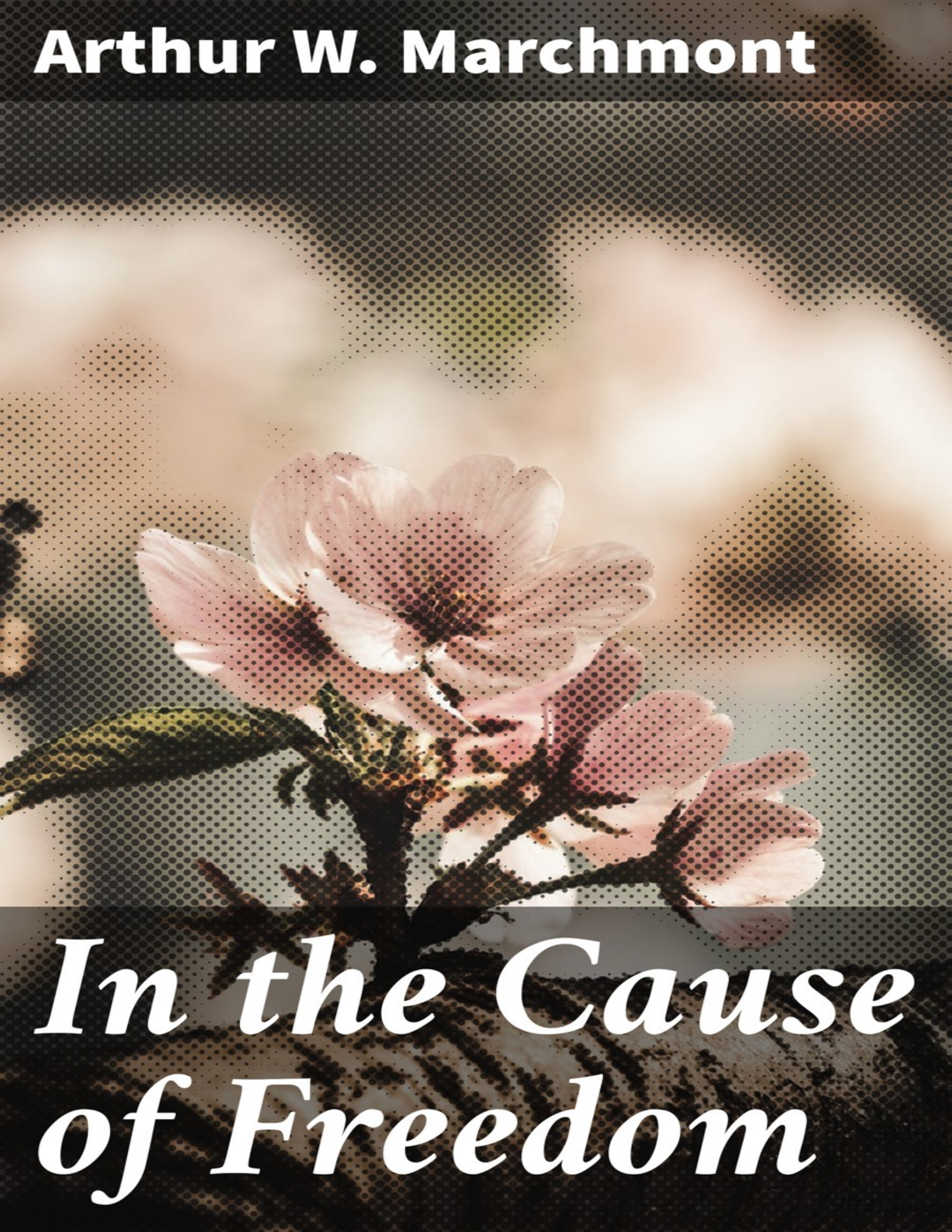
Arthur W. Marchmont



In the Cause of Freedom

Arthur W. Marchmont

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CHAPTER I
A CHANCE MEETING

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“DO you mean to take me for a spy?”

I had hard work to prevent myself laughing at the man to his face; and it is no light matter to laugh at these self-satisfied, bullying officials in Russian Poland. Some of them have too much power.

“Do I understand that you refuse to answer my questions and shew me your papers?”

