

THE MYSTERY OF COUNT LANDRINOF

BY FRED WHISHAW

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SYNOPSIS.

The hero of this story, Boris Landrinof, is a young Russian, who was sent to England to be educated. He is hastily summoned home by his mother owing to the sudden disappearance of his father, Count Landrinof. Shortly after, in London, he is astonished when a friend tells him he has just seen his father. Accompanied by this friend he returns to Russia. Boris discovers a clue, and sets out in search of two men who have as he supposes abducted his father.

Percy agreed with mother, and the result was that the impostor remained. Borofsky came presently. He was depressed and very disconsolate. He had realized that the whole enterprise—on the brilliant success of which he had so prided himself—had actually proved an utter failure and fiasco. The impostor had been too clever for him and had already confessed, or rather triumphantly declared, that he was an impostor, but that, having secured a footing in these comfortable quarters, he did not intend to relinquish it in a hurry. He was going to pass for the count, he declared, so far as the outside world was concerned. If the countess and her young whelp (meaning me) did not choose to acknowledge him, why, they needn't, but if they valued the honor of their family, and perhaps their lives, they had better not give him away either to the police or any one else, for he had a card or two up his sleeve that he could play if he liked, and he knew a thing or two, besides, that he might let out one day if he were left in peace and decently treated, something, indeed, which would be greatly to our advantage did we but share his knowledge!

"Oh, what does he mean, Borofsky, what does he mean?" interrupted mother. "Does he know where my dear husband is to be found? Go back and tell him he shall live in peace and all quietness and luxury, he shall have the best of everything that it is in my power to provide, no one shall interfere with him or know what he is—is not what he desires to be taken for—he shall have money, as much as he will, if only"—At this point poor mother collapsed suddenly. She burst into tears and retired from the room, leaving Percy and Borofsky and me sitting like three dummies, silent and depressed, not one of us possessing spirit enough to discuss the situation, or indeed, for some little while, to open his lips to make any kind of remark whatever.

CHAPTER XV.

THE IMPOSTOR'S THREAT.

When the silence was broken at length, it was poor old Percy who broke it.

"This is a pretty business," he said. "And what a blithering, blundering pedigree ass I have made of myself! It is all my fault, old man, and I feel—I really do—that to chuck myself into the Neva is the only and certain the



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most appropriate and endurable thing left for P. J. M. to do.

"Nonsense!" I said. "It will all come right. We shall never find the right track until we have tried and rejected each wrong one that crosses it and leads us astray. Don't look so glum, Percy, nor you Borofsky either. It isn't your fault. You did your best, and did it well. How could you tell he was not father, when even mother and I passed the photo as authentic?"

"Still one feels what a mess one has made of the thing," said Borofsky. "But look here—Count Boris, and you, too, Mr. Percy, you may both be witnesses—I hereby swear that I haven't done with this sham count yet, not by a long way! He has got the better of us this time, but one day I shall turn the tables on him!"

"Don't frighten him, Borofsky," I said. "We shall be more likely to make him of use to us if we let him be awhile."

"All right, all right," said Borofsky. "I shall do nothing foolish. I intend to win next time, my friend; my reputation has leeway to make up. If you are kind enough to forget it, I cannot."

"So has mine," said Percy, "and I'm with you in this, Borofsky. If we can score off the rascals, we will. Is it a league?"

"League or no league," growled Borofsky, who was despondent and not very genial, "I'm not going to rest until I'm quits with the fellow. We ought, of course, to inform the police that he is here—whatever he may be—and let them take this matter over. He is sure to be up to no good. But the countess wishes him left to himself, and I would prefer it that way, because if the police get a finger in the pie the fellow is as good as delivered out of our hands, and I, for one, have not done with him."

"Only don't forget, Borofsky," I said, "that the main idea is to find father. If there were not the hope of getting this rascal to disgorge some important information about the count, which mother seems to think he may possess, I should be in favor of letting the police have him."

"And remember, you," said Borofsky, "that he will not stick at a lie, nor at a hundred lies, in order to be left in the house undisturbed! Why do you suppose he has come here?"

"To live well and luxuriously on nothing a year, I should think," I laughed.

"Not a bit of it," said Borofsky, who was not overpolite tonight. I forgave him his discourtesy because he was sore after his defeat and disappointment.

"Not a bit of it. He would not risk so much for the sake of comfortable quarters. He has a game on, a deep and probably a most infernal and murderous game, of some sort, and he is going to play it from the safe and convenient sanctuary of Count Landrinof's town mansion and to pass—having found that he can do so with impunity—as the count himself. There, mark my words, and I will remind you of them presently. This man is going to play a deep game. He is a revolutionist, probably a nihilist, and he is taking the advantage of his unexpected likeness to the count, your father, in order to carry on his machinations without suspicion. Do you follow me?"

"Gad, Borofsky!" exclaimed Percy, with admiration. "It's a jolly good idea!"

I concurred. "But," I said, "how is father's discovery to be advanced by allowing this fellow, or seeming to allow him, to do as he likes and hatch all manner of devilry from the shelter of our house?"

"We mustn't hurry," said Borofsky. "We shall watch him. He may have the mystery of your father's absence in the hollow of his hand. We must catch the rascal in some plotting and get him into our power and force his secrets out of him by threatening him with the police and Siberia."

