

The Black Cat

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A Russian Revenge.

BY E. G. CHEVERTON.



S Helen Winscom stepped from the store of the *coiffeuse* into the brightness and bustle of the boulevard, she felt as guilty as a criminal haunted by the knowledge of a crime. She blamed her own vanity for allowing her to covet the beautiful coil of hair which now so magnificently augmented her scanty tresses thinned by recent illness. She blamed Madame Trèsjéune for her specious argument that the braid was only another shade of red than her own hair, and, "in effect Madame was not really dyeing her hair but making a slight accommodation of the tint." Already her secret seemed everybody's and, though long accustomed to observation and scrutiny, to-day the sidelong glance, the furtive regard, the bolder stare, — all tributes paid to her beauty from her earliest introduction into society, — had the effect of making her blush like a school girl till her whole body pricked and tingled.

To regain her composure she turned to the window of a jewelry store, celebrated even among the *magasins* of Paris for the purity of its gems and the beauty of its trinkets. With her first glance the guilty, half-conscious feeling entirely vanished. She felt that she would have dyed her hair many shades deeper than its natural color, instead of one, to produce an effect so splendid as that given

back by the mirrors lining the windows. Against the pallor of her complexion her hair showed like a sunset on a field of snow. It was a glorified red. Burnished copper barely suggests its beauty and brilliance. It made one think of the morning sun seen, blurred, through a London fog. From these reflections, internal and external, Mrs. Winscom was rudely awakened to the publicity of her position by the appearance of another face in the mirror beside her own; a man's face of dark complexion, framed in a close-clipped pointed beard. Affecting to be interested in examining a bracelet, Helen stooped as if to observe it more closely. When her eyes rose again to the level of the mirror the face was still there. The man seemed to be endeavoring to attract her attention. A well-gloved hand was raised to the beard as if to stroke it, and from the half-closed fingers peeped the edge of a visiting card. As the hand was removed the man's glance dropped significantly to the card and then sought her own eyes with a look of intelligence that was unmistakable. Her face burned with anger as she left the window and pursued her way along the boulevard, walking swiftly, heedlessly, to the first crossing, where she turned and passed to the other side. Gradually she slackened her pace as her irritation subsided, and her mouth softened with a smile as she thought: "How foolish of me to resent a notice invited by my own position! Posing before a mirror in a public street as if —"

She broke off her monologue as her eye caught the curve of a dainty Sèvres vase in a store window. It was a corner store, and its windows fronted on the intersecting avenue as well as on the boulevard, the vase occupying a pedestal in the angle of the window and being visible from either approach. As she looked she felt, against her will, her eyes slowly drawn up from the vase until they met those of the man she had recently encountered at the jeweler's. Standing now on the avenue, he was gazing at her, directly through the angle of the window. Again he held the card in his hand, but this time more openly as his position permitted. With a glance which was meant to be annihilating she turned from the window and signaled one of the ubiquitous fiacres which was just then passing. "To the Hotel Mazarin," she commanded as she entered, and then recoiled, half stupefied

by the appearance, at the window of the vehicle, of the persistent stranger who had evidently listened to her directions. But anger overcame her astonishment when, covering the act with a bow, he managed to toss a card into her lap. Seizing the card at the instant it touched her dress she tore it violently in two and dashed the pieces in the man's face just as the cab, starting forward with a jerk, threw her breathless against the cushions.

"The wretch!" she cried, panting with indignation. "And he heard me give my address. Fortunately he doesn't know my name. But is there another woman in the hotel with hair like mine? I wish the hotel might be full of women with every shade of red hair! No, not my shade," she added, her vanity reviving, "but a shade near enough to confuse the man who attempted to describe me by the color of my hair."

Gradually, however, as the carriage rolled along the smooth pavement the monotonous motion tranquilized her nerves, putting her in a mood to accept an explanation of the man's conduct which entirely restored her good humor. He was probably some artist who saw in her the exact type of model he required for a work that was to make his fame and fortune, and who had grasped at the opportunity to obtain her address in this unconventional manner. She had invited notice, she told herself, by her persistence in running about Paris unattended when the friend on whose entertainment and chaperonage she had depended proved inopportunately absent. And anyway the whole affair amounted to nothing, as probably at that very moment there awaited her at the hotel the telegram she expected summoning her to meet the Bronsons in prosaic, respectable London. She found the telegram as she hoped, together with a note which she left unopened until she discovered that the message, dated from Amsterdam, read:—

"Arrive in London Saturday. Join us at the Metropole.
Answer.