“And what if I do?” He had burst into my room in the little inn at Bratinsk as I sat reading my paper over a cigar, and without any preface had fired his questions at me with the peremptory incivility of the average police agent. My temper had taken the intrusion badly.

He shrugged his shoulders and raised his eyebrows. “I am a police agent from Warsaw and must know your business in Bratinsk.”

At that I saw light. I recalled a paragraph I had just read in the Warsaw paper. I pointed to it. “Is this the key to your visit?”

“Ah, you have read it,” he replied with that offensive manner in which these people always contrive to imply that everything you say or do is a matter of suspicion.

“I’ll read it again now with more interest,” said I. I did so very deliberately, to gain time to cool my temper and see how it could possibly affect me.

“We are in a position to state that a raid was made two nights ago upon a house in the Kronplatz, which has long

been suspected to be the Warsaw headquarters of a branch of the dangerous patriotic society known as the ‘P.F.F.’ (Polish Freedom Fraternity). The house was deserted at the time, but important papers were found which revealed the existence of a conspiracy of wide and far-reaching extent. The complete break-up of the powerful organization of the Freedom Fraternity is likely to be the result of the raid, and several well-known patriots are said to be implicated by the discoveries. Among the names rumoured is that of Count Peter Valdemar, once well known as the ‘Stormy Petrel’ of Polish politics.”

“Do you take me for Count Peter Valdemar?” I asked.

“I did not come here to be fooled,” was the angry reply. “If you will not comply with my demands, you must accompany me to Warsaw.”

I saw the prudence of not angering him. “I am Robert Anstruther, an Englishman, and have been here about three weeks, shooting over the estate of my friend, Count Ladislas Tuleski.”

“Your passport?”

“Here it is. You have a very unpleasant manner,” I could not help adding, as I took out my pocket book. By a curious chance I had three passports; my own and that of my chum, Robert Garrett and his sister, Margaret. They were to have come out with me on their way to Turkey, but had been prevented at the last moment. I picked mine out and handed it to him. “It’s properly viséd, you’ll see.”

He assumed a very profound air as he read it. “You speak Polish very well for an Englishman,” he said.

“I speak also German and French, and some Russian.”

“You have no trace of the vile English accent.”

“Is that meant for a compliment?” I asked lightly. It was no use to get angry again.

“And you are a friend of Count Ladislas Tuleski? You are, no doubt, aware that he is a suspect.”

I smiled as I thought of my friend’s airy impulsiveness and almost butterfly repudiation of responsibility. “I am surprised he should be suspected of doing anything seriously.”

“He is,” was the snappy reply. “And his friends are naturally objects of interest just now. Where is he?”

“I don’t know. I heard of him last in London.”

“And you are from London? It is at least a coincidence. Do you know Count Peter Valdemar?”

“I believe I met him once.” I remembered that I had seen him at my friend’s hotel in London.

“Another coincidence,” he returned drily. There was a pause during which he regarded me fixedly, pretty much as though I were a criminal. “You would perhaps, like to shew me all your papers, to satisfy me of the truth of your story.”

That was what an American would call “the limit.”

I got up and opened the door. “I have told you the truth and I don’t allow any man to question my word. You’d better go before I lose my temper.”

I stood six feet without bootheels; I had been the heaviest number five in my college eight that Corpus had had for years; and was in the pink of condition. He saw that I meant business and rose.

“I don’t question your word,” he began.

“Are you going?”

He went out into the corridor. “We shall probably require you to come to Warsaw.”

“If you wish to arrest me do it, and be hanged to you.”

“You mustn’t talk like that, and had better leave Bratinsk. So long as you stay here you will be under surveillance—” the rest of his sentence was lost, for I slammed the door in his face.

The attempt at any kind of surveillance over my movements would drive me out of Bratinsk like a shot; and I should have been much more annoyed by the incident but for the fact that I had been daily expecting my visit to be brought to a close by the weather. I had been very lucky to hit such an open season; but it was late in December, and the snow was so long overdue that by leaving at once I should miss very little sport.

I determined to go, therefore. I had a pig-sticking fixed for the following day; and that should be the last.

It was not at all unlikely, too, that Warsaw would afford me some excitement. The papers were full of hints about impending troubles from the strikers and revolutionary party, consequent upon the ominous unrest in St. Petersburg; and I settled that I might as well go there for a couple of days to see the fun, and then rush home for Christmas.

