

A SECRET SERVICE

BEING
STRANGE TALES OF A NIHILIST

BY
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Table of Contents

PREFACE.

CHAPTER I. WHY I BECAME A NIHILIST.

CHAPTER II. ON TRACKLESS SNOWS.

CHAPTER III. MY FRIEND, THE PRINCESS.

CHAPTER IV. THE BURLESQUE OF DEATH.

CHAPTER V. SOPHIE ZAGAROVNA'S SECRET.

CHAPTER VI. BY A VANISHED HAND.

CHAPTER VII. A ROMANCE OF THE STEPPE.

CHAPTER VIII. THE VELVET PAW.

CHAPTER IX. THE JUDAS-KISS.

CHAPTER X. AN IMPERIAL SUGAR PLUM.

CHAPTER XI. THE CONFESSION OF VASSILII.

CHAPTER XII. FALSE ZERO.

CHAPTER XIII. THE FATE OF THE TRAITOR.

CHAPTER XIV. AN IKON OATH.

CHAPTER XV. THE TZAR'S SPY.



"I rushed wildly up and endeavoured to stop the horrible punishment."

PREFACE.

While writing for *The Times* a series of articles dealing with the Russian Revolutionary movement and the condition of political exiles in Siberia, I became acquainted with the original of Anton Prèhznév. Strange as his stories chronicled in these pages may appear, there are nevertheless in London at the present moment many refugees from the Tzar's empire who could relate facts of an even more startling character. Tzaricide is unfortunately as popular in Russia as it ever was, and the so-called Nihilists have, since the accession of Nicholas II., relinquished none of their activity. There was but little genuine mourning for Alexander III., and the feigned national affliction was speedily succeeded by joyful anticipations of a new and prosperous era. But Russia has already found that her golden hopes have faded. The powerful, unscrupulous officials surrounding the young sovereign, prompted by those evil principles that made Russia under Alexander III. a blot upon European civilisation, have, by painting in lurid colours a rude and ungrateful nation whom to govern is now his thankless task, quickly succeeded in crushing any projected reforms. Thus the despairing nation continues to writhe under the oppression of corrupt officials, and those who dare lift their voices in protest are arrested and hurried without trial to far Siberia. The land is inundated with the swelling flood of the people's sorrow as rivers in spring, abundant with water, overflow the fields, and it will always be as long as an irresponsible, cruel, and despotic autocracy holds and directs her destinies.

The Tzar knows little of the horrors committed in his name. He has never been inside the tenth pavilion in Warsaw Citadel, where starving people have, times without number, been knouted to death. He knows nothing of the dark underground dungeons overrun with vermin in the Peter-Paul Fortress; he has never breathed their fœtid, poisoned atmosphere. Even when he crossed Siberia the officials who surrounded him took every precaution to prevent him from witnessing the troops of wretched, shivering humanity trudging through trackless snows and driven to their gloomy tombs with knouts and butt-ends. Revolutionists are the creation of circumstances, of the general discontent of the people, of the striving of Russia after a new social framework. Discontent only grows the more when it is repressed. For this reason the places of slain and imprisoned Revolutionists are constantly taken by individuals who come forth from among the people in ever-increasing numbers, and who are still more embittered, still more energetic. Truly the Imperial Autocracy is tottering towards its doom.

By a special order issued from the Press Bureau at St. Petersburg copies of this book are prohibited from entering the Russian Empire, while, not content with the formal interdiction of my novel, "Guilty Bonds," which deals with a political conspiracy, the Russian Government has also sent one of its emissaries to my house in London to inform me of the fact. This, I believe, is a personal attention received by no other English author. The methods of the agents of the Russian Secret Police in London and the measures taken by the Revolutionists to repress their activity will probably be a revelation to English readers, some of whom will doubtless

recognise a few of the following chapters as having appeared in my "Strange Tales of a Nihilist," now out of print. That I have been compelled to bestow fictitious names upon the actors in these dramas, add and suppress certain incidents, and change the scene in more than one instance, is obvious; nevertheless, I anticipate that many will recognise in Anton Prèhznef's stories solutions of more than one sensational mystery that has startled Europe.

WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

**A SECRET SERVICE.
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NIHILIST.**

CHAPTER I.

WHY I BECAME A NIHILIST.

Brief forewords are necessary to this record of an adventurous life.