AMELIA BRONSON."

After ringing for a telegraph blank, she seated herself at the table and, taking up the note, scrutinized the address curiously, trying vainly to place the writer. When at last she broke the seal a piece of card fluttered to the floor. A blank card it

proved, except for a faint mark like the flourish sometimes attached to the final letter of a name, but on the other piece, which she found in the envelope, were traced certain curiously shaped characters; they might, she thought, be Chinese or Hebrew. Once more she examined the address, but the writing — a feminine running hand in which the M's might be W's or W's M's — was absolutely unfamiliar. Another and more careful scrutiny of the card showed that there was a slight soil on the back, as if it had been dropped on the street and rubbed with a handkerchief. Instantly there flashed upon her mind the recent cab episode. Obviously this was the card she had torn and thrown in the face of her annoyér. Her theory of the artist, then, was wrong. But what could these symbols mean? And why was not the soiled card replaced by a clean one?

She tossed the pieces on the floor as a knock at the door announced the bearer of the telegraph blanks. But the message sent, she could not put the episode from her mind. To meet her friends as appointed, it was not necessary to leave Paris until tomorrow. But her shopping was done. Why expose herself longer to this mysterious annoyance? Why not go at once and put the channel between her and the man with the card?

Another glance at the puzzling bits of pasteboard changed her uncertainty to resolution. So it happened that while her telegram to her friends announced that she would meet them on Saturday, by noon on Friday she was safely and comfortably lodged in the Metropole, and inclined to be satisfied with everything, even the rainy day which made it the easier for her to decide to remain in the hotel and take a thorough rest in preparation for the sight-seeing which would follow the arrival of the Bronsons.

Returning from luncheon, she had just disposed herself for a comfortable afternoon when a caller was announced. Her first thought, that some friend from home might be staying at the same hotel, was banished by a glance at the card which bore the name of Mr. Woodford, representing Mills & Curry, Bankers, and agents for Brownlow & Co., who had issued her letter of credit. Had the firm failed? The feeling of panic which seized her at the thought brought her, almost breathless, to the reception room, empty except for a gentleman who rose and bowed as she entered.

He was of middle height and thick figure, with a round head and coarse, black hair brushed straight back from a low forehead. His greenish eyes had a feline look which was intensified by a smile which bared a set of white teeth to the gums. When he spoke it was with the precision of a foreigner, somewhat slowly, but with a good accent. He bowed and seated himself in response to Helen's slight inclination as she took a chair by a small center table.

"You are Mr. Woodford?" said Helen, as she laid the card on the table and looked inquiringly at her visitor.

"Ah, pardon," he said; "I found myself lacking a card, so I wrote my name on the back of a business card I chanced to have. It is this that I should have presented."

Very quietly he laid on the table before her a piece of pasteboard the sight of which held her spellbound. For before her eyes, the torn parts neatly joined, was the card she had thrown on the floor of her room in the Hotel Mazarin!

Without a word she looked from the bit of pasteboard to its bearer. He was observing her intently, but bore no resemblance to the man who had followed her in Paris. With an increasing instinct of distrust she took up the banker's card again and turned it over. Before she could decipher the penciled characters on the back he spoke again:—

"Let me save Madame the trouble. My name is Sergius Pushkin, and I call to ask if Madame will be pleased to tell me how she became possessed of the card she left in the Hotel Mazarin. One moment, Madame!" as Mrs. Winscom turned as though to leave the room without a word. "You challenge my right to put the question? It is the right of one holding office under the Russian government, who recognizes on the card you left behind, certain Russian characters, written in a peculiar manner, one over the other, and used by Nihilists to convey to one of their number a warning of approaching danger."

