"

"Perfectly. That should not be difficult to – "

"It may be more difficult than you think," broke in McGuire, springing to his feet again, and jerking out his phrases with strange fury.

"Nothing is to be taken for granted. Nothing," he raged. Peter was silent for a moment, watching McGuire who had paced the length of the room and back.

"I understand, sir," he said at last. "But doesn't it seem to you that both I and the man under me could do our work with more intelligence if we knew just who or what is to be guarded against?" Mr. McGuire stopped beside him as though transfixed by the thought. Then his fingers clutched at the back of a chair to which he clung for a moment in silence, his brows beetling. And when he spoke all the breath of his body seemed concentrated in a hoarse whisper.

"You won't know that. You understand, I give the orders. You obey them. I am not a man who answers questions. Don't ask them."

"Oh, I beg your pardon. So long as this thing you fear is human

– "

"Human! A ghost! Who said I was afraid? Sheldon? Let him think it. This is *my* business. There are many things of value in this house," and he glanced towards the safe. "I'm using the right of any man to protect what belongs to him."

"I see," said Peter.

The man's tension relaxed as he realized Peter's coolness.

"Call it a fancy if you like, Mr. Nichols – " he said with a shrug. "A man of my age may have fancies when he can afford to gratify 'em."

"That's your affair," said Peter easily. "I take it then that the systematic policing of the grounds is the first thing I am to consider."

"Exactly. The systematic policing of the grounds – the dividing of your men into shifts for day and night work – more at night than in the day. Three more men come to-morrow. They will all look to you for orders."

"And who is in charge now?"

"A man named Wells – a native – the foreman from one of the sawmills – but he – er – well, Mr. Nichols – I'm not satisfied. That's why I wanted a man from outside."

"I understand. And will you give the necessary orders to him?"

"Wells was up here to-day, I told him."

"How many men are on guard here at the house?"

"Ten and with the three coming – that makes thirteen – " McGuire halted – "thirteen – but you make the fourteenth," he

added.

Peter nodded. "And you wish me to take charge at once?"

"At once. To-night. To-morrow you can look over the ground more carefully. You'll sleep in the old playhouse – the log cabin – down by the creek. They'll show you. It's connected with this house by 'phone. I'll talk to you again to-morrow; you'd better go down and get something to eat."

McGuire went to the door and called out "Tillie!"

And as a faint reply was heard, "Get Mr. Nichols some supper."

Peter rose and offered his hand.

"I'll try to justify your faith in me, sir. Much obliged."

"Good-night."

Peter went down the stairs with mingled feelings. If the words of Beth Cameron had created in his mind a notion that the mystery surrounding Black Rock was supernatural in character, the interview with Jonathan K. McGuire had dispelled it. That McGuire was a very much frightened man was certain, but it seemed equally certain to Peter that what he feared was no ghost or banshee but the imminence of some human attack upon his person or possessions. Here was a practical man, who bore in every feature of his strongly-marked face the tokens of a successful struggle in a hard career, the beginnings of which could not have been any too fortunate. A westerner whose broad hands and twisted fingers spoke eloquently of manual labor, a man who still possessed to all appearances considerable physical

strength – a prey to the fear of some night danger which was too ominous even to be talked about.

It was the quality of his terror that was disturbing. Peter was well acquainted with the physical aspects of fear – that is the fear of violence and death. That kind of fear made men restless and nervous, or silent and preoccupied; or like liquor it accentuated their weaknesses of fiber in sullenness or bravado. But it did not make them furtive. He could not believe that it was the mere danger of death or physical violence that obsessed his employer. That sort of danger perhaps there might be, but the fear that he had seen in McGuire's fanatical gray eyes was born of something more than these. Whatever it was that McGuire feared, it reached further within – a threat which would destroy not his body alone, but something more vital even than that – the very spirit that lived within him.

Of his career, Peter knew nothing more than Sheldon, Senior, had told him – a successful man who told nothing of his business except to the Treasury Department, a silent man, with a passion for making money. What could he fear? Whom? What specter out of the past could conjure up the visions he had seen dancing between McGuire's eyes and his own?

These questions it seemed were not to be answered and Peter, as he sat down at the supper table, put them resolutely from his mind and addressed himself to the excellent meal provided by the housekeeper. For the present, at least, fortune smiled upon him. The terrors of his employer could not long prevail against

the healthy appetite of six-and-twenty.

But it was not long before Peter discovered that the atmosphere of the room upstairs pervaded the dining room, library and halls. There were a cook and housemaid he discovered, neither of them visible. The housekeeper, if attentive, was silent, and the man who had opened the front door, who seemed to be a kind of general factotum, as well as personal bodyguard to Mr. McGuire, crept furtively about the house in an unquiet manner which would have been disturbing to the digestion of one less timorous than Peter.

Before the meal was finished this man came into the room and laid a police whistle, a large new revolver and a box of cartridges beside Peter's dish of strawberries.

"These are for you, sir," he whispered sepulchrally. "Mr. McGuire asked me to give them to you – for to-night."

"Thanks," said Peter, "and you – "

"I'm Stryker, sir, Mr. McGuire's valet."

"Oh!"

Peter's accent of surprise came from his inability to reconcile Stryker with the soiled shirt and the three days' growth of beard on the man upstairs, which more than ever testified to the disorder of his mental condition.

