

THE MYSTERY OF COUNT LANDRINOF.

BY FRED WHISHAW.

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"Excuse me, count, but you have gone beyond me," said the pristaf. He spoke more politely to me than to Borofsky, but I could see that my words did not please him. "You have not yet explained the nature of the complaint. The name of the arrested on the day and at the address named was, I perceive, Kornilof, an escaped convict, a murderer and a rogue of the first water. Good. There is no doubt of his guilt, for he is known to have escaped from Siberian exile. He was tracked to St. Petersburg, arrested here and taken back to complete his sentence. There can scarcely be a mistake here. Indeed you have pitched upon a case, young sir, in which there can be less question of blunder than in any other almost in our sheets. It is not your father who complains, I understand, but yourself. Let me warn you that this is a dangerous case in which to interfere. Should you prove yourself interested in this Kornilof, the authorities would be obliged, in spite of respect for your parent and other considerations, to regard your future actions with suspicion and perhaps even to put a watch upon your doings. Now, then, what have you to complain of?"

"Speak for me, Borofsky," I said.

"No, excuse me, I will bear no complaint from any but the complainant himself."

"Very well, then," I said doggedly, "only he would have said it more politely than I, maybe. I complain, pristaf, that your fools of constables arrested the wrong man. You must have seen the prisoner?"

"Certainly," interrupted the pristaf. "Therefore you are as much to blame as they—perhaps more—and I warn you that unless you set the matter right, and at once, as I shall indicate, steps shall be taken to get justice done in another way, and in that case you shall not go unpunished."

"But, Holy Mother!" cried the pristaf, somewhat impressed, perhaps, by my earnestness. "What is all this to you, count? Even supposing that I had arrested the wrong delinquent—which I deny—how should you know of it, of all people you, and why should it interest you? As soon I would expect one of the czar's sons to come to me with a similar tale. Now, in a word, supposing that we did not actually arrest this Kornilof—which, again I deny—we arrested another in his place. You are, then, interested in this other—is that it?"

"I am."

"Name him, then."

"Count Vladimir Landrinof!" I said, playing my trump card as boldly as I could. I longed to impress this man with the seriousness of the affair he was inclined to treat so lightly. I would bluff him, frighten him, amaze him, but he should believe me and obey me! The effect of my words upon the pristaf was certainly marked. He started and looked at me and then at Borofsky.

sky. Then he addressed himself to my companion.

"Is the young gentleman mad?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXVI.
DISCREDITED BY THE POLICE.

"The young gentleman is very far from mad," said Borofsky. "He is as sane as you or I, and, moreover, what he has said is strictly true. Your people arrested and deported the wrong man at the time and address given, and that man was Count Landrinof."

"But, my dear sir," began the pristaf and paused. Then he touched a bell. An inspector entered so very quickly that there could be no doubt he had been stationed at the door listening.

"You know Count Landrinof by sight, inspector, I believe?" said the pristaf.

"Exactly so," replied that official, saluting.

"Is the count a well known character?"

"Exactly so, honor. How not? All the world knows Count Landrinof."

"So, when did you last see the count?"

"This morning, honor."

"At what hour?"

"Eleven."

"Read me your report, or your notes, made at or after this encounter and handed in to my office later."

The inspector consulted his notebook. Then he cleared his throat and blew his nose. The inspector did not possess a pocket handkerchief, or, if he did, he had left it at home or pawned it. Russian policemen regard with contempt the finikin ways of those who possess pocket handkerchiefs and carry them about. Then he read:

"This morning, as I passed through the Fourth line, at the far end, by the Small prospekt, I observed Count Landrinof, with whom I am slightly acquainted. I greeted him, and we entered into conversation."

At this point I interrupted the recital. "Stop!" I said. "Explain how and when you made the count's acquaintance."

"Is it necessary, honor?" asked the fellow, glancing at his superior.

"Oh! You may enlighten the gentleman," said the pristaf, shrugging his shoulders.

"I was then a plain gorodovoy, a town constable, and held the count's horse on a certain occasion when the animal was restive. For this service his excellence gave me the sum of 1 ruble. He knew me afterward whenever we met and occasionally presented me with a gratuity on such occasions as Easter and New Year."