"But I am not a Nihilist. I am an American woman traveling abroad for my health, and temporarily separated from my party," said Helen. And then stung with the desire to baffle this evil-eyed inquisitor, she said more calmly: "As for the card, I found it on my table in an envelope addressed to me. I

could not understand it and tore it in two. It is for you to explain why I received it."

The Russian smiled his wolfish smile. "It is very easy to explain," he said quietly. "Madame bears the most striking resemblance to a Russian woman named Olga Oblowsky, who sometime ago escaped from Siberia. She was distinguished for the color and beauty of her hair, which was of the same wonderful shade as Madame's, and it was owing to her *chevelure* that Madame was mistaken for the Russian by my agents, who summoned me to Paris. Upon my arrival I discovered that further inquiry had disclosed the supposed Olga Oblowsky to be an American lady traveling abroad — as you have stated. But when Madame left Paris her room was examined, the card found, and as it seemed to lend some color to an improbable theory, I followed Madame to London for this interview."

"But how did you know my address?" Helen asked.

"Madame has been in communication with her friends. It is not difficult to read telegrams. Ah!" as his companion turned to the door with only the faintest inclination of dismissal, "Madame desires to say no more?"

"I am not a spy in the employ of the Russian government," said Helen coldly, with a marked accent on the pronoun.

"Madame has the valuable qualification of reticence," he answered her, with a sneer which the display of his teeth seemed to render into a snarl. "I have the honor to wish Madame a good day." And with a profound bow he left the room.

The visit of the Russian, the new light thrown on the card episode in Paris, so thoroughly aroused Mrs. Winscom that she found it impossible to carry out her purpose of resting when she regained her room. Against her will her mind occupied itself entirely with this mysterious Russian woman so like herself, even to the hair. At the thought of this point of resemblance a horrible idea came to her.

What if this woman had been murdered and her hair sold! Pacing the room she stopped before the mirror, and it seemed to her excited fancy that this rare red of her hair was the red of blood.

A sharp knock at the door set her heart beating suffocatingly, and the appearance of the familiar blue telegram envelope by no

means reassured her, suggesting, as it did, that something had happened to the Bronsons. What had happened proved nothing but an enforced delay, which would postpone her friends' arrival until Monday, but in her present state of mind two days of solitude and retirement assumed the shape of a catastrophe. At one and the same time she was possessed by the desire to go somewhere, see something, and weighed down by the thought of venturing out on a solitary expedition. All the usual sights enumerated in Baedeker or the newspapers seemed stale and unprofitable without companionship, and yet the four walls of her room oppressed her unbearably.

Dinner came and found her still unsettled and irresolute. Then, impatient with herself, she decided on seeing Irving in his revival of "The Bells" at the Lyceum, and gave a hurried order for a ticket and carriage, in order that she might not have time to change her mind. To drive directly to the theater and back again seemed to insure herself against any farther annoyances; and yet, bored and restless as she felt, she was more than once on the point of countermanding her orders and spending the evening by her open grate with a good book.

Once in the carriage, however, and driving slowly through the foggy streets, she felt her spirits rising. It would be good to sit in the warm, brilliant theater and know those fog waves were beating helplessly against its walls. The play pleased her in prospect, and to be the sole occupant of a box promised novelty.

The fog made the progress of the carriage slow, and the curtain had risen when she entered the theater. There was a crowded house. In the interval between the first and second acts Helen was conscious that she was attracting some notice, and markedly from a man on the other side of the house. Raising her opera glasses, she carelessly let her glance range over the audience until the opposite box came into the field of vision. She was rewarded by a smile that bared the white teeth of Sergius Pushkin. She did not look in his direction again, but she felt the glance she would not meet, and its persistence was so entirely insolent that she found it hard to keep her mind on the action of the piece. The fascination of the play at length swept the Russian from her thoughts. Toward the close of the last scene she was aware of a slight stir in the opposite box. Looking across, she saw that a

man had entered and was carrying on a whispered conversation with the occupant. In a moment more Pushkin rose. As he left following the messenger, he turned and flashed one glance toward Helen. She had covered him with her glass as he retired, and when he turned, his look fell full on her own. It was a look she never forgot, so full was it of mingled hate and brutal triumph.

