

might these wary Nihilists take counsel to destroy one who had preyed on them and on their associates with an unerring and unmerciful hand. Ivan turned to the assembled conspirators.

"Comrades," said he, "the results following our meeting here to-night will be fraught with so much of momentous import, both to ourselves and our enemies, that there must not be the slightest chance of failure. The deed must be done quickly and quietly. The risk to the perpetrator is great, involving the hazard of his own life. For that reason I ask if there be any one here who will venture to do this glorious act for the cause of freedom. If there be such let him stand forth."

Immediately the whole body stepped forward as one man. Ivan smiled grimly.

"Such unanimity of purpose and desire for revenge I have seldom seen," said he, "and it augurs ill for our foes. But since there is no other way, the honor must be conferred by lot. First, however, let us decide upon the means of death. Which shall it be—poison, pistol or poniard?"

For answer a score of shining steel blades shimmered for an instant in the feeble light.

"So be it," said Ivan, "and let the thrust be quick and to the heart. Now for the casting of lots. Alexis, bring the cards."

In a moment a pack was forthcoming, and the conspirators drew close to the little table, completely surrounding it. Ivan shuffled the cards nervously.

"To whomever falls the ace of hearts that one is chosen," he said, and began to deal them out one by one. For some time the silence was broken only by the soft pat, pat of the falling cards. Once, twice, he dealt around and yet the deciding card had not fallen. He began on the third round. At the fourth cast the fatal card turned. Instantly all eyes turned upon the holder of the fatal ace. As they looked the heavy veil was torn from the face and the pointed hood thrown back revealing the pale face of a beautiful woman set in a wreath of jet-black hair.

"Lonia Romanoff!" gasped the conspirators.

"Yes," she said. "Yet be not frightened lest I shall fail in my task. Remember that woman and the devil are matchless in cunning. I am proud of my commission, and I pledge you I shall fulfil it within the week."

"See to it that you do," said Ivan, sternly. "You know the