

THE EDGE OF HAZARD

PICTURES BY A. WEIL BY GEORGE HORTON

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SYNOPSIS.

Frederick Hardy, a fashionable Boston society man, lost his wealth, was jilted by a girl and sent by a friend to take charge of an American Trading Company store in Russia. On his journey through Japan he met Stapleton Neville, supposedly an Englishman. They agreed to go together to Russia. Because of suspicious circumstances they were several times molested by the Japanese. Hardy was arrested and found upon his person were papers showing maps of Jap forts. Hardy was proven guileless. On a train he met Absome, daughter of a Jap merchant. In Neville's shoes Jap found pictures of forts, proving him to be a Russian spy. Hardy departed for Russia on a steamer, which was wrecked shortly afterward. He was rescued by a Russian steamer. On reaching Vladivostok he was well treated. He started for Siberia, meeting Princess Romanovna on the train. Hardy boarded a vessel for Amur. Hardy showed the princess his expertise as a rifle shot. The steamer was stranded. The princess and her maid were attacked by Chinese. Hardy saved their lives. The princess thanked Hardy for his heroism. Manchurians fired upon the craft. Hardy slew their chief. Burning arrows were hurled upon the Puskhikin's decks. An attempt was made to board the vessel. The attacking Chinese were repulsed. Romanoff sneered at Hardy's solicitude for the princess. Stanka a messenger, sent for help, was nailed to a cross on the shore. To put an end to the awful torture Hardy himself put Stanka out of his misery, taking his own life in his hands. Forrest fired upon the vessel. Hardy volunteered to go for help. Refused permission he jumped overboard and started to swim with the princess' distress message. Romanoff was angry at Hardy for his brave efforts to rescue the princess. He wooed her in his own savage way. He said Hardy had made love openly to a Japanese girl. Help came and the princess was rescued. Hardy journeyed on a raft. Arriving at his destination he took charge of the trading company's business. Hardy received a letter from a social leader in Boston and another from Absome. Hardy took lessons in Russian from a Jew, thus connecting himself in a way with that race. Hardy received a letter from the princess, thanking him for his bravery. Hardy's teacher was in danger of death. He employed Wang as a servant. Hardy went to Moscow, where he was invited to call upon the princess. He started for the palace home of Princess Romanovna. Hardy aroused unaccountable jealousy of his Korean boy by announcing that he was going to call on the princess.

CHAPTER XXVIII.—Continued.

Hardy, meanwhile, slipping into a long ulster, the fur collar of which he turned up about his ears, left the hotel and stepped to the edge of the sidewalk. A droshky dashed up immediately.

"The Princess Romanovna," said he in Russian. "The Princess Romanovna, in the street—"

The ivoschik jumped down with alacrity extraordinary for a Russian. "The Princess Romanovna?" he inquired, looking shrewdly at Hardy.

"Yes," said Hardy, "in the street—"

"Get in," said the Russian, "and I will drive you there immediately. I know where it is."

There was something strange in the man's manner, so strange, in fact, that it set the American wondering. He acted as though he had been sent for his fare, or had been expecting him. But Hardy did not long dwell on this idea, for he was, after all, on his way to the princess. He would soon be in her presence again, and the thought so agitated him, so set his heart to beating, that all other matters were driven from his mind.

As these thoughts were running through Hardy's mind, it occurred to him from time to time that it took a long time to reach the palace of the princess. He knew about where it was located, though he had not visited the spot. It should have taken him 15 minutes to drive there from the hotel. He consulted his watch and found that he had been half an hour on the road.

"Cabmen," he muttered, "are the same the world over. The fellow is driving me about for a while in order to increase the size of the bill."

He was on the point of opening the door and shouting to the ivoschik, when the latter drew up before a large, square house on a quiet, poorly lighted street. Hardy threw open the door and jumped out.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In the Nihilists' Den.

"So here we are at last!" he said; "wait for me." The house as he glanced up at it did not impress him as a palace, but he reflected that some of the older and more exclusive of the Muscovite nobility lived in antiquated and unpretentious residences. The ivoschik ran up the steps by his side and rang the bell. An old woman opened the door.

"Ah," she said to the cabman, "so you have brought him!"

"Da! da!" replied the Jehu, and trudged down the steps.