At the outset it is my earnest desire to disabuse the minds of English readers that the Narodnaya Volya, or the Party of Freedom, are mere murder leagues. Unfortunately, English writers, unacquainted with Russian life, ignorant of the true objects of the organisation, or of its inner working, and only recognising its far-reaching influence, have surrounded Nihilism with a glamour and mystery that would be highly amusing to us were it not for the fact that their sensational and sanguinary narratives injure our cause. So little does the average Englishman know of the conditions of life under the Tzar, that any argument in favour of Nihilism would be useless and wearisome, therefore I leave him to decide for himself, after reading the exciting episodes of a strange career, whether Autocracy or Freedom is to be preferred.

I, Anton Prèhznef, subject of the Tzar, now in exile in England, hereby make free and full confession of my secret alliance with the so-called and mis-called Nihilist Party. We, who are struggling to effect a change for the better in the internal and economical condition of the Russian people, look with envy upon every Englishman, at the same time regarding him as a brother. To overthrow the dynasty by murder is not our object, although, alas! human life has been sacrificed, as my narrative

will show. We desire peace; and while staying our hand and refraining from dealing the blows that are at this moment in our power to strike at the Imperial Autocracy, we are living in the expectation that the flood of popular indignation will sweep off the face of the Russian soil the bureaucracy, the *tchinovniks*, and the present ruinous and shameful system of organised robbery and tyranny, and create something better than the existing brutality and corruption that has plunged so many millions in abject misery.

Prior to narrating the exciting incidents of my career, it will be necessary, in order that it should be rightly understood why I lifted a hand against the rule of the Tzar, Alexander III., or his successor the Tzar Nicholas, to describe the tragic events which led to the overflow of my indignation against tyranny, and caused my subsequent alliance with the Brothers of Freedom.

Few English readers rightly understand the claims of the Russian Revolutionists, therefore it will be well to make an explanation, and I cannot do better than quote from the secretly printed manifesto issued by the Narodnoe Pravo ("Popular Right") Party. This manifesto, which was recently circulated widely by clandestine means throughout the Russian Empire, and even in Siberia, points out in forcible language that Russia must now determine her further destinies, and consider the question of political freedom. It proceeds as follows:—

“As there is not, and cannot be, a hope that the Government will willingly enter upon the path indicated, there is but one course remaining to the people, to oppose by the force of

organised public opinion the inertness of the Government and the narrow dynastic interests of the autocracy. The Narodnoe Pravo has in view the creation of this force. In the opinion of the Party popular right includes in itself alike the conception of the right of the people to political freedom, and the conception of its right to secure its material needs upon the basis of national production. The Party considers the guarantees of this right to be:—Representative government on the basis of universal suffrage; freedom of religious belief; independence of the Courts of Justice; freedom of the Press; freedom of meeting and association; inviolability of the individual, and of his rights as a man.

“Thus understanding popular right, the Party sets itself the task of uniting all the oppositional elements of the country, and of organising an active force which should, with all the spiritual and material means at its disposal, attain the overthrow of autocracy, and secure to every one the rights of a citizen and a man.”

I commenced life under a disadvantage, for I am a Jew.

In Russia the law declares all Hebrews to be “aliens whose several rights are regulated by special ordinances,” and my race is regarded as a pariah caste in consequence. The memory of my earlier years it is unnecessary to recall. My father, Isaac Prèhznèv, was a well-known operator on the Bourse in Petersburg, and he and my mother moved in good society. Our house in the Isàkievskaya was well known to people with long-sounding titles and long pedigrees, and, as children, my sister Mascha and I had made a practice of standing upon the stairs on Thursday nights, watching the arrival of the uniformed and

much-decorated men and handsome ladies who attended the receptions which my parents gave weekly during the season.

Mascha, three years my junior, was petted by the guests and servants none the less than I had been, for we were a pair of over-indulged children, and lived a life of uninterrupted happiness.

At last I arrived at an age when departure from home became compulsory, and one eventful day I bade farewell to those I loved and was drafted to Vologda to perform my military service. From a life of luxurious ease to a soldier's existence in the barren district around Lake Kubinskoi was by no means a pleasurable change, especially as, according to law, no Jew can rise to the rank of officer, although he is bound to serve in the rank and file like all other Russians. Nevertheless, I endured the wearying monotony of eternal drill, receiving occasional letters that came from my distant home like brief rays of sunshine upon my otherwise dark, unhappy life. Suddenly, when I had been at Vologda about two years, they ceased. Several times I wrote, but received no answer. I telegraphed, but with the same result. I wrote to relatives in Petersburg inquiring the cause of my parents' strange silence, yet even these letters remained unanswered.

