

A Startling Adventure.

"ROBINSON, the boss wants you!" "The dickens he does!" thought I, for Mr. Dickson, Odessa agent of Bailey & Co., corn merchants, was a bit of a Tartar, as I had learned to my cost. "What's the row now?" I demanded of my fellow clerk; "has he got scent of our Nicolaeff escapade, or what is it?"

"No idea," said Gregory; "the old boy seems in a good enough humor; some business matter, probably. But don't keep him waiting." So, summing up an air of injured innocence, to be ready for all contingencies, I marched into the lion's den.

Mr. Dickson was standing before the fire in a Briton's time-honored attitude and motioned me into a chair in front of him. "Mr. Robinson," he said, "I have great confidence in your discretion and common sense. The follies of youth will break out, but I think that you have a sterling foundation to your character underlying any superficial levity."

I bowed.

"I believe," he continued, "that you can speak Russian pretty fluently."

I bowed again.

"I have, then," he proceeded, "a mission which I wish you to undertake, and on the success of which your promotion may depend. I would not trust it to a subordinate, were it not that duty ties me to my post at present."

"You may depend upon my doing my best, sir," I replied.

"Right, sir, quite right! What I wish you to do is briefly this: The line of railway has just been opened to Solteff, some hundred miles up the country. Now I wish to get the start of the other Odessa firms in securing the produce of that district, which I have reason to believe may be had at very low prices. You will proceed by rail to Solteff and interview a Mr. Dimidoff, who is the largest landed proprietor in the town. Make as favorable terms as you can with him. Both Mr. Dimidoff and I wish the whole thing to be done as quietly as possible; in fact, that nothing should be known about the matter until the grain appears in Odessa. I desire it for the interests of the firm, and Mr. Dimidoff on account of the prejudices his peasantry entertain against exportation. You will find yourself expected at the end of your journey, and will start to-night. Money shall be ready for your expenses. Good morning, Mr. Robinson; I hope you won't fail to realize the good opinion I have of your abilities."

I was so charmed at being, as it were, behind the scenes, that I crept about the office all day in a sort of cloak-and-bloody-dagger style with responsibility and brooding care marked upon every feature, and when at night I stepped out and stole down to the station the unprejudiced observer would certainly have guessed, from my general behavior, that I had emptied the contents of the strong box before starting, into that little valise of Gregory's. It was imprudent of him, by the way, to leave English labels pasted all over it. However, I could only hope that the "Londons" and the "Birmingham" would attract no attention, or, at least, that no rival corn merchant might deduce from them who I was and what my errand might be.

Having paid the necessary roubles and got my ticket I ensconced myself in the corner of the snug Russian car and pondered over my extraordinary good fortune. Dickson was growing old now and if I could make my mark in this matter it might be a great thing for me. Dreams arose of a partnership in the firm. The noisy wheels seemed to clank out "Bailey, Robinson & Co." in a monotonous refrain, which gradually sank into a hum, and finally ceased as I dropped into a deep sleep. Had I known the experience which awaited me at the end of my journey it would hardly have been so peaceable.

I awoke with an uneasy feeling that some one was watching me closely, nor was I mistaken. A tall dark man had taken up a position on the seat opposite, and his black slither eyes seemed to look through me, and beyond me, as if he wished to read my very soul. Then I saw him glance down at my little trunk.

"Good heavens!" thought I, "here's Simpkins' agent, I suppose. It was careless of Gregory to leave those confounded labels on the valise."

I closed my eyes for a time, but on reopening them I again caught the stranger's earnest gaze.

"From England, I see," he said in Russian, showing a row of white teeth in what was meant to be an amiable smile.

"Yes," I replied, trying to look unconcerned, but painfully aware of my failure.

"Traveling for pleasure, perhaps?" said he.

"Yes," I answered, eagerly. "Certainly, for pleasure; nothing else."

"Of course not," said he, with a shade of irony in his voice. "Englishmen

always travel for pleasure, don't they? O, no, nothing else."

His conduct was mysterious, to say the least of it. It was only explainable upon two hypotheses—he was either a madman or he was the agent of some firm bound upon the same errand as myself and determined to show me that he guessed my little game.

I was to be expected at the end of my journey, so Mr. Dickson had informed me. I looked about among the motley crowd, but saw not Mr. Dimidoff. Suddenly a slovenly, unshaven man passed me rapidly, and glanced first at me and then at my trunk—that wretched trunk, the cause of all my woes. He disappeared in the crowd; but in a little time came strolling past me again and contrived to whisper as he did so, "Follow me but at some distance," immediately setting off out of the station and down the street at a rapid pace. Here was mystery with a vengeance. I trotted along in his rear with my valise and on turning the corner found a rough droschky waiting for me. My unshaven friend opened the door and I stepped in.