It was evident to Hardy that he was expected at the house of the princess, that even the servants had been told to keep on the lookout for him. Hardy had been shown into a small reception room, where a coal fire was burning in the grate. A couple of easy chairs and a leather-covered lounge, somewhat worn, formed the only furniture, rather meager, it seemed to him, for the palace of a princess. He removed his coat and sat down before the fire. As the old woman had been expecting him, it was safe to assume that she had gone to inform Romanovna of his arrival. He arose, and with fingers that trembled slightly, arranged his white tie in a mirror over the mantle. As he was thus engaged, he could hear two men talking probably in the hall, just outside the door.

"Is the most wonderful explosive ever invented," said one. "Enough to fill the inside of a child's ball is quite sufficient to wreck the czar's palace—"

"Curse him!" interjected the other. "Amen! It can therefore be thrown to a great distance, and wherever it strikes, it explodes. There is no missing fire. Several members of the Order witnessed a trial of it in the Ural mountains, in a lonely spot, and the results were most satisfactory. A small quantity, hurled at the base of a cliff, tore the whole face of the mountain loose. One of the brethren accidentally dropped a sphere of it, and he simply disappeared—vanished from the face of the earth. One of his arms was found two miles from the place, lying beside a mountain road."



"We Welcome You Among the Enemies of Russia."

"That would be good medicine for the czar," chuckled a third voice. "Yes, and for tyrants in general. With this new and mysterious explosive, the Order has an agency by which it can become a terror to the ruling classes, by which it can demoralize society, and make way for the new order of things, the divine brotherhood of man. In six months from now there will not be a man living in Russia who will dare set himself up above his fellow creatures or take his seat on the tyrant throne of Russia. To-night we shall select the brother who will throw the first sphere."

"But is it not fortunate," asked the second speaker, "that a member of the Enemies of Russia should have made this important discovery? The brother, Felix Hulín, is here—a slender, dark man with eye-glasses. The cabman that we sent brought him and he is now in the reception room. Ah, but he has the air of a deep student! Let us go in and make him welcome."

Hardy, still fumbling with his tie, caught sight of his own face in the mirror, and was startled by its expression. It was the face of a man caught in a trap and who has only a moment to escape before he is discovered.

He was in a nihilists' den and had overheard a plot to kill the czar. If it should be discovered that he was an impostor, he had little doubt as to what his fate would be. He seized his coat and hat and started toward the door. Three men entered, two well dressed and the other evidently a laborer of some sort. "Brother Hulín," said the tall man in imperfect French, "we welcome you among the Enemies of Russia. We know all about your marvelous discovery, and we consider you the greatest inventor of the age."

Hardy shook hands with them all with much cordiality.

"I was," he said, also in French, "hoping to make a little address to the brethren to-night."

"Very well," said the tall man, "but don't be long, for there are many of the Order here who are anxious to meet you."

Hardy stepped toward the door with a light heart, but just as he reached for the knob, the bell rang, and one of

the nihilists opened the door and admitted the cabman with a slender, dark man who wore eye-glasses.

"I am Felix Hulín," announced the new arrival in perfect French, "and that man," pointing to Hardy, "is an impostor!"

CHAPTER XXX.

For the Good of the Order.

The American, in immaculate evening dress, his crush hat beneath his elbow and his fur-lined coat thrown over his arm, stood at bay with his back against the wall, silently eyeing the nihilists. The blood rushed back to his heart, and his cheek paled a trifle, but the glance that he fixed on those wondering faces, in which hate and fear were beginning to dawn, showed no flinching. The cabman, in tall boots of patent leather, and shining silk hat, stood at the door, with his broad back against it, his whip in his hand. He was a thick-set, broad-shouldered muzhik, with little, red eyes, a red face and a profuse red beard. His glance shifted uneasily from Hulín to Hardy.

By his side stood the little Frenchman, who sank his head between his shoulders like a turtle, and, stretching an accusing left arm toward Hardy, shrieked:

"I am Felix Hulín, I say, mon dieu! the great inventor, the great benefactor of the human race. Behold, here is the proof! If I dash this little sphere on the floor, poof! b-r-r-r! The whole house will fall apart like a castle of cards, the roof will leap into the air, in one little second, by gar, we shall all be in eternity. Gentlemen, are you convinced? Sooner than have my word doubted, I shall give you the proofs. Ten thousand devils! I am Felix Hulín, I say, no man shall doubt me!"