And as Stryker went out and his footsteps were heard no more, the housekeeper emerged cautiously from the pantry.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Nichols?" she asked in a stage whisper.

"Right as rain. Delicious! I'm very much obliged to you."

"I mean – er – there ain't anythin' else ye'd like?"

"Nothing, thanks," said Peter, taking up the revolver and breaking it. He had cut the cover of the cartridge box and had slipped a cartridge into the weapon when he heard the voice of the woman at his ear.

"D'ye think there's any danger, sir?" she whispered, while she nervously eyed the weapon.

"I'm sure I don't know. Not to you, I'd say," he muttered, still putting the cartridges in the pistol. As an ex-military man, he was taking great delight in the perfect mechanism of his new weapon.

"What is it – ? I mean, d'ye think – ," she stammered, "did Mr. McGuire say – just what it is he's afraid of?"

"No," said Peter, "he didn't." And then with a grin, "Do you know?"

"No, sir. I wish t'God I did. Then there'd be somethin' to go by."

"I'm afraid I can't help you, Mrs. – "

"Tillie Bergen. I've been housekeeper here since the new wing was put on – "

"Oh, yes," said Peter, pausing over the last cartridge as the thought came to him. "Then you must be Beth Cameron's aunt?"

"Beth?" The woman's sober face wreathed in a lovely smile. "D'ye know Beth?"

"Since this afternoon. She showed me the way."

"Oh. Poor Beth."

"Poor!"

"Oh, we're all poor, Mr. Nichols. But Beth she's – different from the rest of us somehow."

"Yes, she *is* different," admitted Peter frankly.

Mrs. Bergen sighed deeply. "Ye don't know how different. And now that – all this trouble has come, I can't get home nights to her. And she can't come to see me without permission. How long d'ye think it will last, sir?"

"I don't know," said Peter, slipping the revolver and cartridges into his pockets. And then gallantly, "If I can offer you my services, I'd be glad to take you home at night – "

"It's against orders. And I wouldn't dare, Mr. Nichols. As it is I've got about as much as I can stand. If it wasn't for the money I wouldn't be stayin' in the house another hour."

"Perhaps things won't be so bad after a time. If anything is going to happen, it ought to be pretty soon."

She regarded him wistfully as he moved toward the door. "An' ye'll tell me, sir, if anything out o' the way happens."

"I hope nothing is going to happen, Mrs. Bergen," said Peter cheerfully.

Stryker appeared mysteriously from the darkness as Peter went out into the hall.

"The upstairs girl made up your bed down at the cabin, sir. The chauffeur took your bag over. You'll need these matches. If you'll wait, sir, I'll call Mr. Wells."

Peter wondered at the man in this most unconventional

household, for Stryker, with all the prescience of a well-trained servant, had already decided that Peter belonged to a class accustomed to being waited on. Going to the door he blew one short blast on a police whistle, like Peter's, which he brought forth from his pocket.

"That will bring him, sir," he said. "If you'll go out on the portico, he'll join you in a moment."

Peter obeyed. The door was closed and fastened behind him and almost before he had taken his lungs full of the clean night air (for the house had been hot and stuffy), a shadow came slouching across the lawn in the moonlight. Peter joined the man at once and they walked around the house, while Peter questioned him as to the number of men and their disposition about the place. There were six, he found, including Wells, with six more to sleep in the stable, which was also used as a guardhouse. Peter made the rounds of the sentries. None of them seemed to be taking the matter any too seriously and one at least was sound asleep beneath some bushes. Peter foresaw difficulties. Under the leadership of Shad Wells the strategic points were not covered, and, had he wished, he could have found his way, by using the cover of shadow and shrubbery, to the portico without being observed. He pointed this out to Wells who, from a supercilious attitude, changed to one of defiance.

"You seem to think you know a lot, Mister?" he said. "I'd like to see ye try it."

Peter laughed.

"Very well. Take your posts and keep strict watch, but don't move. If I don't walk across the lawn from the house in half an hour I'll give you ten dollars. In return you can take a shot if you see me."

He thought the men needed the object lesson. Peter was an excellent "point." He disappeared into the woods behind him and making his way cautiously out, found a road, doubling to the other side of the garage along which he went on his hands and knees and crawling from shrub to shrub in the shadows reached the portico without detection. Here he lighted a fag and quietly strolled down to the spot where he had left Shad Wells, to whom he offered a cigarette by way of consolation. Wells took it grudgingly. But he took it, which was one point gained.

"Right smart, aren't ye?" said Shad.

"No," said Peter coolly. "Anybody could have done it, – in three ways. The other two ways are through the pine grove to the left and from the big sycamore by the stream."

"And how do you know all that?"

"I was in the Army," said Peter. "It's a business like anything else."

And he pointed out briefly where the five men should be stationed and why, and Shad, somewhat mollified by the cigarette, shrugged and agreed.

"We'll do sentry duty in the regular way," went on Peter cheerfully, "with a corporal of the guard and a countersign. I'll explain in detail to-morrow." And then to Shad, "I'll take

command until midnight, when you'll go on with the other shift until four. I'll make it clear to the other men. The countersign is the word 'Purple.' You'd better go and turn in. I'll call you at twelve."

Peter watched the figure of the woodsman go ambling across the lawn in the direction of the garage and smiled. He also marked the vertical line of light which showed at a window on the second floor where another kept watch. The man called Jesse, the one who had been asleep beneath the bushes, and who, fully awake, had watched Peter's exhibition of scouting, now turned to Peter with a laugh.