"And he knew you this time?" I asked.

The inspector winced slightly. I saw it plainly enough, and so did Borofsky, but he replied that the count never failed to recognize him.

"You are sure he knew you?" said Borofsky, looking keenly at the man.

"Lord have mercy!" exclaimed the fellow. "Have I not said so? He recognized me, and we conversed. Here is the conversation. I have it down in my notes. I said: 'Excellence, we do not often see you in these parts of the town. Do you walk for pleasure?' To which the count replied that one of the servants, a groom, had been taken ill and was lying sick in his lodging up here in the Fourth line, by the little Nava, and he came occasionally to inquire after the poor fellow."

"Your excellence was always kind hearted and generous," I replied, and the count gave me a gratuity and departed."

"How much?" asked Borofsky.

"Twenty kopecks," said the fellow.

"Ah!" exclaimed acute Borofsky. "Not the usual ruble, eh?"

The fellow winced again.

"I did not say that I always received a ruble," he said. "The amount depends upon the services performed."

"Ha!" exclaimed Borofsky. "The service performed today was a great one, my friend, for you neglected to arrest this impostor, which would have been your plain duty. Confess that you were in doubt whether he was in truth Count Landrinof or another, that he did not recognize you at first and that you were surprised to receive 20 kopecks instead of the usual ruble?"

"Bah!" said the pristaf. "This is mere foolishness. It is enough. Inspector, you can leave the room."

"You see, gentlemen," he continued, when the man had departed, closing the door after him, "that there can be no mistake. I, myself, as it happens, have seen the count enter his very house, his own mansion. It is scarcely a week since I saw him with my own eyes."

"But, my dear sir," said Borofsky,



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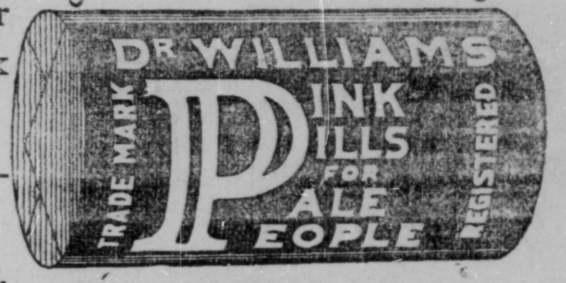
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"all this does not advance the matter in the least. We do not contest that a certain individual, sufficiently like the Count Landrinof to be mistaken for him by those who are not intimately acquainted with the count, is at present living and passing himself off as Count Landrinof, at his excellency's own mansion."

"What! Without permission of the family," interrupted the pristaf, "of the countess, and of this young gentleman, his son? No, my dear sir; you ask me to believe a thing which is impossible."

"On the contrary," said Borofsky, stamping his foot with vexation, "with their permission and concurrence if you will kindly listen without interruption I will make the matter clear from the beginning. The man now passing as Count Landrinof was received into the house under a misconception. The count disappeared last July. He disappeared utterly and no trace of him could be found until word was received that he had been seen in London."

"You appealed, of course, to the police for assistance in your difficulty?" said the pristaf.

"It was the wish of the countess to dispense with the service of the police, because she was naturally desirous of keeping the family trouble as secret as possible."

The pristaf smiled incredulously and shrugged his shoulders. "Proceed," he said.

"I was then dispatched to England in order to induce the supposed count to return," continued Borofsky. "Being personally unacquainted with his excellence, I was taken in by him and actually assisted in attempting to foist him upon the countess and her son as the real count. On arrival, however, the impostor no longer attempted to carry on the deception. He admitted that he was not himself the count, but that, if permitted to pass for awhile as his excellence and to inhabit rooms in his mansion and to receive certain payments in money, he would in return make over to the countess certain secrets as to the fate of her husband which she could not otherwise learn excepting through his good offices, practically admitting that he was, in fact, that very Andre

whom, we submit, you believe your men to have arrested on that fatal July afternoon."