"What if he is my father's brother?" I said.

"Well, but so he is, in all probability. I asked him, but he denied it, which, of course, means nothing, one way or the other. There could scarcely be another so like the count."

"But, for heaven's sake, Borofsky, let us be careful what we do. What if the fellow were to commit a crime and be arrested as Count Landrinof and punished under his name?"

"We don't want him to commit any crime, of course, but we do want him to conspire, so that we may watch him and get him into our power; that's all."

"It's dangerous, Borofsky, in many ways. Look at the disgrace of it, if anything were to go wrong, the horrible disgrace and dishonor to our family name, father's name to be mixed up with vile, murderous plottings and crimes! Bah! I hate to think of it."

"My dear sir," said Borofsky, "it



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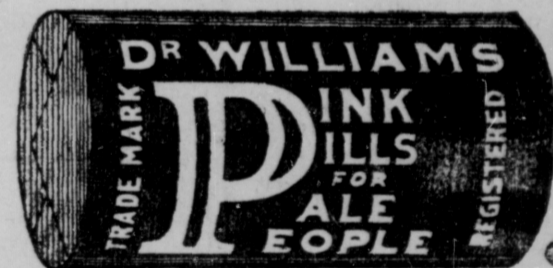
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need never come to that. If we move, we shall move carefully, and nothing shall be left to chance."

"And what if he should be my uncle Andre? Shall we deliver him up to justice when we have done with him?"

"Now you are going too fast!" laughed Borofsky. "We have to catch our hare first before we can cook him. I should think, when one has an uncle of this kind, the sooner one gets rid of him, whether by means of the police or any other way, the better."

"Ought we not to organize some method of combined spying, Borofsky?" said Percy. "One doesn't like the work, but we must be spied upon if we wish to find out anything useful."

"We will do so, of course, presently. But for awhile he must be left to himself, for he must not have the faintest suspicion that he is suspected or watched. Give the bird a short period to get over its first fear, so that it may learn to hop about freely and pick up the seeds prepared for it. Bring the net along when it has forgotten its fears!"

So for a little while we left the impostor count alone and allowed him to do what he would and go where he liked, unwatched and undisturbed.

During this period only Percy and Borofsky ever spoke to him of our party. I would not allow my mother to go near the wretch; neither would I trust myself to approach or speak to him.

Borofsky played his game well. He gave the fellow to understand that all

in the establishment had the countess' orders to see that he had everything he could possibly desire and that she was anxious to see him well satisfied in the hope that, if only in gratitude for her hospitality and kindness, he would repay her presently with some information as to the mystery of father's disappearance.

"Ha, ha!" said our visitor at this. "I owe you some little make up for the trick I played you, Borofsky, eh? You are very young, my son, and must learn your business by painful experience. All right; you shall have my secret some day—that is, if none of you play the fool before the time comes."

"Play the fool?" said Borofsky.

"How, in what way?"

"In any way that would displease me," growled our impostor. "Never fear. I shall soon know it if any of you start playing the fool."

But Borofsky disclaimed all intention of playing either the fool or anything else and repeated that the countess wished her guest treated well and hoped for the return he had indicated as soon as possible.

"Well, she shall have it," said the other, "when the time comes!"

"News of her husband—that is what her excellence is longing for," continued Borofsky. "She believes, rightly or wrongly, that you may be in possession of knowledge which would assist her to find the count."

"As, rightly or wrongly, she be-

lieves this," said the impostor, with an ugly laugh. "Ha, ha! I shall have plenty to tell her when the time comes."

"When will that be?" asked Borofsky.

"Oh, come, come! Let a man rest after his journey!" said the impostor.

"Everything comes to those who wait."

CHAPTER XVI.

ANDRE LANDRINOF, THE COUNT'S BROTHER.

So we three men settled down to watch the one man, though we allowed him to observe no indication that we were interested in his actions. And at first we thought we must be mistaken as to his connection with revolutionary people, anarchists and malcontents and shady characters generally, for his conduct was quiet and exemplary, and he came and went in and out of the house, mistaken by most of those who saw him for Count Landrinof.

"Confound the fellow!" said Percy one day after a fortnight or more of this blameless existence. "When is he going to start nihilist meetings in the house, and so on? He gives us nothing to go upon!"

"A watched pot never boils," I laughed; "at least not till one is sick of watching."

Nevertheless presently a little steam began to issue from the spout of our kettle, and we knew that the water was on the move.

In other words, our friend began to

show a little activity. He went about the town more frequently. Queer, weird looking people came at intervals to see him and sat in father's study in consultation with the impostor. The time had come for us to start work as amateur detectives, an occupation I most cordially disliked.

But father was still unfound. Indeed we were no further on toward clearing up the mystery than we had been a week after his disappearance, and mother fretted and wept.

Great heavens! To set all this right and see dear mother happy once more I should spy with the best and meanest.

One evening Borofsky returned home in the best of spirits.

"What is it, Borofsky?" I inquired, for I saw that he was longing to be asked.

"I've had a good haul today," he said, rubbing his hands. "Our friend's busy over some devilry, I'd stake my existence on it. He has been present at a secret committee meeting this afternoon, and I know where they met and how many were present."

(To be Continued)

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