"Is Mr. Dim—" I was beginning.

"Hush!" he cried. "No names, no names; the very walls have ears. You will hear all to-night; and with that assurance he closed the door and seizing the reins we drove off at a rapid pace; so rapid that I saw my black-eyed acquaintance of the railway carriage gazing after us until we were out of sight.

I thought over the whole matter as we joggled along in that abominable sprigless conveyance.

We were there to all appearance; for the droschky stopped, and my driver's shaggy head appeared through the aperture.

"It is here, most honored master," he said as he helped me to alight.

"Is Mr. Dim—" I commenced, but he interrupted me again.

"Anything but names," he whispered; "anything but that. You are too used to a land that is free. Caution, O sacred one!" and he ushered me down a stone-flagged passage and up a stair at the end of it. "Sit for a few minutes in this room," he said, opening a door, "and a repast will be served for you," and with that he left me to my own reflections.

"Well," thought I, "whatever Mr. Dimidoff's house may be like, his servants are undoubtedly well trained. 'O sacred one!' and 'reverend master!' I wonder what he'd call old Dickson himself, if he is so polite to the clerk. I suppose it wouldn't be the thing to smoke in this little crib, but I could do a pipe nicely. By the way, how confoundedly like a cell it looks."

I had hardly concluded my survey when I heard steps approaching down the corridor, and the door was opened by my old friend of the droschky. He announced that my dinner was ready, and, with many bows and apologies for leaving me in what he called the "dismissal room," he led me down the passage and into a large and beautifully furnished apartment. A table was spread for two in the centre of it, and by the fire was standing a man very little older than myself. He turned as I came in and stepped forward to meet me with every symptom of profound respect.

"Mr. Dimidoff, I presume?" said I.

"No, sir," said he, turning his keen gray eyes upon me. "My name is Petrokine; you mistake me, perhaps, for one of the others. But now, not a word of business until the council meets. Try your *chef's* soup; you will find it excellent, I think."

Who Mr. Petrokine or the others might be I could not conceive. Land stewards of Dimidoff's perhaps, though the name did not seem familiar to my companion. However, as he appeared to shun any business questions at present, I gave in to his humor, and we conversed on social life in England—a subject in which he displayed considerable knowledge and acuteness.

"By the way," he remarked, as we smoked a cigar over our wine, "we should never have known you but for the English labels on your luggage; it was the luckiest thing in the world that Alexander noticed them. We had had no personal description of you; indeed, we were prepared to meet a somewhat older man. You are young, indeed, sir, to be entrusted with such a mission."

"My employer trusts me," I replied, "and we have learned in our trade that youth and shrewdness are not incompatible."

"Your remark is true, sir," returned my newly-made friend; "but I am surprised to hear you call our glorious association a trade. Such a term is gross indeed to apply to a body of men banded together to supply the world with that which it is yearning for, but which, without our exertions, it can never hope to attain. A spiritual brotherhood will be a more fitting term."

"By Jove!" thought I, "how pleased the boss would be to hear him. He

must have been in the business himself, whoever he is."

"Now, sir," said Mr. Petrokine, "the clock points to eight, and the council must be already sitting. Let us go up together, and I will introduce you. I need hardly say that the greatest secrecy is observed, and that your appearance is anxiously awaited."

I turned over in my mind as I followed him how I might best fulfill my mission and secure the most advantageous terms. They seemed as anxious as I was in the matter, and there appeared to be no opposition, so perhaps the best thing would be to wait and see what they would propose.

I had hardly come to this conclusion when my guide swung open a large door at the end of a passage, and I found myself in a room larger and even more gorgeously fitted up than the one in which I had dined. A long table, covered with green baize and strewn with papers, ran down the middle, and round it were sitting fourteen or fifteen men conversing earnestly. The whole scene reminded me forcibly of a gambling hell I had visited some time before.

Upon our entrance the company rose and bowed. I could not but remark that my companion attracted no attention, while every eye was turned upon me with a strange mixture of surprise and almost servile respect. A man at the head of the table, who was remarkable for the extreme pallor of his face as contrasted with his blue-black hair and moustache, waved his hand to a seat beside him, and I sat down.

"I need hardly say," said Mr. Petrokine, "that Gustave Berger, the English agent, is now honoring us with his presence. He is young, indeed, Alexis," he continued to my pale-faced neighbor, "and yet he is of European reputation."

"Come, draw it mild," thought I, adding aloud, "If you refer to me sir though I am, indeed, acting as an English agent, my name is not Berger, but Robinson—Mr. Tom Robinson, at your service."

A laugh ran round the table.

"So be it, so be it," said the man they called Alexis. "I commend your discretion, most honored sir. One cannot be too careful. Preserve your English sobriquet by all means. I regret that any duty should be performed upon this auspicious evening; but the rules of our association must be preserved at any cost to our feelings, and a dismissal is inevitable to-night."