With an involuntary shiver she laid down the glass. The recognition of the Russian and the thoughts suggested by the little hint he had given of his mission — that he might be assisting in a tragedy quite as terrible as that on the stage — lent intensity to the closing scenes of the play, and she was conscious of more than usual excitement as the curtain fell.

It was slow work leaving the theater. Added to the ordinary crush was the annoyance of the fog, out of which, above the bustle and rattle, rumbled an occasional shout of warning; so that it was with a feeling of relief that Helen heard her carriage announced, and groping her way through the dimness stepped quickly into it and sank upon the cushions, closing her eyes wearily. After the strain of the evening the relaxation was so grateful that she hardly noticed that the carriage still delayed. But the next moment the opening of the door brought her back to the world, and before she could utter a protest a veiled figure entered, and was seated, and Helen found herself being driven rapidly away, with an unknown woman as companion. For just a moment her overwrought nerves quivered so that it seemed the tension must find relief in a scream. But her natural coolness, and a swift remembrance of the many chances that the encounter might be a mistake, calmed her.

"I beg your pardon," she said steadily; "in the fog you perhaps entered the wrong —"

But before she could finish, her companion broke in upon her.

"No," she said quietly, in a voice whose gentle modulations attested her breeding, "it is no mistake. I have deliberately intruded, but on a matter of life and death."

With a half-despairing gesture she drew aside her veil.

Involuntarily Helen shrank back. "It is —" she said, and stopped, choked.

"Yes," said the other sadly, "it is Olga Oblowsky. You shrink from me. I do not blame you. Sergius has already visited you. You have seen me through his eyes of evil."

"No," said Helen, "that man's opinion would carry no weight with me, even if he had done more than suggest a remarkable resemblance between us."

"And he told you that your hair was wonderfully like mine, did he not? The exact counterpart in color?"

"Yes, he laid special stress on that feature of resemblance," Helen answered, feeling very uncomfortable, for she wondered what this woman would say if she knew why her hair so greatly resembled her own.

"Madame," said Olga, leaning forward and stretching out a little hand which Helen involuntarily clasped, "I have intruded myself on you to ask a great favor. I hardly know how to ask, and yet because you are from the free land America, and are of that people, brave, generous, and warm of heart, I find courage. Ah, do not fear me!" as Helen, reminded of the strangeness of the interview and her slight knowledge of the petitioner, unclasped her hand from that of the Russian; "I do not say that my request is reasonable. Indeed, it will seem to you ridiculous. Yet I have risked my liberty and my life only to ask you for that coil of hair you bought in Paris, and which you are wearing to-night."

Dazed by the singularity of a request so different from the petition for practical assistance she had expected, Helen stammered: "But why—but what—" when the thought that had previously occurred to her after her interview with Pushkin made her break off and say, "Is it your hair?"

"It *was* mine," Olga replied.

"You sold it and want it back again?" Helen inquired.

"I want it again," Olga said, ignoring the first part of the question, "and believe me, it is no woman's whim. The dearest hope of my heart depends on Madame's answer. And it must be quick. We go slowly, but we are going too far for me. Life is at stake."

There was a passion of eagerness in the Russian woman's voice, in the face peering forward, the gesture of the outstretched hands,

that moved Helen out of herself. Without stopping to think of reasons or consequences she threw back the hood of her cloak, and with fingers that trembled slightly loosened the braid from her head and gave it to the woman.

With a little cry of gratitude Olga seized Helen's hand and kissed it. At the same time she laid a somewhat bulky envelope in her lap. "In this," she said, "is a letter which will explain all to you." As she spoke, as if in response to some signal, the carriage drew up to the edge of the pavement, and before it had fairly come to a standstill the door was opened by some one from without and quickly closed again after Olga's hasty exit. As her carriage started forward Helen lifted the curtain of the little window at her back and saw the dull gleam of lamps as a cab was turned around and vanished like a phantom in the fog. Indeed, the whole interview would have seemed merely a phantasy but for the envelope which she clasped anxiously during the rest of a seemingly interminable drive,—longing, yet fearing, to open it before she should be in the haven of her own room. When she had finally reached that shelter and locked the door she did not even wait to remove her opera cloak before tearing open the mysterious envelope. As she withdrew the folded sheets from their cover there dropped to the floor two five-pound Bank of England notes. She laid these in her lap and began to read.