Unable to obtain leave of absence, the days passed slowly, and I grew sorely puzzled at the mystery.

Imagine my feelings when one morning a comrade, who had had a *Novoë Vremya* sent to him, handed me the newspaper and pointing to a line, asked—

“Is he any relation of yours?”

I looked eagerly where he indicated. My heart stood still, and the paper fell from my nerveless grasp.

It was an announcement to the effect that “Isaac Prèhznëv, Jew, of the Isàkievskaya, St. Petersburg,” had formed one of the convoy of prisoners exiled by administrative process to Siberia during the past week!

Ignorant of the whereabouts of my mother and sister, and apprehensive regarding their future, I was refused leave and forced to continue my military service until the day arrived when I was free to return and seek them.

To preserve the continuity of this narrative, events must here be described which were afterwards related to me by Mascha.

From some unknown cause my unfortunate father had fallen into disfavour with the Tzar, although nothing was known of it until one night, during the progress of a ball at home, half-a-dozen men from the *Okhrannoë Otdelenië*,^[4] entered and arrested him. A fortnight later he was sent, without trial, to the mines of the Trans-Baikal, all he possessed was confiscated by the Government, and my mother and sister turned into the streets to starve.

Our relations were poor and could do little to assist them; therefore, in order to hide their poverty, Mascha and her mother went to Mstislavl, a small sleepy town in the Government of Moghilev, where for nearly a year they earned a precarious livelihood by doing needlework and making lace. But the year was disastrous to Russia, for a terrible famine

spread over the land, and, alas! for my unfortunate family, its effects were keenly felt in Moghilev. At the time I arrived at Petersburg in search of them, they had no work and were starving.

Stretched upon a straw mattress in the corner of a cold, bare room in a wretched *isba*, lay my mother, her thin, haggard face, protruding cheek bones, and sunken eyes showing unmistakably that death was at hand.

Mascha stood, pale and motionless, looking sorrowfully down upon her. In the grey light of the brief autumn day the dismal place presented a woeful aspect, being almost devoid of furniture, the round discoloured stove having gone out several days ago. Notwithstanding her plain shabby dress, it was certain that Mascha was beautiful; all Mstislavl, if called upon, would bear witness to this fact. About eighteen years of age, she was tall, slender, graceful, with beautifully rounded throat and arms, fair wavy hair drawn back upon her brow, a dazzling complexion, and eyes of clear child-like blue. When she smiled her charms were enhanced by an expression of indescribable simplicity and frankness.

At this moment, however, she presented a sad picture, for her hair had fallen dishevelled about her handsome face, and her eyes were red with weeping. As her mother tossed wearily upon her pallet, moaning in pain, Mascha fell upon her knees and kissed the cold, drawn face.

“Are you suffering much, mother dearest?” she asked, tenderly, smoothing away the dark hair from the clammy forehead.

“Yes—I—I’m sinking fast, my child,” she replied in a faint, hoarse voice. “I shall leave you very soon, Mascha, and you will be alone, with no other protector except God, to whose mercy I confide you. Trust in Him in the hours of affliction or misfortune, and by His infinite power He will guide your footsteps and protect you from all harm.” She paused, and added, “Though you may be scoffed at and persecuted by Orthodox Russians, never forget that you are one of God’s chosen, and while resenting insult, always refrain from revenge.”

“I can’t bear to hear you talk like this,” cried my sister, bursting into tears. “You must not—you shall not die!” Springing suddenly to her feet, she stifled her sobs, and said, “You sha’n’t starve! I’ll save you, even if compelled to beg bread from the Gentiles. I shall not be long, and I will bring you food.”

With these words, she threw a cloak around her shoulders, and opening the door, disappeared; while her mother closed her wearied eyes and prayed earnestly for succour.