He plucked his right hand into his pocket and drew forth a sphere, about the size of a baseball, which he held in the hollow of his palm.

"I am Dr. Hulín," he added; "behold the pill which I have prepared for tyrants and spies!"

About 20 of the brethren had stolen into the hall and were pressing forward toward Hardy; stolen, indeed, for these men all moved silently, as though accustomed to secret and dangerous meetings. But at the dreaded word "spy" a murmur arose.

"A spy! A spy! Kill him, tear him to pieces!"

But the man who had welcomed Hardy in French stepped in front of them and raised his hand.

"Sh! Brethren," he commanded, "are you all mad? Would you have the police down on us? The spy is in our power, if indeed, he is a spy, and we shall know how to deal with him, how to seal his lips. As for you, Brother Felix, do not drop your pill, in the Virgin's name! Put it in your pocket. Preserve it for tyrants and the foes of mankind. There! We shall breathe freer now. Ivan—to the cabman—what is the history of this man? How did you happen to bring him here?"

"I went to the Slaviansky Bazar to get a slender, dark man with eye-glasses," he explained, "who should give me the password for the night—'The Princess Romanovna.' This man came out, hailed me and gave me the password. I bring him here, and then, ten minutes later, along comes this other slender, dark foreigner with eye-glasses, who, it seems, is able to find his own way about! That is the truth, Brother Bielinski, I call the Virgin to witness—and the pious soul crossed himself."

"Very well," said Bielinski, a tall man, stoop-shouldered, with thin, hook-nose and keen, furtive eyes. "Very well. May I ask, my friend," turning to Hardy, "whether you are a member of the Brotherhood, and, if not, why are you here?"

"The explanation is very simple," replied Hardy in French, in which language the question had been directed. "I am an American merchant, residing in Stryetensk. I have an acquaintance with the Princess Romanovna, removed his coat and hung it upon a nail. He then took his seat, by invitation, at Bielinski's right.

"Brethren," said the latter, rising, "of the Society of the Enemies of Russia!" He spoke very distinctly, but not loud. The most absolute silence prevailed. "First we must decide what to do with this man who has introduced himself into our midst, and has learned the secrets of the order. Though I do not personally believe him to be a spy, though I am confident he was brought here by accident, yet he is not of us, and he is a friend of the haughty and wealth-pampered aristocrat whose name forms the password of the evening. He was on his way to her residence when he was brought here."

During this time Hardy remained standing, with his opera hat beneath his elbow and his ulster thrown over his arm. His eyes were fixed on the little ball in Hulín's handkerchief, which, shining in the gas light, held

formed and thrown into the Moskva, thus giving the impression that he had fallen in and drowned; or, a fine needle might be driven into the base of his brain, after which he could be dropped into the river; or, he could be taken out to some lonely spot, gagged, of course, to prevent an outcry, stabbed or beaten to death, and robbed. The gags could then be removed and this would cause the impression that he had been killed by footpads for his money and valuables. Fortunately, his attire, that of a wealthy aristocrat, would corroborate the impression. These are merely suggestions, of course. Would it not be well to decide officially on his fate, and then appoint a committee to settle the manner of his removal?"

Mr. Kourbski sat down and glanced about with a self-satisfied air.

"It is time," said Bielinski, rising and resting both palms on the table, "to bring this incidental discussion to a close, and proceed with the more important business of the evening. Nothing must be allowed to interfere with the great work which we have in hand: The destruction of so-called government and the establishment of universal freedom; the elimination of war, oppression and tyranny, and the inauguration of general and everlasting peace, equality and brotherhood."

As Bielinski spoke, his face flushed with enthusiasm, and his eyes glowed with the light of the dreamer and the Utopian. Murmurs of approval ran through the audience.