With this plan in my thoughts I strolled up to the railway station to see about trains.

As I reached the building the stationmaster, a very busy little official, named Blauben, came running up to me.

“Ah, mister, mister,”—he knew this one word of English and thought it the correct way to address an Englishman

—“you can do me a service. I beg of you. I am in sore perplexity.”

“What is the matter?”

“A country-woman of yours. She sets me at defiance and does not understand a word I say. The last train for three hours has gone and the law is that I shut the station. She will not go out.”

“Do you want me to put her out for you?”

“No, no; you can explain to her that the law requires the station to be shut now; and they are very strict because of this last conspiracy they have discovered. No one is allowed to remain, mister. Besides, my wife is waiting for me; and you know her. She is not patient when the dinner is kept waiting. Ah, mister?”

“Where is she?”

I pictured to myself a typical strong-minded British matron, or spinster, stern of feature, sturdy of will, Baedeker in hand, insistent upon her rights, and holding the station grimly against the chattering officious little Pole; and I looked for some fun. But, instead, he led me up to a girl, who contradicted in every particular my anticipation. She was some twenty years of age, well-dressed and as pretty as a painting; straight, regular features, flaxen hair and blue eyes; glorious eyes meant for laughter, but now clouded with trouble and nervous agitation. A picture of pale, shrinking misery that went straight to my heart.

“Here is an English mister who will explain,” said the stationmaster with elaborate gesture.

I raised my hat and as she glanced at me, the colour flushed into her cheeks and her large eyes seemed to dilate

with a new fear connected with my presence. In a moment it flashed into my thoughts that she had understood him quite well.

“The stationmaster tells me you are a country-woman of mine,” I said in English; “and has asked me to explain that the station is to be closed now.”

There was a pause, her look one of blank dismay. She bit her lip and then stammered slowly with a rich foreign accent, “Zank you, sir; I cannot go. I wait for ze train and zomeone.”

I accepted this as though it were the purest English and gave a free translation of it to the station master. But he was bluntness itself. His wife was waiting for him, and he had the law on his side.

I turned to the girl again and said, trying German this time: “They have curious laws in this country, and one of them requires the station to be closed.”

Her face lighted with unmistakable relief and she answered in the same language: “My servant has gone to make some arrangements, I only wish to wait for a train.”

I interpreted this also; but the man was obdurate. “She cannot wait here. No one is allowed—by law.”

“But I *must* wait,” she broke in, and blushed vividly and trembled at having given away the fact that she understood him.

“Let me offer a suggestion. I am an Englishman, Robert Anstruther, and if you will permit, I will wait with you outside until your servant returns. These officials are obstinate just now because of some plot that has been discovered; and he will only send for the police if you do not comply.”

At the mention of the police she rose quickly, all the colour left her face and her lips quivered.

The stationmaster beamed his thanks upon me as he bowed us out and turned the key upon us.

“These little officials are very touchy,” I said, when we stood outside and I saw she was quite undecided what to do.

She paused, and then said impulsively: “I don’t know what you will think. I—I am so ashamed.”

“I hope not. There is no need.”

“I mean about—I am not English.”

“Are you not? You answered me in English,” I said gravely.

A little blush signalled vexation. “As if you did not know. It is no subject for laughter.”

“God forbid that I should laugh. You are too evidently in deep trouble.”

“And you know that I understood him all the time.”

I bowed. “I ask no questions.”

“I should like to explain, but I cannot. Oh, how humiliating!” she cried, and the distress and trouble in her tone touched me deeply.

“I am only a stranger, but if I can help you, I beg you to give me the opportunity.”

“You cannot. You cannot; oh, I——” She left the sentence unfinished and turned away to stare along the road leading to the village, her arm resting upon a gate near. “If he comes back——” I heard her murmur; but the rest of the sentence was lost.

She was a mystery, and a very fascinating mystery too. Who could she be? Why travelling alone? What was her

trouble? Why pretending to be English? Why had she started so at the mention of the police? These and a dozen other questions rushed into my mind in the minute or two that followed. I cudgelled my wits for something to say; some way of breaking down the barrier that prevented her making some kind of use of me.