"I guess you're right, Mister. S'long's we're paid. But I'd like to know just what this 'ere thing is the ol' man's skeered of."

"You know as much as I do. It will probably have two legs, two hands and a face and carry a gun. You'd better be sure you're not asleep when it comes. But if you care to know what I think, you can be pretty sure that it's coming – and before very long."

"To-night?"

"How do I know? Have a cigarette? You cover from the road to the big cedar tree; and keep your eyes open – especially in the shadows – and don't let anybody get you in the back."

And so making the rounds, instilling in their minds a sense of real emergency, Peter gave the men their new sentry posts and made friends. He had decided to stay up all night, but at twelve he called Shad Wells and went down to look over his cabin which was a quarter of a mile away from the house near Cedar Creek

(or "Crick" in the vernacular). The key was in the cabin door so he unlocked it and went in, and after striking a match found a kerosene lamp which he lighted and then looked about him.

The building had only one room but it was of large dimensions and contained a wooden bed with four posts, evidently some one's heirloom, a bureau, washstand, two tables and an easy chair or two. Behind the bed was a miscellaneous lot of rubbish, including a crib, a rocking horse, a velocipede, beside some smaller toys. Whom had these things belonged to? A grandson of McGuire's? And was the daughter of McGuire like her father, unlovely, soiled and terror-stricken? His desultory mental queries suddenly stopped as he raised his eyes to the far corner of the room, for there, covered with an old shawl, he made out the lines of a piano. He opened the keyboard and struck a chord. It wasn't so bad – a little tuning – he could do it himself…

So this was his new home! He had not yet had the time or the opportunity to learn what new difficulties were to face him on the morrow, but the personal affairs of his employer had piqued his interest and for the present he had done everything possible to insure his safety for the night. To-morrow perhaps he would learn something more about the causes of this situation. He would have an opportunity too to look over the property and make a report as to its possibilities. To a man inured as Peter was to disappointments, what he had found was good. He had made up his mind to fit himself soldierlike into his new situation and he had to admit now that he liked the prospect. As though

to compensate for past mischief, Fate had provided him with the one employment in the new land for which he was best suited by training and inclination. It was the one "job" in which, if he were permitted a fair amount of freedom of action and initiative, he was sure that he could "make good." The trees he could see were not the stately pines of Zukovo, but they were pines, and the breeze which floated in to him through the cabin door was laden with familiar odors.

The bed looked inviting, but he resolutely turned his back to it and unpacked his suitcase, taking off his tailor-made clothing and putting on the flannel shirt, corduroy trousers and heavy laced boots, all of which he had bought before leaving New York. Then he went to the doorway and stood looking out into the night.

The moonbeams had laid a patine of silver upon the floor of the small clearing before the door, and played softly among the shadows. So silent was the night that minute distant sounds were clearly audible – the stream seemed to be tinkling just at his elbow, while much farther away there was a low murmur of falling water at the tumbling dam, mingling with the sighs of vagrant airs among the crowns of the trees, the rustle and creak of dry branches, the whispering of leaf to leaf. Wakeful birds deceived by the moon piped softly and were silent. An owl called. And then for the briefest moment, except for the stream, utter silence.

Peter strode forth, bathed himself in the moonlight and drank deep of the airs of the forest. America! He had chosen! Her

youth called to his. He wanted to forget everything that had gone before, the horrors through which he had passed, both physical and spiritual, – the dying struggles of the senile nation, born in intolerance, grown in ignorance and stupidity which, with a mad gesture, had cast him forth with a curse. He had doffed the empty prerogatives of blood and station and left them in the mire and blood. The soul of Russia was dead and he had thought that his own had died with hers, but from the dead thing a new soul might germinate as it had now germinated in him. He had been born again. *Novaya Jezn!* The New Life! He had found it.

He listened intently as though for its heartbeats, his face turned up toward the silent pines. For a long while he stood so and then went indoors and sat at the old piano playing softly.

CHAPTER V
NEW ELEMENTS

Some of the men on guard in the middle watch reported that they had heard what seemed to be the sounds of music very far away in the woods and were disturbed at the trick their ears had played upon them. But Peter didn't tell them the truth. If listening for the notes of a piano would keep them awake, listen they should. He slept until noon and then went to the house for orders.

Morning seemed to make a difference in the point of view. If the moon had made the night lovely, the sun brought with it the promise of every good thing. The walk through the woods to Black Rock House was a joy, very slightly alleviated by the poor condition of the trees under which Peter passed. It was primeval forest even here, with valuable trees stunted and poor ones vastly overgrown according to nature's law which provides for the survival of the fittest. This was the law too, which was to be applied to Peter. Would he grow straight and true in this foreign soil or gnarled and misshapen like the cedars and the maples that he saw? Yes. He would grow and straight … straight.

Optimism seemed to be the order of the new day. At the house he found that his employer had put on a clean shirt and was freshly shaven. The windows of the room were opened

wide to the sunlight which streamed into the room, revealing its darkest corners. McGuire himself seemed to have responded to the effulgence of the sun and the balmy air which swept across his table. His manner was now calm, his voice more measured.

When Peter came into the room, Mr. McGuire closed the heavy doors of the steel safe carefully and turned to greet him.