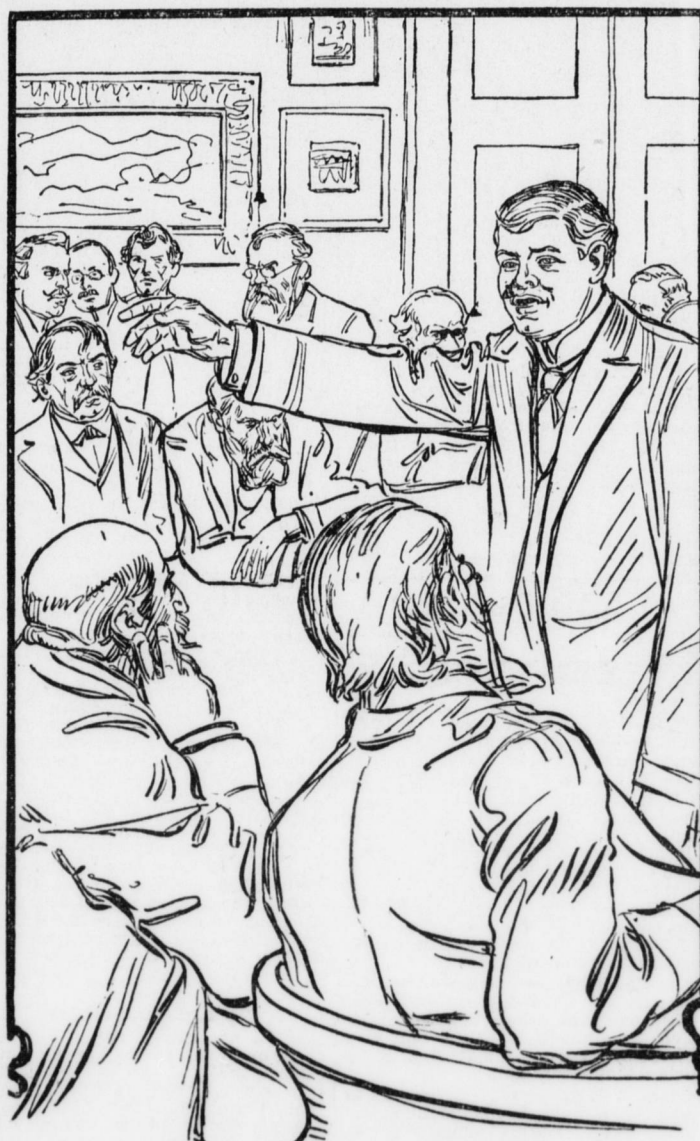
"You know," he continued, "how we propose to accomplish this great end. Government is merely a combination of the strong and the favored of the earth to oppress the weak. Laws are simply canons for the regulation of oppression. All these things are unnatural and artificial and are built on a substructure of superstition. We propose to render government impossible by making the governing profession so dangerous that no man will dare undertake it. But the question now before us is this: Here is a man in our midst who is not of us. He is a sympathizer with and a friend of our oppressors. He came to us, supposing that he was going to the house of the Princess Romanovna, and overheard our plans. He has discovered our place of meeting. Will it be safe to turn him loose, after exacting a promise from him that he will not betray us, if such a promise can be obtained, or is it your mind that he be removed, as Brother Kourbski suggests, for the good of the Order? In voting on this question you will bear in mind that the life of any one individual is of small moment when weighed in the balance against the general good of humanity. Brother Smirnof will pass among you, handing each one of you a white and a black marble, a supply of which I have here, and Brother Kourbski will collect your ballots in a hat. A black ballot will signify removal, a white ballot life and some other expedient. Brother Smirnof!"

That member arose and stepped briskly to the side of the chairman who took a number of marbles from a drawer and poured them into a hat. Kourbski followed him about with another hat, into which the members dropped their votes. In the ghastly silence that reigned, Hardy could hear his heart beat plainly, and the marbles dropping, dropping, into the hat, rattled like paving stones falling from a height. As Kourbski stepped to the table and poured the marbles on it, the American arose, and mechanically twitching at his pince-nez, gazed with open mouth. A black stream poured from the hat.

"The ballots are all black!" announced the chairman. "I shall appoint Brothers Kourbski, Stankietich and Golovlev as a committee of three on ways and means. Gentlemen, you will retire into the adjoining room. Kindly reach your decision as soon as possible, for this, as I have said, is only an incidental matter, and we have much of importance before us."