"Madame," the letter ran, "if you should ever read these lines which I am penning in haste and uncertainty, you will perhaps find in them the explanation of and apology for events that forego their reception. Our plans are made. The atmosphere leagues with us. To-night will see me again a captive or—. But it is my story, the history of my past, Madame, that I want to tell. If I succeed, the rest will be told you by others. I was born noble. My father was an officer of the Court, and my twin brother, Nicholas, was also high in the service of the Tzar. We were alike, my brother and I, in height and features, in the remarkable color of our hair, and our minds were as closely akin as our bodies. When this brother became interested in the new teaching and was admitted to the circle of Nihilism, he did not tell me. It was the first reserve of his life from me. But I soon

guessed the secret, and while I accepted his faith, and believed with him, I was terrified for the danger to him and to the family through him. I lived in daily expectation of the blow that was sure to fall. And in due time it came. There was a high official of police, Sergius Pushkin, who paid me court and offered me marriage. I refused him, and he yet made himself offensive to me by attentions I could not resent.

“One day he called and requested to see me alone. My impulse was to refuse. But a sudden fear for Nicholas made me yield, and I received him. Then, like the cunning hound he was, he unfolded his mission. For long he had suspected my brother of Nihilism. He had watched him, trapped him, spied on him, until he had accumulated undoubted evidence of his complicity in a plot against the Tzar. Through my brother the whole family was liable. We were absolutely in Pushkin’s hands. Ruin, Siberia, death, confronted me in the form of this wretch with his smooth tongue and wolf smile. I divined in a moment his motive in this interview. I was to pay with myself the price of his secret. It was I, then, who approached the subject. ‘You would not have discovered this plot,’ I said, ‘if I had accepted your offer of marriage.’ ‘If I were of the Excellency’s family,’ he answered, with that sneering smile of his, ‘I should not involve myself in the ruin of my own kin.’ ‘My alternative, then,’ I replied, ‘is to be yours or to see my family ruined and sent to the mines.’ ‘Your perception does you credit,’ was his answer. ‘Then,’ I said, ‘I accept your proposition of marriage, with the provision that you not only withdraw my brother’s name from those connected with this plot, but protect him in the future should occasion arise.’ ‘Your pardon,’ he sneered; ‘we go too quickly. I do want you to be mine. But this time I have not proposed marriage. You rejected my former offer with scorn. Now you are in my power, and I do not choose to pay the price of my liberty for what I can get at a cheaper rate.’

“The insolence of his tone added to the vileness of his language. In a passion of rage I ran toward him and struck him on the face. ‘You Mongol hound!’ I cried. ‘I will not insult my race with another thought of you. Better that it should perish from the earth than that a taint of your foul blood should mark

and mar the strain.' The blood flushed his face at my blow. His eyes glared; his hands clinched convulsively. When he spoke, the suppressed passion of his voice made me shrink away from him in terror at my act.

“‘I give you one moment for decision,’ he said. ‘You anticipate delay, time after my departure to warn your brother and your father. There will be no time for warning. My men are at the doors. Every avenue is guarded. I have but to make a signal from this window,’ — he crossed to the window as he spoke, and pulled aside the draperies — ‘and your last hope is gone.’ ‘Make your signal, then,’ I gasped; ‘you are not my last hope or any hope, I will appeal to the Tzar.’