"Oh, glad to see you, Nichols," he said more cheerfully. "A quiet night, I understand."

"Yes," laughed Nichols, "except for the man who got through the guards and smoked a cigarette on your portico."

"What!" gasped McGuire.

"Don't be alarmed, sir. It was only myself. I wanted to show Shad Wells the defects of his police system."

"Oh! Ah! Ha, ha, yes, of course. Very good. And you weren't shot at?"

"Oh, no, sir – though I'd given them leave to pot me if they could. But I think you're adequately protected now."

"Good," said McGuire. "Have a cigar. I'm glad you've come. I wanted to talk to you."

And when they had lighted their cigars, "It's about this very guard. I – I'm afraid you'll have to keep your men under cover at least in the daytime."

"Under cover?"

"Well, you see," went on McGuire in some hesitation, "my daughter (he called it darter) Peggy is motoring down from New York to-day. I don't want her, but she's coming. I couldn't stop

her. She doesn't know anything about this – er – this guarding the house. And I don't want her to know. She mustn't know. She'd ask questions. I don't want questions asked. I'll get her away as soon as I can, but she mustn't be put into any danger."

"I see," said Peter examining the ash of his cigar. "You don't want her to know anything about the impending attempts upon your life and property."

"Yes, that's it," said McGuire impatiently. "I don't want her to find out. Er – she couldn't understand. You know women, Nichols. They talk too much." He paused "It's – er – necessary that none of her friends in New York or mine should know of – er – any danger that threatens me. And of course – er – any danger that threatens me would – in a way – threaten her. You see?"

"I think so."

"I've put all weapons under cover. I don't want her to see 'em. So when she comes – which may be at any moment – nothing must be said about the men outside and what they're there for. In the daytime they must be given something to do about the place – trimming the lawns, pruning trees or weeding the driveway. Pay 'em what they ask, but don't let any of 'em go away. You'll explain this to the new men. As for yourself – er – of course you're my new superintendent and forester."

McGuire got up and paced the floor slowly looking at Peter out of the tail of his eye.

"I like you, Nichols. We'll get along. You've got courage and intelligence – and of course anybody can see you're a gentleman.

You'll keep on taking your meals in the house – "

"If you'd like me to go elsewhere – "

"No. I see no reason why Peggy shouldn't like you. I hope she will. But she's very headstrong, has been since a kid. I suppose I humor her a bit – who wouldn't? I lost my oldest girl and her boy with the 'flu.' Her husband's still in France. And Peggy's got a will of her own, Peg has," he finished in a kind of admiring abstraction. "Got a society bee in her bonnet. Wants to go with all the swells. I'm backin' her, Nichols. She'll do it too before she's through," he finished proudly.

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Peter soberly, though very much amused at his employer's ingenuousness. Here then, was the weak spot in the armor of this relentless millionaire – his daughter. The older one and her child were dead. That accounted for the toys in the cabin. Peggy sounded interesting' – if nothing else, for her vitality.

"I'd better see about this at once, then. If she should come – "

Peter rose and was about to leave the room when there was a sound of an automobile horn and the sudden roar of an exhaust outside. He followed McGuire to the window and saw a low red runabout containing a girl and a male companion emerging from the trees. A man in the road was holding up his hands in signal for the machine to stop and had barely time to leap aside to avoid being run down. The car roared up to the portico, the breathless man, who was Shad Wells, pursuing. Peter was glad that he had had the good sense not to shoot. He turned to his employer,

prepared for either anger or dismay and found that McGuire was merely grinning and chuckling softly as though to himself.

"Just like her!" he muttered, "some kid, that!"

Meanwhile Shad Wells, making a bad race of it was only halfway up the drive, when at a signal and shout from McGuire, he stopped running, stared, spat and returned to his post.

There was a commotion downstairs, the shooting of bolts, the sounds of voices and presently the quick patter of feminine footsteps which McGuire, now completely oblivious of Peter, went to meet.

"Well, daughter!"

"Hello, Pop!"

Peter caught a glimpse of a face and straggling brown hair, quickly engulfed in McGuire's arms.

"What on earth – " began McGuire.

"Thought we'd give you a little touch of high life, Pop. It was so hot in town. And the hotel's full of a convention of rough necks. I brought Freddy with me and Mildred and Jack are in the other car. We thought the rest might do us good."

The voice was nasal and pitched high, as though she were trying to make herself audible in a crowd. Peter was ready to revise his estimate that her face was pretty, for to him no woman was more beautiful than her own voice.

"But you can't stay here, Peg," went on McGuire, "not more than over night – with all these people. I'm very busy – "

"H-m. We'll see about that. I never saw the woods look

prettier. We came by Lakewood and Brown's Mills and – Why who – ?"

As she sidled into the room she suddenly espied Peter who was still standing by the window.

"Who – ? Why – Oh, yes, this is my new superintendent and forester. Meet my daughter, – Mr. Nichols."

Peter bowed and expressed pleasure. Miss McGuire swept him with a quick glance that took in his flannel shirt, corduroy breeches and rough boots, nodded pertly and turned away.

Peter smiled. Like Beth Cameron this girl was very particular in choosing her acquaintances.

"I nearly killed a guy in the driveway," she went on, "who was he, Pop?"

"Er – one of the gardeners, I've told them to keep people off the place."