The three members retired, closing the door softly behind them. The dream was becoming reality. Hardy, who was still standing, glanced about like a trapped animal, his eyes hunting some desperate means of escape. There was the window. He might dash at that and leap at the panes. The crash and the outcry which he would make might attract the attention of some passer-by. But, alas, the majority of the company were sitting between him and the window, and the shutters, which he could discern through the thick curtains, were, no doubt, heavy and well secured. His overcoat dropped to the floor and a scarcely audible "bump" attracted his attention. He picked up the garment, and slipped his hand into the pocket, where it touched the cold handle of a revolver. He remembered that a merchant had given him the weapon in the morning as a sample of a large stock of German imitations that could be sold at a much lower price than the American original. The merchant had said that it was a good weapon, despite the cheapness, and had requested him to try it.

But it was not loaded.



"There is But One Way—He Must Die."

Hardy noticed that the last two words were spoken with an emphasis of hate, which reminded him of the Christian voices at Stryetensk, spitting out "Moschke! Moschke! The Jew! The Jew!" Truly this Holy Russia is a breeding-ground for many violent hates.

They all moved silently down to the extreme end of the hall and passed through a door into a large square room, furnished with chairs and divans and a round table, upon which were a number of books and magazines. Crossing this, they entered the council chamber, a long, narrow apartment, with benches running around it, and a long table in the center, with chairs placed for about 20 people.

The Enemies of Russia seated themselves on the benches and at the table. Bielinski, who was evidently the chairman, took his place at the head of the table. Felix Hulín, after taking the terrible sphere from his pocket and laying it carefully on the table on a tiny couch formed of his crumpled

handkerchief, removed his coat and hung it upon a nail. He then took his seat, by invitation, at Bielinski's right.

"Brethren," said the latter, rising, "of the Society of the Enemies of Russia!" He spoke very distinctly, but not loud. The most absolute silence prevailed. "First we must decide what to do with this man who has introduced himself into our midst, and has learned the secrets of the order. Though I do not personally believe him to be a spy, though I am confident he was brought here by accident, yet he is not of us, and he is a friend of the haughty and wealth-pampered aristocrat whose name forms the password of the evening. He was on his way to her residence when he was brought here."

During this time Hardy remained standing, with his opera hat beneath his elbow and his ulster thrown over his arm. His eyes were fixed on the little ball in Hulín's handkerchief, which, shining in the gas light, held

his gaze with a strange fascination, like the baleful eye of a snake.

"What is his nationality?" asked one of the brethren.

"He says that he is an American," replied Bielinski.

"The Americans," said the questioner, "are a powerful nation. If we should detain this man, who is himself evidently an aristocrat, and has friends, they would raise heaven and earth to find him, and there would be much publicity and discussion—a thing that we wish to avoid now. The same thing would result if he should permanently disappear."

Here he sat down, and silence reigned for a full minute.

"There is much truth," at length said Bielinski, "in what Brother Smirnof says. Has any other brother any suggestion to make?"

A young Russian arose, a florid-faced, clean-shaven youth, with blue eyes and a sweet expression. His voice was soft and he smiled as he talked.

"He must not disappear," said the speaker, "as Brother Smirnof says, neither can we keep him. He would be an elephant on our hands. Neither would it be safe to turn him loose with our secret in his brain and on his tongue. It seems to me, with all due reverence to my elders—and here he smiled and waved his hand—"that there is but one way. He must die and his body must be found under such circumstances that the police will be led to believe he has met his fate through accident. This will save under the head, not of an execution, but of a necessary removal for the good of the order."

"What method would you propose, Brother Kourbski?" inquired Bielinski.

"There are several methods that naturally suggest themselves," replied Kourbski, expansively. Hardy's eyes left the meager spot and sought the speaker's face.

"For instance, he might be chloro-

formed and thrown into the Moskva, thus giving the impression that he had fallen in and drowned; or, a fine needle might be driven into the base of his brain, after which he could be dropped into the river; or, he could be taken out to some lonely spot, gagged, of course, to prevent an outcry, stabbed or beaten to death, and robbed. The gags could then be removed and this would cause the impression that he had been killed by footpads for his money and valuables. Fortunately, his attire, that of a wealthy aristocrat, would corroborate the impression. These are merely suggestions, of course. Would it not be well to decide officially on his fate, and then appoint a committee to settle the manner of his removal?"

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