The visit of the police agent having turned my thoughts to the subject of the conspiracy, I wondered whether she could be in any way connected with it. A fugitive, perhaps? But the idea was preposterous. She was surely the very incarnation of innocence; about as well fitted for a conspirator as I was for a police agent.

She turned suddenly and broke in upon my thoughts by saying, hurriedly and nervously, this time in Polish: “Thank you, sir, for what you have done and also for your offer; but I must not detain you longer.”

I smiled. “You are not detaining me; but I will go, of course, if you wish.”

She hesitated. I hoped it was from reluctance to dismiss me. Then she put out her hand impulsively and said with an air of constraint and a very wistful look: “My secret is safe with you, I know.”

“I should like to make it a condition of silence that you let me help you further.”

“No, no. That is impossible; impossible,” she cried quickly. “My—my servant will be back soon.” The fear in her eyes increased as she spoke of him.

“Well, don’t forget the name—Anstruther. I’m at the *Petersburg Inn*, should you—or your friends think me likely to be of any use.”

She shook her head. “No, no. Thank you. Thank you.”

I raised my hat and turned away. I would have given a lot to be able to find some excuse for staying with her; and when I looked after her, chance found me a reason to go back. She was walking slowly in the direction of the village, her back towards me, and I saw her handkerchief fall.

I picked it up and hurried after her. Hearing my step she turned so quickly as to suggest alarm.

“You have dropped this,” I said, handing her the little dainty lace trifle. As I held it out the initials “V.D.” embroidered in the corner, lay uppermost.

She took it hurriedly, glanced from the initials to my face, and then thanked me.

Just then a man came hastily round a bend in the path some twenty paces ahead of us. She bit her lip at sight of him and her nervous confusion increased.

“My—my servant. You must go, please.”

Surprised that she should shew such fear of a servant, I drew aside with a smile and she walked on.

Then I looked at the servant; and the mystery about her at once became clearer and yet deeper.

It is one of the freaks of my otherwise treacherous memory, never to forget a face; and despite his disguise I recognized the man at once. I knew him by his remarkable eyes—small, piercing and almost black in hue.

It was Count Peter Valdemar, the “Stormy Petrel” of Polish politics; the originator of a dozen conspiracies. He was dressed as a servant, wore a close-cropped red wig, and was clean shaven.

I recalled the police agent’s words instantly; and the danger to the girl appealed to me. For her sake I resolved to warn him.

They spoke together, and from his glances in my direction, I guessed she was telling him what I had done. As I approached them, he assumed the deferential air of a servant.

“A word with you,” I said.

He was full of surprise. “With me, sir?”

I drew him aside. “I have no desire to pry into your affairs, but I wish to warn you that you are in great danger of discovery here.”

“Danger! Of what? Surely you are mistaken, sir?” He spoke with a flourish of the hand and a bow, but his piercing eyes were fixed intently upon mine.

“I am a friend of Count Ladislas Tuleski, and I met you once or twice in his rooms in London a year ago. You are Count Peter Valdemar. This morning a police agent from Warsaw visited me, and regarded me as a suspect because of my friendship with the Count, and because I admitted that I had known you. Take the warning from me as a friend; and be on your guard. If I have recognized you, others may.”

It was safer for us both not to be seen together, so I walked off leaving him a very much surprised Count indeed.

CHAPTER II
ON THE DEVIL'S STAIRCASE

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I HAD not walked three hundred yards towards the village when I met the police agent hurrying stationwards at a pace which would quickly bring him face to face with Count Peter and his companion.

This must be prevented at any cost, so I stopped him.

"I wish to speak to you."

"They told me you had gone to the station."

This was all right, for it showed he was following me. "Our interview ended hastily this morning because I thought you doubted my word and I was angry. I see now that you were doing your duty. Come back with me to the inn, and let us talk things over."

"You can say what you have to say here," he answered. He was a surly dog: but I dared not let him pass me.

"Scarcely that; because I can adopt your suggestion and prove to you, by letters and so forth, that I am what I told you; an Englishman and not a spy."

"Why do you change like this?" His suspicious tone again.