"Well. I'd like to see him keep *me* off! I suppose he'll be trying to hold up Mildred and Jack – "

She walked to the window passing close beside Peter, paying as little attention to his presence as if he had been, an article of furniture.

"Can't you get this man to go down," she said indicating Peter, "and tell them it's all right?"

"Of course," said Peter politely. "I'll go at once. And I'd like to arrange to look over part of the estate with Wells, Mr. McGuire," he added.

"All right, Nichols," said the old man with a frown. And then

significantly – "But remember what I've told you. Make careful arrangements before you go."

"Yes, sir."

Peter went down the stairs, amused at his dismissal. On the veranda he found a young man sitting on some suitcases smoking a cigarette. This was Freddy, of course. He afterwards learned that his last name was Mordaunt, that he was a part of Peggy's ambitions, and that he had been invalided home from a camp and discharged from the military service. As Freddy turned, Peter bowed politely and passed on. Having catalogued him by his clothing, Freddy like Peggy had turned away, smoking his cigarette.

Peter thought that some Americans were born with bad manners, some achieved bad manners, and others had bad manners thrust upon them. Impoliteness was nothing new to him, since he had been in America. It was indigenous. Personally, he didn't mind what sort of people he met, but he seemed to be aware that a new element had come to Black Rock which was to make disquietude for Jonathan K. McGuire and difficulty for himself. And yet too there was a modicum of safety, perhaps, in the presence of these new arrivals, for it had been clear from his employer's demeanor that the terrors of the night had passed with the coming of the day.

He commented on this to Shad Wells, who informed him that night was always the old man's bad time.

"Seems sort o' like he's skeered o' the dark. 'Tain't nateral.

'Fraid o' ghosts, they say," he laughed.

"Well," said Peter, "we've got our orders. And the thing he fears isn't a ghost. It's human."

"Sure?"

"Yes. And since he's more afraid after dark he has probably had his warning. But we're not to take any chances."

Having given his new orders to Jesse, who was to be in charge during their absence, they struck into the woods upon the other side of the Creek for the appraisal of a part of the strip known as the "Upper Reserve." From an attitude of suspicion and sneering contempt Peter's companion had changed to one of indifference. The unfailing good humor of the new superintendent had done something to prepare the ground for an endurable relation between them. Like Beth Cameron Shad had sneered at the word "forester." He was the average lumberman, only interested in the cutting down of trees for the market – the commercial aspect of the business – heedless of the future, indifferent to the dangers of deforestation. Peter tried to explain to him that forestry actually means using the forest as the farmer uses his land, cutting out the mature and overripe trees and giving the seedlings beneath more light that they may furnish the succeeding crop of timber. He knew that the man was intelligent enough, and explained as well as he could from such statistics as he could recall how soon the natural resources of the country would be exhausted under the existing indifference.

"Quite a bit of wood here, Mister – enough for my job," said

Shad.

But after a while Peter began to make him understand and showed him what trees should be marked for cutting and why. They came to a burned patch of at least a hundred acres.

"Is there any organized system for fighting these fires?" Peter asked.

"System! Well, when there's a fire we go and try to put it out – " laughed Wells.

"How do the fires start?"

"Campers – hunters mos'ly – in the deer season. Railroads sometimes – at the upper end."

"And you keep no watch for smoke?"

"Where would we watch from?"

"Towers. They ought to be built – with telephone connection to headquarters."

"D'ye think the old man will stand for that?"

"He ought to. It's insurance."

"Oh!"

"It looks to me, Wells," said Peter after a pause, "that a good 'crown' fire and a high gale, would turn all this country to cinders – like this."

"It's never happened yet."

"It may happen. Then good-by to your jobs – and to Black Rock too perhaps."

"I guess Black Rock can stand it, if the old man can."

They walked around the charred clearing and mounted a high

sand dune, from which they could see over a wide stretch of country. With a high wooden platform here the whole of the Upper Reserve could be watched. They sat for a while among the sandwort and smoked, while Peter described the work in the German forests that he had observed before the war. Shad had now reached the point of listening and asking questions as the thought was more and more borne into his mind that this new superintendent was not merely talking for talk's sake, but because he knew more about the woods than any man the native had ever talked with, and wanted Shad to know too. For Peter had an answer to all of his questions, and Shad, though envious of Peter's grammar – for he had reached an age to appreciate it – was secretly scornful of Peter's white hands and carefully tied black cravat.

This dune was at the end of the first day's "cruise" and Shad had risen preparatory to returning toward Black Rock when they both heard a sound, – away off to their right, borne down to them clearly on the breeze – the voice of a girl singing.

"Beth," said Shad with a kindling eye. And then carelessly spat, to conceal his emotions.

"What on earth can she be doing in here?" asked Peter.

"Only half a mile from the road. It's the short cut from Gaskill's."

"I see," from Peter.

"Do you reckon you can find your way back alone, Nichols?" said Shad, spitting again.

Peter grinned. "I reckon I can try," he said.

Shad pointed with his long arm in the general direction of Heaven. "That way!" he muttered and went into the scrub oak with indecent haste.

Peter sat looking with undisguised interest at the spot where he had disappeared, tracing him for a while through the moving foliage, listening to the crackling of the underbrush, as the sounds receded.