"So that the countess has permitted this person to live in her house and to pass as the count for how long—two months, more or less—in order that she may in the end induce him to part with secrets which must inevitably end his period of prosperity and also his freedom! A likely story indeed, my dear sir, and likelier still that this man, if he were Andre, would so disclose his secrets!"

"We have cherished hopes that, failing his good will, we may find means to compel him to make a confession," said Borofsky.

"Do so, then, and afterward return to me," said the pristaf. "But stay," he added. "Whence this marvelous tale, then, of the arrest of Count Landrinof in mistake for this other individual? Did you not say that Andre Landrinof—supposing it were he—had boasted that he alone was able to reveal the secret of the count's fate? He has not revealed it, I understand. Yet you know the facts. Explain this."

"We discovered the truth accidentally from another source," said Borofsky.

"Ah, the truth! Yes. Well, gentlemen, I am obliged to you for this most interesting—nay, thrilling—narrative, which I have found very entertaining. I regret that I cannot accept it without support. May this unexpected source that you speak of be examined by me for confirmation of your report?"

"It is impossible," said Borofsky. "We"—

"Ah, I thought so. Good morning, gentlemen. I shall be glad to see you when you have something a little more definite, and, if I may say so, a little more plausible and credible, to lay before me."

"We shall report to your superiors, Mr. Pristaf," said Borofsky angrily.

"No doubt, and so shall I," said the pristaf, bowing us politely to the door.

CHAPTER XXVII.
THE POLICE MAKE INQUIRIES.

Borofsky and I were both too angry to speak much as we left the pristaf's office.

The fellow, as Borofsky explained it, simply reeked of tawdry officialdom. He was just the kind of person of whom nothing is to be expected in Russia, a man who will either really believe or pretend to believe his own ironically expressed opinions in defiance of every canon of right and equity. "If a man like that," said Borofsky, "happens to blunder, as he has, he'll move heaven and earth to conceal his mistake. He will lie and intrigue and put obstacles in the way of truth, and, if he can help it, right will never be done unless we get at his obstinate conscience with a golden key."

"Well, man, he shall have what he likes. You know that!" I said angrily.

"If you thought this, why didn't you say so at the time? We'd have offered him enough to keep him a year. It isn't a question of economy; you know that!"

"There's time enough for bribing when we can't beat the rascal on our merits," said Borofsky. "Don't forget that our little student has another card up his sleeve."

We went, presently, to the department itself, and here we interviewed a greater man.

Very courteous and affable was this gentleman. We recapitulated our story, with the added complaint that the pristaf would do nothing for us.

"What would you have him do?" asked the great man. "He cannot forthwith undo the arrest of July last upon your bare assertion. Inquiries will, however, be made. The countess must be examined."

"Oh, no!" I interrupted. "Please not—not just yet, at any rate! Let the matter proceed a little further toward solution."

The great one shrugged his shoulders. "I respect your desire to spare your

mother," he said, "but the matter cannot go very far without the testimony of the countess. The count must be examined—he, I mean, who is now passing, as you contend, for the count. All sides must be heard. I may believe your tale—which is extraordinary—or I may not, but I can take no steps upon it until a thorough inquiry has been held. You will admit that this is so?"

"We admit that, excellence," said Borofsky.

"You informed the pristaf, of course, as to the source from which you have obtained your version of the arrest—the blunder as you term it—of July?" continued the official. "We shall be obliged to examine into the authenticity of this source."

Borofsky flushed. "I regret," he stammered, "that it is at present impossible for us to reveal it," he said. "My young friend has made, unfortunately, a promise of secrecy."

"Oh, but," exclaimed the great man, "pardon me, young Count Landrinof, but if we are to seek truth we must probe all hiding places for her! You do not seriously suppose that you are to be at liberty to reveal what you please and to conceal also what you think fit? This is a matter of screening one, I suppose, who has been concerned in possibly criminal enterprises."

"I know nothing of my informant," I said; "not even his name."

"Nor his address?"

"Nor his address"—I hesitated, blushing.

"Nor where he is to be found at present?" he added, looking keenly in my face.

(To be Continued.)

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