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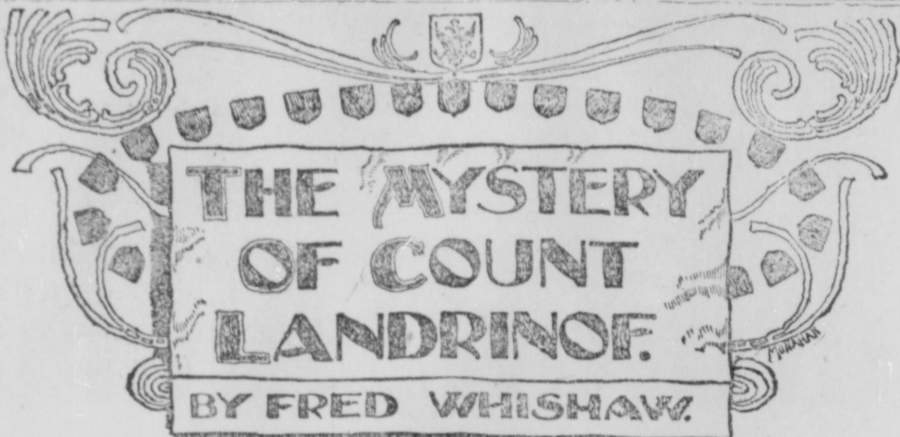
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(Continue)

She lay in bed, looking a shadow of her real self, and she burst into tears when I entered the room.

"My son, my son!" she cried.

"Thank God you have come, for we



Boris.

poor women are wretched beings when we are suddenly deprived of the strong arm in which we have trusted!"

"I thank God, too, mother, that I came," I said, "though I feel sure that we shall not be deprived for long of dear old father's presence!"

"Oh, do you really believe it?" she wailed. "I have tried to—so hard, but I feel I am losing my hope. Tell me, my Boris, have you formed any theory—do you find your hopes upon anything you know or have thought out?"

"I cannot form a theory, mother, until I know the facts," I said. "But I have a kind of feeling that we shall find father in God's good time. Be sure we shall be surprised when we know it at the simple solution of what seems so mysterious now; we shall laugh and say, 'How is it we never thought of it?'"

"Heaven knows—heaven knows! I cannot tell what to hope or believe. And did you think it thoughtless or unnecessary in me to have sent for you and put an end to your Oxford career?" "Mother," I said, "I would not have staid away from you for a hundred years of Oxford! Besides, when father comes home I shall be able to return. Now, tell me all the particulars, darling, and then we can consult quietly."

Mother dried her tears and sat up and told me her story.

Father, it appeared, had traveled by the private railway to Erinofka, a big moor, the shooting of which he rented with two other sportsmen, a Russian grand duke and an English gentleman called Hulbert. Father liked the place



fact remains that this tremendous mortality was to a great extent due to the lack of inherent resisting power in the victims. These babies when born had in their bodies the seeds of disease. The deadly heated term only shortened the period of their sufferings.

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principally for the excellence of its batteries for elk. This was not the season for elk, but he had set out on the Tuesday morning, intending to walk the moors for grouse and black game on the Wednesday and to return by the midnight train that day, but he had not turned up at home. Mother had waited till Thursday night, thinking that possibly father might have found the birds so plentiful that he had decided to remain another day. But when Friday morning had come and still father had not arrived mother grew anxious and telegraphed to the head keeper at Erinofka, inquiring whether father was still there.

An answer came presently to the effect that father had left on Thursday evening with the rest of the party.

Then mother sent a man down to the lodge, 40 miles away, to make inquiries, but nothing had transpired excepting that father had undoubtedly been to the lodge and had as certainly left it again to return to town.

"That's all," said mother. "I waited until the Tuesday, as you know, to send for you, my beloved, and now you have come. At least we can bear our sorrow together. Alas, what else is left to us but to bear it?"

"Oh, mother, much," I said encouragingly. "The time has not nearly arrived to give way to despair. Believe me, I shall not rest until I have either found my father or learned the secret of his disappearance. Cheer up, my sweet. It is not like you to give way. You are so brave and sensible. All the world knows that!"

"I can bear ascertained calamity," said poor mother. "When one knows the full extent of the trouble, it can be borne more easily. It is the uncertainty of this that has unnerved me. But you are right. We ought still to hope, my Boris. I will be brave. I will hope as you do. We will not despair until we have done all that there is to be done. What shall be our first move? Come, tell me. You have done me good already. Thank God that I have still a brave son. What is to be done?"