"The reason is simple. I have decided to leave here to-morrow probably, and don't wish to be bothered by your spies meanwhile. It is simpler to convince you with proofs." I linked my arm in his. "Come along, we must understand one another better. I am not the suspicious individual you think and you are no doubt a better fellow than I deemed."

He was a little beast, only fit to be kicked; but I thought of the girl and smothered my natural inclinations.

By the time we reached my rooms I had worked some of his suspicions loose; and when I laid before him letters from my sister and friends at home, and showed him such things as my cheque book, letter of credit, and so on, he was sufficiently satisfied to have a bottle of wine with me.

Over this his tongue was loosened and we discussed the conspiracy, which he admitted was widespread and in some respects more dangerous than any which had threatened the Empire for years. Its especial danger lay in the skill with which the leaders had attempted to blend industrial discontent with political intrigue; and so form a union among vast masses of the population in many industrial cities.

The practical grievances of the workers and the many wrongs of the rural population were being used by the democratic theorists, the dreamers and the political agitators to foment discontent; and I knew enough of Russia to be aware that such highly inflammable materials as these might easily be heaped together and then fanned into one huge simultaneous explosion all over the Empire, terrible enough to startle the world.

In Russian Poland the cause was the old one—national independence; and it was in this that Count Peter Valdemar had taken a part and that my friend Ladislas was involved.

I repeated my surprise that my friend should be regarded as dangerous.

“He is a leader; and at such times any man may be a source of danger,” was the reply.

“And this Count Peter—where is he?” I asked casually.

“He is probably making for the German frontier, with the intention of flying to England. He was at Warsaw; but disappeared. Your country has much to answer for in harbouring all these plotters.”

“If it comes to that we have a few anarchists of our own, and they are harboured on this side of the Channel.”

“Not in Russia. But I don’t think the Count will escape us this time. He is well known to so many of us.”

“And if you catch him?” A significant smile answered me and a tilt of the eyebrows.

“You have a wonderful police system,” said I, admiringly.

“We shall catch him on the frontier, sir. Make no mistake. No man can get through the net we have spread there.”

I emptied my glass. “Well, here’s luck to all who deserve it. And now, about myself?”

“I will communicate with Warsaw; and meantime go where you will or stay here if you prefer.”

I had succeeded in detaining him nearly a couple of hours, and by this time the Count and his companion ought to be out of the place; so I ordered my horse, resolved to go for a ride to test the truth of the little beggar’s assurance that I was not to be watched.

I chose the southern road and as the ground was very hard I went at a leisurely pace. I was not followed; and as soon as I had satisfied myself of this, my thoughts slipped back to the incident at the railway station, and a pair of blue eyes that had looked with such desolate wistfulness into mine. Would the Count get away? Had they gone already? Would chance ever bring us together again? Could I not do something on my own account to help chance? That was

more my way; and I set to work thinking how I could use my friendship with Ladislas to accomplish my end.

I was still following this train of thought when I reached the hill known locally as the “Devil’s Staircase.” Bratinsk stands on a plateau; and about five miles to the south, this hill, one of the most dangerous I have ever seen on account of its fearful gradient and deadly twists and turns, leads to the plains below. From the top there is a fine view over the Batak Levels, a stretch of fertile country extending for miles to the foot-hills beyond. It was a favourite spot of mine and on reaching it now I dismounted, tethered my horse near and strolled to smoke a cigar and continue my reverie.

I was inclined to shake hands with myself at the thought of using Ladislas. He would surely be able to tell me enough of Count Valdemar to put me on the track; and I was just thinking how to describe the girl whose initials I believed to be “V. D.” when I caught the grating of wheels, followed rapidly by the throbbing sound of horses’ feet.

Some one must be in a deuce of a hurry, I thought, as I looked back along the road. Some one was, surely enough. Not a couple of hundred yards from the brink of the hill came a light caleche with two occupants drawn by a pair of horses at full gallop. What was the fool of a driver about? To dash down the Devil’s Staircase at that mad pace meant death. No horses ever foaled could make the sharp turns and twists of that zigzag, treacherous, deadly incline at a gallop.

I shouted a warning at the top of my voice; and then my heart seemed to leap in my breast and every vein in my body to chill like ice as the occupants of the caleche looked

up, and I recognized Count Peter Valdemar and the girl who had been in my thoughts all that day.