It was time to be turning homeward, but the hour was still inviting, the breeze balmy, the sun not too warm, so Peter lay back among the grasses in the sand smoking a fresh cigarette. Far overhead buzzards were wheeling. They recalled those other birds of prey that he had often watched, ready to swoop down along the lines of the almost defenseless Russians. Here all was so quiet. The world was a very beautiful place if men would only leave it so. The voice of the girl was silent now. Shad had probably joined her. Somehow, Peter hadn't been able to think of any relationship, other than the cousinly one, between Shad Wells and Beth. He had only known the girl for half an hour but as Aunt Tillie Bergen had said, her niece seemed different from the other natives that Peter had met. Her teeth were sound and white, suggesting habits of personal cleanliness; her conversation, though careless, showed at the very least, a grammar school training. And Shad – well, Shad was nothing but a "Piney."

Pity – with a voice like that – she ought to have had

opportunities – this scornful little Beth. Peter closed his eyes and dozed. He expected to have no difficulty in finding his way home, for he had a pocket compass and the road could not be far distant. He liked this place. He would build a tower here, a hundred-foot tower, of timbers, and here a man should be stationed all day – to watch for wisps of smoke during the hunting season. Smoke … Tower … In a moment he snored gently.

"Halloo!" came a voice in his dream. "Halloo! Halloo!"

Peter started rubbing his eyes, aware of the smoking cigarette in the grasses beside him.

Stupid, that! To do the very thing he had been warning Shad Wells against. He smeared the smoking stub out in the sand and sat up yawning and stretching his arms.

"Halloo!" said the voice in his dream, almost at his ear. "Tryin' to set the woods afire?"

The question had the curious dropping intonation at its end. But the purport annoyed him.

Nothing that she could have said could have provoked him more! Behind her he saw the dark face of Shad Wells break into a grin.

"I fell asleep," said Peter, getting to his feet.

Beth laughed. "Lucky you weren't burnt to death. *Then* how would the trees get along?"

Peter's toe burrowed after the defunct cigarette.

"I know what I'm about," he muttered, aware of further loss of dignity.

"Oh, do you? Then which way were you thinkin' of goin' home?"

Peter glanced around, pointed vaguely, and Beth Cameron laughed.

"I guess you'd land in Egg Harbor, or thereabouts."

Her laugh was infectious and Peter at last echoed it.

"You's better be goin' along with us. Shad asked me to come and get you, didn't you, Shad?"

Peter glanced at the woodsman's black scowl and grinned, recalling his desertion and precipitate disappearance into the bushes.

"I'm sure I'm very much obliged to you both," said Peter diplomatically. "But I think I can find my way in."

"Not if you start for Hammonton or Absecon, you can't. I've known people to spend the night in the woods a quarter of a mile from home."

"I shouldn't mind that."

"But Shad would. He'd feel a great responsibility if you didn't turn up for the ghost-hunt. Wouldn't you, Shad?"

Shad wagged his head indeterminately, and spat. "Come on," he said sullenly, and turned, leading the way out to the northward, followed by Beth with an inviting smile. She still wore her denim overalls which were much too long for her and her dusty brown boots seemed like a child's. Between moments of avoiding roots and branches, Peter watched her strong young figure as it followed their leader. Yesterday, he had thought her small;

to-day she seemed to have increased in stature – so uncertain is the masculine judgment upon any aspect of a woman. But his notions in regard to her grace and loveliness were only confirmed. There was no concealing them under her absurd garments. Her flanks were long and lithe, like a boy's, but there was something feminine in the way she moved, a combination of ease and strength made manifest, which could only come of well-made limbs carefully jointed. Every little while she flashed a glance over her shoulder at him, exchanging a word, even politely holding back a branch until he caught it, or else when he was least expecting it, letting it fly into his face. From time to time Shad Wells would turn to look at them and Peter could see that he wasn't as happy as he might have been. But Beth was very much enjoying herself.

They had emerged at last into the road and walked toward Black Rock, Beth in the center and Peter and Shad on either side.

"I've been thinkin' about what you said yesterday," said Beth to Peter.

"About – ?"

"Singin' like an angel in Heaven," she said promptly aware of Shad's bridling glance.

"Oh, well," repeated Peter, "you do – you know."

"It was very nice of you – and you a musician."

"Musician!" growled Shad. "He ain't a musician."

"Oh, yes, he is, and he says I've a voice like an angel. *You* never said that, Shad Wells."

"No. Nor I won't," he snapped surlily.

Peter would have been more amused if he hadn't thought that Shad Wells was unhappy.

He needed the man's allegiance and he had no wish to make an enemy of him.

"Musician!" Shad growled. "Then it was you the men heard last night."

"I found a piano in the cabin. I was trying it," said Peter. Shad said nothing in reply but he put every shade of scorn into the way in which he spat into the road.

"A piano – !" Beth gasped. "Where? What cabin?"

"The playhouse – where I live," said Peter politely.

"Oh."

There was a silence on the part of both of his companions, awkwardly long.

So Peter made an effort to relieve the tension, commenting on the new arrivals at Black Rock House.

At the mention of Peggy's name Beth showed fresh excitement.

"Miss McGuire! Here? When – ?"

"This morning. Do you know her?"

"No. But I've seen her. I think she's just lovely."

"Why?"

"She wears such beautiful clothes and – and hats and veils."

Peter laughed. "And that's your definition of loveliness."