"What the deuce is the fellow driving at?" thought I. "What is it to me if he does give his servant the sack? This Dimidoff, wherever he is, seems to keep a private lunatic asylum."

"Take out the gag!" The words fairly shot through me and I started in my chair. It was Petrokine who spoke. For the first time I noticed that a burly stout man, sitting at the other end of the table, had his arms tied behind his chair and a handkerchief round his mouth. A horrid suspicion began to creep into my heart. Where was I? Was I in Mr. Dimidoff's? Who were these men with their strange words?

"Take out the gag!" repeated Petrokine; and the handkerchief was removed.

"Now, Paul Ivanovitch," said he, "what have you to say before you go?"

"Not a dismissal, sirs," he pleaded, "not a dismissal; anything but that. I will go into some distant land, and my mouth shall be closed forever. I will do anything that society asks, but pray do not dismiss me."

"You know our laws, and you know your crime," said Alexis, in a cold, harsh voice. "Who drove us from Odessa by his false tongue and his double face? Who wrote the anonymous letter to the Governor? Who cut the wire that would have destroyed the arch-tyrant? You did, Paul Ivanovitch, and you must die."

I leaned back in my chair and fairly gasped.

"Remove him!" said Petrokine, and the man of the droschky with two others forced him out.

I heard the footsteps pass down the passage, and then a door open and shut. Then came a sound as of a struggle, ended by a heavy crunching blow and a dull thud.

"So perish all who are false to their oath," said Alexis, solemnly, and a hoarse amen went up from his companions.

"Death alone can dismiss us from our order," said another man further down; "but Mr. Berg—Mr. Robinson is pale. The scene has been too much for him after his long journey from England."

"O, Tom, Tom," thought I, "if ever you get out of this scrape you'll turn over a new leaf. You're not fit to die, and that's a fact." It was only too evident to me now that by some strange misconception I had got in among a gang of cold-blooded Nihilists, who mistook me for one of their order. I felt, after what I had witnessed, that my only chance of life was to try to play the role thus forced upon me until

an opportunity for escape should present itself; so I tried hard to regain my air of self-possession, which had been so rudely shaken.

"I am, indeed, fatigued," I replied, "but I feel stronger now. Excuse my momentary weakness."

"It was but natural," said a man with a thick beard at my right hand. "And now, most honored sir, how goes the cause in England?"

"Remarkably well," I answered.

"Has the great Commissioner condescended to send a missive to the Solteff branch?" asked Petrokine.

"Nothing in writing," I replied.

"But he has spoken of it?"

"Yes, he said he had watched it with feelings of the liveliest satisfaction," I returned.

"'Tis well, 'tis well!" ran round the table.

I felt giddy and sick from the critical nature of my position. Any moment a question might be asked which would show me in my true colors. I roge and helped myself from a decanter of brandy which stood on a side table. The potent liquor flew to my excited brain, and as I sat down I felt reckless enough to be half-amused at my position, and inclined to play with my tormentors. I still, however, had all my wits about me.

"You have been to Birmingham?" asked the man with the beard.

"Many times," said I.

"Then you have, of course, seen the private workshop and arsenal?"

"I have been over them both more than once."

"It is still, I suppose, entirely unsuspected by the police?" continued my interrogator.

"Entirely," I replied.

"Can you tell us how it is that so large a concern is kept so completely secret?"

Here was a poser, but my native impudence and the brandy seemed to come to my aid.

"That is information," I replied, "which I do not feel justified in divulging even here. In withholding it I am acting under the direction of the chief commissioner."

"You are right—perfectly right," said my original friend Petrokine. "You will, no doubt, make your report to the central office at Moscow before entering into such details."

"Exactly so," I replied, only too happy to get a lift out of my difficulty.

"And now, most honored sir," said Alexis, "tell us what was the reply of Bauer, the German Socialist, to Ravinsky's proclamation?"

Here was a deadlock with a vengeance. Whether my cunning would have extricated me from it or not was never decided, for Providence hurried me from one dilemma into another and a worse one.

A door slammed down stairs, and rapid footsteps were heard approaching. Then came a loud tap outside, followed by two smaller ones.

"The sign of the society!" said Petrokine; "and yet we are all present; who can it be?"

The door was thrown open and a man entered, dusty and travel-stained, but with an air of authority and power stamped on every feature of his harsh but expressive face. He glanced round the table, scanning each countenance carefully. There was a start of surprise in the room. He was evidently a stranger to them all.

"What means this intrusion, sir?" asked my friend with the beard.