Through the old uncleanly Ghetto—the quarter in which Jews were suffered to reside—Mascha wandered aimlessly, wondering where she could discover a person generous enough to give her a morsel of bread. She knew it was useless to ask for food of the people of her own faith, for they were all in terrible distress. Owing to the failure of the harvest for two consecutive seasons food was so scarce in Western Russia, that in many places the peasants were subsisting on grass and roots, while hundreds were dying daily of sheer starvation. But worst of all, the feeling against the Jews had become greatly embittered, from the fact that the moujiks, in their ignorant

fanaticism, had been taught to believe by the village *popes* that the Hebrews had brought the famine upon the land. Hence Jew-baiting had become rife. Unfortunate Israelites were cuffed and assaulted in the open streets, and were unable to obtain redress, and in dozens of towns in Little and Central Russia the Ghettos had been looted and afterwards burned.

In these anti-Semitic excesses Jews were treated worse than dogs, often ruthlessly murdered without a hand being stretched forth to save them, while women were outraged in sight of their children, and there were committed diabolical atrocities that had raised the indignation of every European nation. Murder and pillage ran riot through the Tzar's domains, side by side with the grim spectre Famine, that had spread starvation and death through the great Empire from the White Sea to the Caucasus.

The Ghetto at Mstislavl was the oldest quarter of the little town, consisting of one dark, evil-smelling street, into which the sun never seemed to shine. The black wooden houses, with numerous poles projecting from the windows, further increased the darkness of the narrow lane. From end to end Mascha walked through it, but found no one who could render her assistance. The place seemed deserted, the houses were all closed; the usually noisy colony seemed hushed by death.

Leaving the Jews' quarter, she made her way through the town and entered the market-place, where a little business was still being carried on. Groups of moujiks in their dirty sheepskins were standing about idly, their thin, pinched faces showing that they, too, were feeling the effect of the dearth of food. While wandering along, engrossed in her own sad thoughts,

Mascha chanced to look up, and her eyes fell upon a buxom young woman, who held a large piece of bread in her hand, from which she was feeding a great black dog.

The thought flashed across her mind that she must get food by some means, and save her mother's life. Without a moment's reflection, she stifled her pride, and rushing wildly across to where the woman stood, begged for a portion of the bread.

"You!—Give bread to you!" cried the woman, with a harsh, brutal laugh. "Hebrews are dogs, but this"—and she pointed to the animal at her feet—"this is a Christian dog, and I would rather feed him than you."

"For my mother's sake!" implored Mascha. "She's dying!"

"Bah! If she dies it will be one Jewess the less. Your people are our curse. Go home and die too!"

And the woman spat upon her contemptuously, and turning her back upon the supplicant, continued feeding the dog.

Mascha, crestfallen and dejected, was walking slowly away when she suddenly felt a heavy hand upon her shoulder.

"Now, girl; what do you want here?" inquired a rough, coarse voice.

Glancing up quickly, she recognised the sinister features and shifty feline eyes of Ivan Osnavitsch, the *ispravnik*.^[2]

"I want bread; my mother is starving," she replied.

"Starving? Like all the other dogs that infest the Ghetto kennels, eh? Well, you've no right to beg of Christians. The law of the

Mir forbids it, and I ought to take you to prison as a vagabond. If you want food you should go to the Governor. His Excellency has received relief for distribution, and if you call upon him he may probably give you some. Tell him that I sent you."

"Oh, thank you," she replied, gratefully; "I'll go at once."

Turning, she directed her steps hurriedly towards the palace of the Government, about a mile from the town on the Lubkovo road, while the *ispravnik* laughed, muttering as he watched her retreating figure: "His Excellency is a connoisseur of pretty faces. He will thank me for sending her."

Feeling that not a moment was to be lost, Mascha walked quickly along the muddy highway, that ran through a bare, barren country, beside the sedgy bank of the swiftly-flowing Soj.

Only by repute was General Martianoff, the Governor of Mstislavl, known to her. She knew that by the inhabitants of the Ghetto he was dreaded as a cruel, drunken, and depraved official, and she had heard the Rabbi warn them against breaking any of the thousand tyrannical laws which comprise the *Swod*, or penal code. A Russian District Governor is locally as much of an autocrat as his Imperial Master, the Tzar. He can do exactly what he pleases with the poor, cringing wretches over whom he is given authority. He can condemn Jew or Gentile to prison without trial; he can order any one who displeases him to be knouted, and with his colleague, the *ispravnik*, and his myrmidons, can enforce inhuman tortures not a whit the less terrible than those of the Spanish Inquisition.

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