As the runaways reached me I leapt down on to the road and I made a spring for the reins of the horse nearest me. I missed them and was rolled over and over, while the frightened beasts dashed on, the Count tearing and tugging and straining at the reins in a futile effort to stop them.

I jumped up and ran down the hill in pursuit. Just below, the road made an S-shaped curve, and the horses were round this and out of sight like a flash; and while I was racing after them round the first bend, I heard a shout in a man’s voice, a girl’s scream, and then the crashing sound of a smash.

I reached the scene in a few moments. The wreck had come at a point where the road turned at less than a right angle; and the sight of it sickened me with fear.

One horse was down, lying against a bank, bleeding profusely and kicking spasmodically in what I judged to be a death struggle. The other was on its feet and was plunging and tugging to free itself from the reins and harness which had got entangled in the wreck of the caleche. Under the body of the vehicle lay the Count, and as I did not for the moment see his companion, I guessed that she must be hidden under the wreckage too.

With a big effort I hoisted the vehicle sufficiently to drag out the Count; but the girl was not there.

Then I saw her lying behind a bush by the roadside. I ran to her and laid my finger on her pulse. With intense relief I found the beat; feeble it is true, but steady; and I poured some brandy into the cup of my flask and managed to get a

little of it between her lips. A trembling sigh escaped her; and I returned to the Count.

The police agent was right. The Count would never cross the German frontier—he had crossed the farther one. I knew enough of first aid work to ascertain the cause. His neck was broken; and I guessed he had been thrown sideways on to his head, snapping the vertebrae. I drew the body to the side of the road and threw one of the rugs over it.

Next I freed the sound horse—thinking he might be needed—soothed him a bit and tethered him to a tree.

By this time the girl was fast recovering and I went back to her. I was administering another dose of the brandy when she opened her eyes.

“You!” she said.

“Yes, fortunately. Don’t worry about things. May I help you to sit up and take this, or can you manage it alone? That’s good,” I smiled as she sat up unaided.

“What has happened? Oh, I remember. The hill and then ——” and she put her hands before her eyes for a moment.

“You have had a wonderful escape.”

The word confused her. “Did we escape then? Is he not following us? My uncle thought—oh, I understand; I thought you meant—but is he hurt?”

“Yes, badly.”

I had placed her so that her back was towards the wrecked carriage and the Count’s body; but at my words she turned and looked round. Her eyes were wide with horror. “Is he dead?” she asked.

“But for a miracle you would have shared his fate.”

She was silent for a moment and lifted her hands and let them fall with a sigh. “He would rather have had it so than have been captured; and he feared that this time. He was a hard, desperate man.”

There was no sign of any strong emotion or great personal grief in this reference to him. It was far better so under the circumstances. But I did not quite know what to say.

Then she surprised me. “He told me to come to you if anything happened to him. You recognized him, he said.”

“Yes, as Count Peter Valdemar. I warned him this morning.”

“He told me. You are a friend of—Count Ladislas Tuleski?” She said this with just a suspicion of hesitation.

“An intimate friend. Do you know him?”

“Yes—I know him,—oh, yes: I——” she hesitated, glanced at me and stopped.

“He is one of my most intimate friends and one of the best fellows in the world,” I said enthusiastically.

She made no reply, but glanced swiftly at me again and lowered her head.

“I think I can walk now,” she said presently; and I helped her to rise. “I am not hurt, you see. It was only fright and shock.”

“Thank God it was no worse,” I cried. She did not seem to hear this. “Now, what do you wish to do?”

“I don’t know. What ought I to do? My uncle—do you know the Count was my uncle?—or, rather, not my own uncle, no real blood relation.”

“No, I had no idea.”

“When the trouble came at Warsaw he had to fly, and he was carrying certain papers with instructions to friends of the Fraternity to Cracow. A raid is expected there; and there are papers which threaten us all. Even my own dear mother is in danger. He told me to carry those papers through to Cracow at any cost; to get your help if need be, and to say that your friend, Count Ladislas, was also involved. I was to tell you this, if you showed any reluctance to help me. But now what can we do?” and she looked the picture of dismay.

“You were travelling as an English girl?”

“Yes, as Miss Mary Smith. He got passports for me in that name and for himself as Ivan Grubel, my servant.”

