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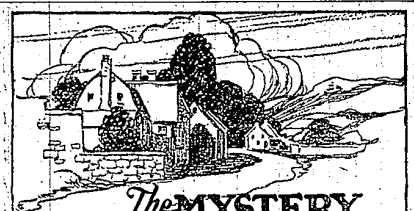

The MYSTERY ROAD

By E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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CHAPTER IV—Continued

—21—

"Then thousand pounds?" she almost shrieked. "Why, it is two million roubles! Ivan Krossneys would sell you his whole batch of prisoners for that, and throw the fortress in! Why, if it rested with me," she went on, "you could have Krossneys as well, for a quarter of that. Talk sense, please! There is not an Englishman there. Of that I am certain."

"The prisoner whose liberty I desire to buy," Gerald confided, "is a Russian. I do not know under what name he passes, but his number is twenty-nine."

Elsa Francks rose to her feet, opened the door and shouted to her maid in Russian. Then she took up a battered telephone instrument.

"I will speak with the major," she said. "I am the only civilian in the town with a telephone. It is a great favor. You can wait whilst I speak with him."

There was a good deal of delay before she was connected, and a further delay before the person with whom she desired to speak arrived. In time, however, the conversation was finished, apparently to her satisfaction. She set down the instrument.

"The governor is on his way down," she announced triumphantly. "Come, we will see to this little affair quickly. You can remain."

The maid entered the room, carrying a tray on which were bottles of beer and glasses. The woman eyed them with satisfaction.

"You are not Russian," she said, "so I do not offer you the samovar. Beer every one drinks—the English especially. That is so, is it not?"

"That is so," Gerald admitted. "I shall drink to your good health, madame."

"You may call me Elsa," she invited graciously, coming over to his side with a glass in her hand. "We will drink to the success of our enterprise."

Gerald accepted the glass and exchanged courteous amenities with his hostess. She eyed him with growing favor.

"It is a pity that you are not staying longer," she observed. "We might become friends. Who knows?"

"In that case," Gerald replied gallantly, "I might have to quarrel with Major Krossneys, and that would not do at all."

She snapped her pudgy fingers. A man who had ten thousand pounds to dispose of! What was Krossneys!

"Do you think," she scoffed, "that I shall stay here with him if I can get hold of half that sum you spoke of? Not I! I shall choose a different companion. I shall go to Monte Carlo. I shall never enter this accursed country again. Even to think of leaving it makes me giddy with happiness. It will be you who will be my deliverer. Let us drink again together."

"Perhaps," Gerald suggested, "the governor will not give up his prisoner."

Her exclamation of contempt was almost a shout. The very idea, while she scouted it as ridiculous, seemed to infuriate her.

"Give him up? Of course he will give him up!" she declared. "If he refused—why, I would take him by the beard—I would kill him!"

Her eyes were lit with cruelty. The snarl of an animal of prey twisted her lips. Then she burst into a fit of laughter.

"Why do I make myself furious?" she exclaimed. "Why, Ivan would sell every one of his hundred and thirty-seven prisoners for a tenth part of the money you speak of! Come, let us be gay. I will put something on the gramophone. You shall dance with me, yes?"

"What about his excellency the governor?" Gerald asked.

The woman made a little grimace.

"You are perhaps right," she acquiesced. "One must wait—wait until everything is arranged. After that I shall snap my fingers at Ivan. He wearies me, and he is an old man. Will you take me out of the country, my friend? We might to go into Poland—I have friends at Warsaw."

There were heavy steps outside. She held up her hand as though to warn him.

"It is the governor," she announced. "It is Ivan Krossneys who arrives. Mind, he is very jealous. Be careful."

Gerald, with all his nerves on edge, was yet able to indulge for a moment in a grim smile. The door was opened. The maid poked her head in and muttered something unintelligible. Close behind her entered the governor of the fortress.

The governor was a large, corpulent, untidy-looking man in an ill-fitting uniform, with coarse features and a straggling beard. He clicked his heels together and made some pretense at a military salute, as Elsa introduced her visitor. She whispered a word or two apart with him in Russian, and then continued in French, which she spoke apparently with less ease than English.

"This gentleman," she declared, "has a great affair of business to discuss with you. He was sent here by a friend of mine whose name I may not give. He is an Englishman pretending to be an American, but that makes for little. He is entrusted with a great sum of money for a certain purpose."

Into the governor's eyes flashed for a moment some reflection of the cupidity which had gleamed in the woman's. Money was scarce in Russia; pay was small and irregular in coming. The thought of money whetted his interest.

"Let me hear what this gentleman has to say," he invited.

"I have come with a very bold proposition," Gerald began, "but it is one which I hope you will consider carefully. You have many prisoners in your fortress who are detained largely through misfortune. There are many there whose offenses are trivial, who will probably be released shortly in any case, and who might just as well be free as remain a charge upon the government."

"You seem to know a great deal about my prisoners," the governor remarked graciously. "Many of them are criminals of the worst order."

"It is not one of these whom I wish to discuss with you," Gerald assured him. "It happens that you have a young man there who is not of the criminal class at all. He has very wealthy friends."

"Eh!" the governor exclaimed. "How wealthy?"