"Why, yes," she said in wonder. "Last year all the girls were

copyin' her, puttin' little puffs of hair over their ears – I tried it, but it looked funny. Is she going to be here long? Has she got a 'beau' with her? She always had. It's a wonder she doesn't run over somebody, the way she drives."

"She nearly got me this mornin'," growled Shad.

"I wish she would – if you're going to look like a meat-ax, Shad Wells."

There was no reconciling them now, and when Beth's home was reached, all three of them went different ways. What a rogue she was! And poor Shad Wells who was to have taken Peter at a gobble, seemed a very poor sort of a creature in Beth's hands.

She amused Peter greatly, but she annoyed him a little too, ruffled up the shreds of his princely dignity, not yet entirely inured to the trials of social regeneration. And Shad's blind adoration was merely a vehicle for her amusement. It would have been very much better if she hadn't used Peter's compliment as a bait for Shad. Peter had come to the point of liking the rough foreman even if he was a new kind of human animal from anything in Peter's experience.

And so was Beth. A new kind of animal – something between a harrier and a skylark, but wholesome and human too, a denim dryad, the spirit of health, joy and beauty, a creature good to look at, in spite of her envy of the fashionable Miss Peggy McGuire with her modish hats, cerise veils and ear puffs, her red roadsters and her beaux. Poverty sat well upon Beth and the frank blue eyes and resolute chin gave notice that whatever was to happen

to her future she was honorable and unafraid.

But if there was something very winning about her, there was something pathetic too. Her beauty was so unconscious of her ridiculous clothing, and yet Peter had come to think of it as a part of her, wondering indeed what she would look like in feminine apparel, in which he could not imagine her, for the other girls of Black Rock had not so far blessed his vision. Aunt Tillie Bergen had told him, over his late breakfast, of the difficulties that she and Beth had had to keep their little place going and how Beth, after being laid off for the summer at the factory, had insisted upon working in the Gaskill's vineyard to help out with the household. There ought to be something for Beth Cameron, better than this – something less difficult – more ennobling.

Thinking of these things Peter made his way back to the cabin. Nothing of a disturbing nature had happened around Black Rock House, except the arrival of the remainder of McGuire's unwelcome house party, which had taken to wandering aimlessly through the woods, much to the disgust of Jesse Brown, who, lost in the choice between "dudes" and desperadoes, had given up any attempt to follow Peter's careful injunctions in regard to McGuire. It was still early and the supper hour was seven, so Peter unpacked his small trunk which had arrived in his absence and then, carefully shutting door and windows, sat at the piano and played quietly at first, a "Reverie" of Tschaikowsky, a "Berceuse" of César Cui, the "Valse Triste" of Jean Sibelius and then forgetting himself – launched forth into Chopin's C Minor

Étude. His fingers were stiff for lack of practice and the piano was far from perfect, but in twenty minutes he had forgotten the present, lost in memories. He had played this for Anastasie Galitzin. He saw the glint of the shaded piano lamp upon her golden head, recalled her favorite perfume… Silver nights upon the castle terrace… Golden walks through the autumn forest…

Suddenly a bell rang loudly at Peter's side, it seemed. Then while he wondered, it rang again. Of course – the telephone. He found the instrument in the corner and put the receiver to his ear. It was McGuire's voice.

"That you, Nichols?" it asked in an agitated staccato.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's getting dark, what have you done about to-night?"

"Same as last night," said Peter smiling, "only more careful."

"Well, I want things changed," the gruff voice rose. "The whole d – n house is open. I can't shut it with these people here. Your men will have to move in closer – but keep under cover. Can you arrange it?"

"Yes, I think so."

"I'll want you here – with me – you understand. You were coming to supper?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well – er – I've told my daughter and so – would you mind putting on a dress suit – ? Er – if you have one – a Tuxedo will do."

"Yes, sir," said Peter. "That's all right."

"Oh – er – thanks. You'll be up soon?"

"Yes."

"Good-by."

With a grin, Peter hung up the receiver, recalling the soiled, perspiring, unquiet figure of his employer last night. But it seemed as though McGuire were almost as much in awe of his daughter as of the danger that threatened, for, in the McGuire household, Miss Peggy, it appeared, was paramount.

Peter's bathroom was Cedar Creek. In his robe, he ran down the dusky path for a quick plunge. Then, refreshed and invigorated, he lighted his lamp and dressed leisurely. He had come to his cravat, to which he was wont to pay more than a casual attention, when he was aware of a feeling of discomfort – of unease. In the mirror something moved, a shadow, at the corner of the window. He waited a moment, still fingering his cravat, and then sure that his eyes had made no mistake, turned quickly and, revolver in hand, rushed outside. Just as he did so a man with a startled face disappeared around the corner of the cabin. Peter rushed after him, shouting and turned the edge just in time to see his shape leap into the bushes.

"Who goes there?" shouted Peter crisply. "Halt, or I'll fire."

But the only reply was a furious crashing in the undergrowth. Peter fired twice at the sound, then followed in, still calling.

No sound. Under the conditions a chase was hopeless, so Peter paused listening. And then after a few moments a more distant crackling advised him that his visitor had gotten well away. And

so after a while he returned to the cabin and with his weapon beside him finished his interrupted toilet.

But his brows were in a tangle. The mystery surrounding him seemed suddenly to have deepened. For the face that he had seen at the window was that of the stranger who had stared at him so curiously – the man of the soft hat and dark mustache – who had seemed so startled at seeing him in the Pennsylvania Station when he was leaving New York.