“Where are they?”

“He has them and the rest of the papers. They are sewn into his coat.”

“Why did he make all this methodical preparation?”

“He was recognized, I think, in Bratinsk. That was why we were driving away. He expected to be pursued.”

“If I get the coat, can you find the papers?”

“Yes, but—he is—dead;” and she shuddered.

“We have to think of the living. Yourself, my friend, and your mother.”

It is not a pleasant thing to strip the coat off a dead man; but it had to be done. So I went and did it as quickly as I could. I took it back to her and she was hurriedly searching for the papers when she gave a little gasp of alarm and shrank close to me as a horseman appeared, picking his way very gingerly down the hill. It was my friend, the police agent from Warsaw. In a moment he took in the scene. He recognized me at once, and my companion a moment later.

“Ah, this is better luck than I expected. A smash, eh? So you didn’t get far away after all? I knew I should catch you, but didn’t hope to do it so soon. Where’s Count Peter Valdemar?”

“You again, is it?” I said, with a smile. “This young lady, a country-woman of mine, Miss Mary Smith, has met with an accident and her servant, named Ivan Grubel, has been killed. The horses ran away.”

“Killed, eh? That’s his coat then. Give that to me.” My companion caught her breath and clutched my arm.

“You guessed too fast, my friend; you did so this morning, you know, as I showed you afterwards. This coat is mine;” and with that I slipped my arms into it and put it on.

“Yes, it’s easy to see it’s yours by the way it fits you,” he sneered. My arms were some three inches too long for the sleeves and the body was ridiculously short. “I know you by this time. You must give me that coat. I saw the woman there searching the pockets for something.”

“If you want it, you’d better come and take it. I shan’t give it up unless you do.”

“For your own sake don’t mix up any more with this. If you are an Englishman, go away and leave me to deal with this woman. But give me that coat. You know to whom it belonged; and I must have it.”

He dismounted and walked toward me.

“You had better keep your distance,” I said quietly.

“You resist? Then I must do my duty. You are my prisoner.”

The threat of arrest seemed to scare the girl badly, but without a second’s hesitation she tried to shield me by

taking everything on her own shoulders.

“I alone am responsible,” she cried, stepping forward. “Give up the coat, Mr. Anstruther. It is I who should be the prisoner.”

She acted pluckily, like the little brick she was, and with the best intentions in the world. But it was a huge mistake. She had practically given the whole thing away.

The significant leer of triumph on the police agent’s face made it plain that he appreciated this.

CHAPTER III
VOLNA DRAKONA

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I LOST no time in undeceiving the police agent. “You are plucking unshot birds,” I said. “There is not going to be any arrest either of this lady or myself. You can end the thing anyhow you please, short of arresting either of us.”

I was glad that that made him lose his temper. “Do you dare to disobey me?” he cried furiously.

I became personal and heaped fuel on the fire of his anger. “Don’t be a foolish little person. You don’t know how idiotic you look. You can do nothing. You are six inches shorter than I am, and I don’t care a kopeck for your authority as a policeman.”

He swore fluently and stamped his feet with rage. “You will answer for this,” he shouted, using a very foul epithet. “I thought this morning you were a spy. Now I know it. You shall not insult me. In the name of the Czar, I call on you to submit.”

I laughed at him with intentional aggravation. “You are a worse fool than I thought. I am a British subject; I have done no wrong; and I care no more for your Czar than I do for you. You have just insulted me grossly and the best thing you can do is to clear out.”

“You are a revolutionary, in league with this woman and the carrion there;” and he jerked his thumb toward the dead body.

I took no notice of this coarseness, but untethered the unhurt horse and led it over to my companion.

“We are going,” I said to him. “I have told you that this is Miss Mary Smith; I have her passport here in my coat.” I rummaged in the pockets, found two passports, and handed them to him.

He glanced at them and then pocketed them with a grin of self-satisfaction at his astuteness.

“Where are you going?”

“That is our own business. I will not let you follow us. Return me those passports,” I said, threateningly. He did not see my object but backed away toward his horse. “Come, quick.”

He hesitated a moment and then mounted hurriedly. “As they were in your coat they will connect you with these people,” he said with a cunning leer.