“Before my sentence was finished he had fluttered his handkerchief at the window. In an instant, it seemed, the house was in the possession of the police. I was given into custody, and hurried away to a place of detention. The servants were placed under arrest, my father's papers were seized, and he himself and my brother made prisoners when they entered the house accustomed to shelter them. I never saw them again. They were both condemned to the mines. My father died heartbroken on the journey. My brother was shot in an attempt to escape his guards. But I had yet an offer of liberty. My persecutor came again and renewed his proposition, promising even yet to save my father, and mitigate the punishment of my brother by his influence. I need not repeat my answer. I waited for my own turn to be tried and marched to the mines. But the trial never came. One day my head was shorn. The morning following I was taken to another cell, and confronted with my enemy. He bade me remove my clothes for punishment. While I stared at him, scarce understanding, a guard seized my arms, and my wrists were made fast to rings in the wall. They stripped my clothing to the waist, and I covered in shame against the shielding stones. Then Sergius Pushkin, rubbing his rude hand across my shoulders, said: ‘It is a pity to cut up such soft flesh with the harsh whip. See, we have made a whip that should suit my dainty lady's skin.’

“As he spoke, he took a knout from an assistant and held it before my eyes. It was my own hair twisted into a cruel whip made thick and hard by a treatment of grease, and flashing here

and there with the gleam of bits of metal that were to bite into the body. (My back is scarred forever by the furrows made by that whip.) But I will spare you details. Enough that I received my punishment, and entered on my journey to the mines. The friends who failed to effect the escape of my brother were successful in their plans for me. Since then I have lived in Switzerland and in Holland, taking my brother's place in the Councils of the friends of Russia. I have bided my time to strike a blow for the cause, and the time has come. It is for this I make my appeal to you. The executioner sold the knout of hair to a trader, and through him it went to Paris. Search was being made for it when you purchased it, and it was one of our friends who, never having seen me, and mistaking you for me, from the description given of me, tried to warn you of the vigilance of Sergius Pushkin, when you were in Paris."

Here the letter broke off abruptly. Only a line or two in pencil hastily and irregularly scrawled below begged acceptance of the accompanying bank notes in recompense for Helen's outlay for the braid.

As she read the closing words Helen let the letter fall into her lap. Her excited mind seemed to read the sequel to the story in flashes of lightning. She remembered the summons of Sergius from his box at the theater, and guessed at the impending catastrophe, — a struggle between the hunter and his game, the spy and the brotherhood. What was to be the result? Was Sergius apprised by his agent of the woman's movements? She felt sure, now, that such was the case. And she had not thought to tell Olga of the presence of Pushkin at the theater, or his abrupt departure. She had been cold, hard, selfish; had uttered no word of warning, made no proffer of help; had left her to fall again into the hand of that wretch. If she had only warned this woman! If she could only warn her now! There was an exaggeration of self-accusation in her thoughts due in part to her overwrought condition. Do what she would, she could not escape the feeling that she had failed a deeply wronged woman in her extremity. Worn out at last, she went to bed, but only to see in panoramic procession the events in the Russian woman's history. At length she fell into a troubled slumber, to wake with a scream from a

dream of a Russian dungeon, and her own flesh quivering under the knout.

It was early morning, but she could not sleep again, so she rose, and in a lounging robe sat by the window listening to the growing noises of the city. Presently she heard the shrill cry of a news-boy. "All about the 'orrible Russian murder in Bermondsey. Special edition." The blood rushed all over her at the sound. This was the last act in the tragedy. The woman she rode with last night was dead, murdered by that hound. Was there no justice, no help? She rose and pushed the electric button. She must know the truth, and set her mind at rest. It was some time before the astonished servant brought her the paper she had ordered. As she opened the damp sheet she saw in staring headlines:—

A RUSSIAN VENGEANCE.

SERGIUS PUSHKIN,

A RUSSIAN OFFICER OF POLICE,

FOUND MURDERED IN

A ROOM IN BERMONDSEY.

STRANGLED WITH A BEAUTIFUL TRESS

OF WOMAN'S HAIR.

KNOUTED BEFORE DEATH.

The paper fell from Helen's hand, and she sank back in her chair in a swoon.

In the private drawer in Mrs. Winscom's desk in her home in New York are Olga Oblowsky's letter and two five-pound Bank of England notes. On the other side of the Atlantic, in the cabinet of criminal curiosities at Scotland Yard, hangs a long tress of woman's hair. Its color is red, it is stiffened and matted as if with some greasy substance, and close scrutiny shows, here and there, some strips of rusty metal. Thus far apart are the first and last links in the chain of a Russian revenge.