The woman broke into the conversation. She gripped her friend by the arm.

"Ivan," she cried, "it is incredible! Do you know the sum which monsieur speaks of? It takes one's breath

"And What the Devil Excuse Can I Make for Letting Him Go?"

away! He speaks of ten thousand pounds! It is two million roubles! What do you think of that?"

"G—d!" Krossneys muttered. "A prisoner of mine?"

"A prisoner of yours," Gerald repeated. "I will be quite frank with you, sir. I speak, I know, to a man of honor, but I will ask you to remember that this young man is unconvicted of any crime, and that the government by whom he was sent to you is tottering. This is not a bribe which I am offering you. It is the price of an act of justice. The money is to be paid in cash."

Krossneys was showing now as much agitation as the woman had displayed. Mingled with his emotion, however, was a fear, signs of which were at once manifested in the anxiety which distorted his face, the eagerness of his demand.

"The number?" he cried. "Tell me the name or the number of the prisoner you desire?"

"Number twenty-nine," Gerald replied.

The governor struck the table with his clenched fist, so that the glasses rattled.

"A million devils curse and blast you both!" he shouted.

He kicked a footstool which was close at hand across the room. Then he flung himself into an easy-chair and sat there with his arms crossed, glowering at Elsa. The woman gazed at him as though he had suddenly gone mad.

"Are you out of your senses, Ivan?" she asked. "Twenty-nine or thirty-nine—what does it matter? Is not one prisoner like another? Who comes to visit them? Who knows which cell is empty? Bah!"

"So you thought you were rich for life, did you, Elsa?" the man in the chair muttered. "Well, you can just rid yourself of the idea. And as for you, sir," he went on, with a malicious glance at Gerald, "you may think yourself fortunate if you leave this country as easily as you entered it."

The woman drew a little nearer to him. There was the look of a wild animal in her face.

"Listen, Ivan!" she cried. "Are you mad? It is a fortune which this man carries in his hand! What is there amongst the scum that infests your prisons of account against that? You terrify me. The money is for us, to be divided. Cash, Ivan! Money to spend—tomorrow—the next day—every day!"

"You fool!" the governor retorted. "Of what use is money when your feet dangle in the air and your neck is broken? That for you, and a dozen rifle bullets in my heart! You are a bold man who came to Russia on such a mission," he added, glowering at Gerald.

She turned to her visitor.

"What does this madman mean?" she demanded. "Who is this prisoner whose freedom you seek?"

"I do not know," Gerald replied. "I am only an emissary."

The governor sat up in his chair.

"I will tell you," he declared hoarsely. "Number twenty-nine is all the fortress records say of him, but his name is Paul, grand duke of Volostok, prince of Tamboff, hereditary grand duke and ruler of all the provinces of the Dvina, nephew of Nicholas, the late tsar, head of the house of Romanoff—himself, if the people changed their fancy tomorrow, tsar of all the Russias! There, my woman, now you know the secret of my fortress! You can guess where we might be if I traded with this lunatic!"

The woman flopped upon the sofa. She was pale through all her rouge and powder. Her yellow hair had broken loose from its band of ribbon. Her dressing gown had fallen away a little from her ample bust. She sat breathing heavily for several moments. Gerald, of the three, was the only one who kept his head.

"All that makes for nothing," he said calmly. "You excite yourself greatly for nothing. The Romanoff dynasty is past. There will never be another tsar in Russia. This young man has rich friends and they want him out of the country. I should think your government would be glad to be rid of him."

Gerald's words were not without their effect, especially upon the woman.

"After all," she muttered, "this man speaks sense. Who cares about grand dukes, nowadays? There are plenty of them who have already escaped. What does one more or less matter?"

"But this one—I have told you who he is!" the man growled.

The woman was beginning to pluck up spirit. She scoffed at him openly.

"When the people of Russia want the days of tsardom back again," she said, "they will find one of the brood fast enough. But that day will not come yet. This young man in your fortress is of no account. You are a fool, Ivan. You cannot see the truth. You have not thought to yourself what ten thousand pounds may mean."

Krossneys sat back in his chair, biting his finger nails.

"Who are you?" he demanded suddenly. "And where does this money come from?"

"My name is Dombey," Gerald replied. "I have admitted to Madame Francks that I am an Englishman. This money has been collected in London by friends and relatives of the young man. The desire for his release has not the slightest political significance."

"And what the devil excuse can I make for letting him go?"

"I should put one of your less important prisoners into his cell and say nothing about it," Gerald suggested.

"There is an inspector of state prisons," Krossneys muttered. "He does not often come, but who knows when he might take it into his head to pay us a visit?"

"The last time he was here," Elsa Francks reminded him, "you met him at the station and took him to the hotel. Afterward, you brought him on here and he was so drunk that he had to stay for two days. He did not even go near the fortress. Your papers and books were brought down here for him to sign."

"It is true," Krossneys assented, "yet next time another man might come. And again, how will this number twenty-nine get safely out of Russia?"

"Think less of these difficulties and more of what one could do with ten thousand pounds," the woman insisted. "You are not asked, Ivan, to run a risk for nothing. I say that it is worth it."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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