I did not care a rap for this now; whether he kept or returned them. We could not possibly use them again, so I shrugged my shoulders and turned away. “Go to the devil,” I said.

But he had a surprise for me. As my back was turned a pistol shot rang out, and the horse I was holding plunged and tore loose from me, limped down the hill and fell to the ground.

“Now we’ll see about your tall talk, Mr. Englishman. You and the woman there will just march on ahead of me into Bratinsk; and if either of you so much as look round, I’ll fire. Mind that. By God.”

His weapon was levelled at my head and my companion again showed the stuff she was made of. With a little cry she dashed right in front of me dead in the line of fire.

“You must not shoot,” she said, quite steadily. “This gentleman has done nothing but help me after the accident.”

“We’ll find out all about that at Bratinsk,” replied the man. “Now march, you two.”

It was an ugly situation; but I did not take the police agent as seriously as did “Mary Smith.” They are bullies to the core, so long as it is safe to bully; and this fellow was a particularly brutal brute of his brutal class.

There is one thing they are all afraid of, however, the censure of their superiors; and their superiors hate the investigation which follows when anything happens to foreigners in general, and Englishmen and Americans in particular.

I felt quite confident, therefore, that he would not fire, and that the chief danger we ran was that his weapon might go off by accident. Moreover, he was probably as bad a shot as they nearly all are. So I put up a bluff.

I drew my companion to one side and looking the man square in the face I walked a couple of paces toward him. Instead of shooting he backed his horse and warned me again. This satisfied me.

“You can fire if you like. You know I am an Englishman and if you shoot me there’ll be a row.”

“Do as I say,” he shouted with an oath.

I paused and then said very deliberately: “I’ll see you in hell first. Fire at me if you dare.”

A little gasp of alarm from the girl was lost in a volley of oaths from the police agent.

Then the luck veered once more to our side. Inadvertently his spur touched his horse's flank and the animal, taking his loud tones as addressed to it, began to fidget and prance so that he could not have taken aim had he wished. The figure he cut was quite laughable.

But it was my chance and I took it. I picked up a stone and flung it at the horse. This set it kicking and plunging desperately so that the none too skilful rider was nearly unhorsed. Choosing my moment I ran up, seized the hand which held the revolver and wrenched the weapon away without any trouble at all.

That was the end of the fighting so far as he was concerned; for he drove his spurs home and clattered away up the hill.

I judged that he was afraid I might now do the shooting which he had threatened so glibly; and mingled with his fear was the belief that, as he had shot our horse and had thus destroyed the means of our flight, he could safely ride off to fetch assistance.

"That's a good riddance anyhow," said I with a laugh, when he had disappeared. "I think you're the pluckiest girl I ever knew."

"I was so frightened," she declared.

"Yes, so frightened that you actually put yourself right in front of his revolver. That's the kind of fright I mean; only I call it pluck."

"It was nothing. But you should not have taken any part in this miserable affair. You have compromised yourself with the police and may get into all kinds of trouble."

“Don’t you think we had better start for Cracow? That fellow won’t be away longer than he can help, and I have to get a little scheme ready for him before he returns. The sooner we start the safer.”

“But what can we do about——” and she glanced to where the Count’s body lay.

“If we are to think of the living, we can do nothing. He has been recognized and when the police return they will care for the body and something can be done from Warsaw.”

“It seems heartless to leave him,” she murmured in distressed perplexity.

“There is no other way; so if you please we will start. I’ll tell you my plan as we walk. Your mother’s safety is in the balance, remember.” She yielded then and we set out.

“I think we shall get through without any great trouble. There is a train from Bratinsk somewhere about eight o’clock, which will put us in Cracow in a few hours.”

“But I have no passport now, to pass the frontier.”

“Fortunately, I can arrange that. My first plan is to send the police off on a false scent. There is a peasant family, not a mile from the top of the hill—where my horse is, by the way—and they will do anything for me. I helped them out of some trouble when I was here last year, and they think a lot of it. With this police agent away from Bratinsk for a few hours, we can get off secretly and safely.”

At the top of the hill I found my horse, put “Miss Smith” on his back and handed her the coat which had been the first cause of trouble.

“I shall need the coat for my plan; so find the papers which are sewn into it and be ready to rip them out the