"Percy is coming to help me tomorrow or next day," I said. "I thought it would be as well to have him here. You know him and like him."

"Kind Percy!" murmured mother. "He is a friend indeed."

"And meanwhile I shall go to Erinofka by the very first train I can catch tomorrow morning in order to make inquiries on the spot. Whom did you send from here?"

"The second coachman, Pavel, an honest fellow. He knows the keeper, Armin, and interviewed him at Erinofka. Armin could give him no satisfaction."

"I shall see Armin for myself and many other people besides," I said. "I shall make preliminary inquiries tomorrow and then come back for Percy and continue them together with him."

"But have you any sort of notion as to what can have occurred? That is what is so dreadful to me that I cannot imagine what nature of calamity could possibly have happened to him. I feel so helpless about it."

"I cannot, really, until I have made inquiries, dear mother. It is possible that poor father may only have fallen from the train en route and rolled down an embankment. You have not seen the line to Erinofka. It is a mere toy railway, with a gauge but three feet wide and tiny carriages like small buses with balconies. The train runs most unsteadily, and father might have fallen asleep and been jerked from the balcony without any one seeing. He might have lain stunned until some one found and took him into shelter. The finder, unaware of his name, would be unable to communicate with his friends, and poor father still too ill perhaps to give him any information. That is at least a theory and would account for the absence of news. Then there is another thing that might possibly have happened, though I admit it does not seem very likely."

"Go on, Boris, tell me everything you have thought of," said poor mother, who wept quietly through my somewhat grieved recital. "How dreadful to think that my poor dear Vladimir may be lying even now unconscious, and we unable to help him because ignorant where to look for him—God grant it is not that!"

"He will have found kind friends, never fear," I said, "but my other theory is less painful to contemplate. I told you the worst first. It is this: Father is well known and known to be rich too. It may be that some wretched fellows, desperate perhaps for want of money, may have formed a band, like Greek brigands, to abduct him. If so, they will send a deputation one day, presently, or a message, claiming a sum of money for his ransom."

"Is that possible, here in civilized Russia?" said mother wistfully. "I

have never heard of anything of the kind, have you? At all events, not in this part of Russia."

I was obliged to confess that I had not.

"But we must not reject the idea on that account. We must weigh and investigate every notion either of us has, however wild or impossible it may be."

"Yes, yes, that is true. We will not leave a stone unturned!" said mother.

I traveled up to Erinofka the next morning. I could not help thinking, as I stood upon the balcony outside the little railway carriage, that any one tired from a hard day's shooting over the moors and leaning on the rail as I now leaned might most easily be pitched out by a jerk of the train. Jerks, violent ones, were common enough, for the train was but a makeshift thing and the line very narrow and badly laid. It had been made for the sole use of a factory of some sort, close to Erinofka, the manufactured goods being sent by its means to St. Petersburg, while the raw materials were carried up from town to the works.

Accidents were of frequent occurrence, though the train went so slowly that personal injury was rare. Passengers were allowed to use the line, which was thus most useful for my father and his fellow sportsmen. He might easily have fallen out then. But in that case would not Hulbert—who was shooting with him that day, as I had ascertained—have known of it either at once or when the train arrived at St. Petersburg? At any rate, he would have missed my father and have given the alarm. As a matter of fact, and as I discovered presently, Hulbert had remained behind for another day's sport when my father returned, Hulbert returning on the Thursday and father on the Wednesday, so that the accident—if it happened—would have occurred without Hulbert knowing anything about it.

I found Armin, the keeper at the lodge. It was from him that I learned that father had started for home earlier than Hulbert. He had done so, Armin explained, because he had found that the birds were still so small that he did not care to shoot them. Armin had been away in town when our man came to make inquiries. It was Spiridon that the man had interviewed.

"Did you see my father off on the Wednesday, Armin?" I asked him. Armin reflected. No, he said presently, he had not. He had been out on the moors till late with Mr. Hulbert. If our men had been told that the count returned with Mr. Hulbert, it was a mistake.

"The count left us early in the day," he added, "being discontented with the size of the birds. They certainly were small, for it was the very first day of the shooting, or near it."

(To be Continued)

## Dr. A. W. CHASE

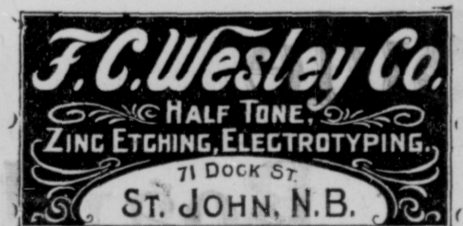
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