"Intrusion!" said the stranger. "I was given to understand that I was expected, and had looked forward to a warmer welcome from my fellow-associates. I am personally unknown to you gentlemen, but I am proud to think my name should command some respect among you. I am Gustave Berger, the agent from England, bearing letters from the chief commissioner to his well-beloved brothers of Solteff."

One of their own bombs could hardly have created greater surprise had it been fired in the midst of them. Every eye was fixed alternately on me and upon the newly-arrived agent.

"If you are indeed Gustave Berger," said Petrokine, "who is this?"

"That I am Gustave Berger, these credentials will show," said the stranger, as he threw a packet upon the table.

"Who that man may be I know not, but if he has intruded himself upon the lodge under false pretenses it is clear that he must never carry out of the room what he has learned. Speak, sir," he added, addressing me; "who and what are you?"

"Gentlemen," I said, "the role I have played to-night has been a purely involuntary one on my part. I am no police spy, as you seem to suspect, nor, on the other hand, have I the honor to be a member of your association. I am an inoffensive corn dealer, who, by an extraordinary mistake, has been forced into this unpleasant and awkward position."

I paused for a moment. Was it my fancy that there was a peculiar noise in the streets, a noise as of many feet

treading softly? No, it had died away; it was but the throbbing of my own heart.

"I need hardly say," I continued, "that anything I may have heard to-night will be safe in my keeping. I pledge my solemn honor as a gentleman that not one word of it shall transpire through me."

The senses of men in great physical danger become strangely acute, or their imagination plays them curious tricks. My back was towards the door as I sat, but I could have sworn that I heard heavy breathing behind it. Was it the three minions whom I had seen before in the performance of their hateful functions, and who like vultures, had sniffed another victim?

I looked round the table. Still the same hard cruel faces. Not one glance of sympathy. I cocked the revolver in my pocket.

There was a painful silence, which was broken by the harsh grating voice of Petrokine.

"Promises are easily made and easily broken," he said. "There is but one way of securing eternal silence. It is our lives or yours. Let the highest among us speak."

"You are right, sir," said the English agent; "there is but one course open. He must be dismissed."

I knew what that meant in their confounded jargon and sprang to my feet.

"By Heaven," I shouted, putting my back against the door, "you shan't butcher a free Englishman like a sheep. The first among you who stirs, drops."

A man sprang at me. I saw along the slits of my derring the gleam of a knife and the demoniacal face of Gustave Berger. Then I pulled the trigger, and, with his hoarse scream sounding in my ears, I was felled to the ground by a crashing blow from behind. Half-unconscious and pressed down by some heavy weight, I heard the noise of shouts and blows above me, and then fainted away.

When I came to myself I was lying among the debris of the door, which had been beaten in on the top of me. Opposite were a dozen of the men who had lately sat in judgment upon me, tied two and two, and guarded by a score of Russian soldiers. Beside me was the corpse of the ill-fated English agent, the whole face blown in by the force of the explosion. Alexis and Petrokine were both lying on the floor like myself, bleeding profusely.

"Well, young fellow, you've had a narrow escape," said a hearty voice in my ear.

I looked up and recognized my black-eyed acquaintance of the railway carriage.

"Stand up," he continued, "you're only a bit stunned; no bones broken. It's no wonder I mistook you for the Nihilist agent, when the very lodge itself was taken in. Well, you're the only stranger who ever came out of this den alive. Come down stairs with me."

He explained as we walked back to the hotel that the police of Solteff, of which he was the chief, had had warning and been on the lookout during some time for this Nihilistic emissary. My arrival in so unfrequented a place, coupled with my air of secrecy and the English labels on that confounded portmanteau of Gregory's had completed the business.

I have little more to tell. My Socialistic acquaintances were all either transported to Siberia or executed. My mission was performed to the satisfaction of my employers. My conduct during the whole business has won me promotion, and my prospects for life have been improved since that horrible night, the remembrance of which still makes me shiver.

No Time for Doubts.

When Dr. Marshman was a young man, and at home, he was frequently the subject of doubts and fears. On his return from India, after nearly thirty years residence and labor there, William Jay said to him—"Well, Doctor, how about doubts and fears?" "Haven't had time for them," was the answer.

The raven is like the slanderer, seeking carrion to feed upon, and delighted when a feast is found.

It is as easy to draw back a stone thrown with force from the hand as to recall a word once spoken.

Gratitude is the music of the heart when its chords are swept by kindness.

Get out Doors.

The close confinement of all factory work, gives the operatives pallid faces, poor appetite, languid, miserable feelings, poor blood, inactive liver, kidneys and urinary troubles, and all the physicians and medicine in the world cannot help them unless they get out of doors or use Hop Bitters, the purest and best remedy, especially for such cases, having abundance of health, sunshine and rosy cheeks in them. They cost but a trifle. See another column.—*Christian Record.*