CHAPTER VI
THE HOUSE OF TERROR

Who – what was this stranger who seemed so interested in his whereabouts? Peter was sure that he had made no mistake. It was an unusual face, swarthy, with high cheek bones, dark eyes, a short nose with prominent nostrils. Perhaps it would not have been so firmly impressed on his memory except for the curious look of startled recognition that Peter had surprised on it at the station in New York. This had puzzled him for some moments in the train but had been speedily lost in the interest of his journey. The man had followed him to Black Rock. But why? What did he want of Peter and why should he skulk around the cabin and risk the danger of Peter's bullets? It seemed obvious that he was here for some dishonest purpose, but what dishonest purpose could have any interest in Peter? If robbery, why hadn't the man chosen the time while Peter was away in the woods? Peter grinned to himself. If the man had any private sources of information as to Peter's personal assets, he would have known that they consisted of a two-dollar watch and a small sum in money. If the dishonest purpose were murder or injury, why hadn't he attacked Peter while he was bathing, naked and quite defenseless, in the creek?

There seemed to be definite answers to all of these questions, but none to the fact of the man's presence, to the fact of his look

of recognition, or to the fact of his wish to be unobserved. Was he a part of the same conspiracy which threatened McGuire? Or was this a little private conspiracy arranged for Peter alone? And if so, why? So far as Peter knew he hadn't an enemy in America, and even if he had made one, it was hardly conceivable that any one should go to such lengths to approach an issue and then deliberately avoid it.

But there seemed no doubt that something was up and that, later, more would be heard from this curious incident. It seemed equally certain that had the stranger meant to shoot Peter he could easily have done so in perfect safety to himself through the window, while Peter was fastening his cravat. Reloading his revolver and slipping it into his pocket, Peter locked the cabin carefully, and after listening to the sounds of the woods for awhile, made his way up the path to Black Rock House.

He had decided to say nothing about the incident which, so far as he could see, concerned only himself, and so when the men on guard questioned him about the shots that they had heard he told them that he had been firing at a mark. This was quite true, even if the mark had been invisible. Shad Wells was off duty until midnight so Peter went the rounds, calling the men to the guardhouse and telling them of the change in the orders. They were to wait until the company upon the portico went indoors and then, with Jesse in command, they were to take new stations in trees and clumps of bushes which Peter designated much nearer the house. The men eyed his dinner jacket with some curiosity

and not a little awe, and Peter informed them that it was the old man's order and that he, Peter, was going to keep watch from inside the house, but that a blast from a whistle would fetch him out. He also warned them that it was McGuire's wish that none of the visitors should be aware of the watchmen and that therefore there should be no false alarms.

Curiously enough Peter found McGuire in a state very nearly bordering on calm. He had had a drink. He had not heard the shots Peter had fired nor apparently had any of the regular occupants of the house. The visitors had possibly disregarded them. From the pantry came a sound with which Peter was familiar, for Stryker was shaking the cocktails. And when the ladies came downstairs the two men on the portico came in and Peter was presented to the others of the party, Miss Delaplane, Mr. Gittings and Mr. Mordaunt. The daughter of the house examined Peter's clothing and then, having apparently revised her estimate of him, became almost cordial, bidding him sit next Miss Delaplane at table.

Mildred Delaplane was tall, handsome, dark and aquiline, and made a foil for Peggy's blond prettiness. Peter thought her a step above Peggy in the cultural sense, and only learned afterward that as she was not very well off, Peggy was using her as a rung in the social ladder. Mordaunt, Peter didn't fancy, but Gittings, who was jovial and bald, managed to inject some life into the party, which, despite the effect of the cocktails, seemed rather weary and listless.

McGuire sat rigidly at the head of the table, forcing smiles and glancing uneasily at doors and windows. Peter was worried too, not as to himself, but as to any possible connection that there might be between the man with the dark mustache and the affairs of Jonathan McGuire. Mildred Delaplane, who had traveled in Europe in antebellum days, found much that was interesting in Peter's fragmentary reminiscences. She knew music too, and in an unguarded moment Peter admitted that he had studied. It was difficult to lie to women, he had found.

And so, after dinner, that information having transpired, he was immediately led to the piano-stool by his hostess, who was frequently biased in her social judgments by Mildred Delaplane. Peter played Cyril Scott's "Song from the East," and then, sure of Miss Delaplane's interest, an Étude of Scriabine, an old favorite of his which seemed to express the mood of the moment.

And all the while he was aware of Jonathan McGuire, seated squarely in the middle of the sofa which commanded all the windows and doors, with one hand at his pocket, scowling and alert by turns, for, though the night had fallen slowly, it was now pitch black outside. Peter knew that McGuire was thinking he hadn't hired his superintendent as a musician to entertain his daughter's guests, but that he was powerless to interfere. Nor did he wish to excite the reprobation of his daughter by going up and locking himself in his room. Peggy, having finished her cigarette with Freddy on the portico, had come in again and was now leaning over the piano, her gaze fixed, like Mildred's, upon

Peter's mobile fingers.

"You're really too wonderful a superintendent to be quite true," said Peggy when Peter had finished. "But *do* give us a 'rag.'"

Peter shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I can't do ragtime."

"Quit your kidding! I want to dance."

"I'm not – er – kidding," said Peter, laughing. "I can't play it at all – not at all."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.