

Secrets of the Courts of Europe

An Old Ambassador's Revelations of the
Inner History of Famous Episodes
Heretofore Cloaked in Mystery

Chronicle by ALLEN UPWARD

THE GHOST OF THE WINTER PALACE

"Check!" proclaimed the ambassador, with a threatening air, as he advanced the king's bishop to the one square I had omitted to guard. And he leaned back in his seat and smiled as if he considered the game already won.

I sat silently studying the position. But my opponent was not a man who played chess merely by moving the pieces on the board. He did not neglect the opportunity to distract my attention by conversation.

"The game of chess is an admirable one for men of my calling," he observed. "There is something truly instructive in the lessons which it conveys. Look, for instance, at the pawn, a piece which in its earlier career scarcely repays the trouble of capture, but to which, later on, even the queen may have to be sacrificed."

I resigned myself to the prospect of losing the game, and prepared to listen.

"The people of western Europe do not understand Russia. It is, of course, Russia, the Russia of the government, that I speak. During the whole time that I spent in St. Petersburg I could always perceive that I was a mere spectator, allowed to see no more of the true condition of affairs than it suited the purpose of the officials to display to me. Nevertheless, I flattered myself that I penetrated farther behind the scenes than they were aware.

"Outwardly, as everybody knows, the government of this empire is an autocracy, the absolute power being vested in the hands of the tsar. But the true government of Russia is a secret society, the mysterious Tchin, which includes the whole of the official class, and in whose hands the tsar is often no more than a puppet, powerless to exert his own will. How burdensome this position is, may be estimated from the fact that eight decades ago the Grand Duke Constantine deliberately refused to ascend the throne, which passed to his younger brother, the Emperor Nicholas I.

"Nor has the Tchin ever shrunk from asserting its supremacy by the most deplorable deeds. It is not the Nihilists who have set the fashion of assassinating tsars. It is by the hands of their own ministers and courtiers that the monarchs of Russia have most often perished.

"It is necessary to bear these facts in mind in order to understand the incident I am about to relate."

"It is not so very many years since the attention of Europe was concentrated upon the death of Alexander III. Occurring as it did in a remote corner of his dominions, on the shores of the Black sea, the accounts supplied by the correspondents of the European press, who flocked in vast numbers to the spot, were as circumstantial as if each one had been admitted to the bedside of the dying monarch. The interest taken in this event was moreover enhanced by the romantic circumstances of the marriage of the present tsar, Nicholas II.

"However, the result of all this was that the Nihilists relaxed their activity, and for a time there was absolute repose in the Russian capital. This repose was broken by a strange and disturbing rumor, which circulated, observe, merely among the exclusive circles of the court. This rumor was to the effect that the winter palace had become haunted.

"It was stated that a ghost had been seen walking in one of the corridors at midnight. And there were those who asserted that the spirit in question was that of the dead tsar.

"As you may imagine, such a report could not be long in attracting the attention of the secret police. The result was very soon apparent.

"Never was the marvelous power of the police exerted with more crushing effect. The rumor died out as swiftly and suddenly as it had arisen. It never penetrated beyond the inner circle of society, and, above all, never reached the ears of a single correspondent of any journal outside the Russian empire. In the Russian press, of course, it was impossible for anything to pass the stern scrutiny of the censorship.

"It is for this reason that the public of Europe has never had even an inkling of a secret of which, outside the immediate court circle, I am perhaps the sole possessor. That mere curiosity is not one of my failings, you have doubtless long ago observed. But in the interests of France I deemed it necessary to penetrate to the bottom of this extraordinary affair, and circumstances fortunately put it in my power to do so.

"I was not there in any political capacity. I was favored in my investigation by the accident of my friendship with a very charming woman, the Princess Nestikoff, whose son, Prince Boris Nestikoff, was an imperial page, at that time on duty in the winter palace.

"I had formed the acquaintance of the princess during my former official residence at the embassy, and, though some years had elapsed since I had seen her, she received my with unabated friendliness on my return.

"I chanced to be dining at her man-

sion on the Nevsky Prospect, on the day after the royal apparition was said to have made its appearance. We were enjoying a tête-à-tête after dinner, before proceeding to a ball given that night at the palace, when we were interrupted by the arrival of the young Boris, dressed in the imposing uniform of his office. He was quite a lad; indeed, when I had formerly known him he was a mere child, and had been accustomed to consider me in the light of a father.

"He entered the room in which we were seated more abruptly than was, perhaps, consistent with his filial respect, but the agitation under which he evidently labored furnished some excuse.

"'Mother,' he cried out as soon as he was inside the door, 'have you heard about the event of last night?'

"The princess, with a gesture full of dignity, drew his attention to my presence.

"'Boris!' she exclaimed in a voice of reproof. 'You have omitted to pay your respects to the baron.'

"The young prince blushed, and hastened to make his apologies, with that grace which he inherits from his parent.

"'Say no more,' I commanded; 'it is easy to see that you have something of importance which you wish to communicate to your mother. With madame's permission, I will withdraw.'

"But this neither of them would hear of, both mother and son assuring me that there was no secret which they would not intrust to my discretion.

"It was then that my young friend proceeded to disclose the reason for his sudden appearance, and to astound us with the intelligence that he was himself the author of the rumor which had so perturbed the society of St. Petersburg. It will, perhaps, save time if I repeat the substance of his story in my own words.

"You must know that the winter palace is one of the most colossal buildings in the world. Whole suites of apartments in it are never used even, but, in order to guard against all danger from the odious attempts of the Nihilists, a certain watch is maintained even in the most deserted quarters of the palace.

"The imperial suite, comprising eight principal rooms, is traversed throughout its length by a corridor which opens at one end on the first landing of the grand staircase, at which point two of the pages are always on duty, day and night. At the other end the corridor is closed by a door which is always kept locked. On the further side of this door is a disused gallery, overlooking a garden in the rear of the palace, and leading to a suite of rooms which had not been used for years. It was at this spot that the young prince had been on duty the preceding night.

"You will understand that the task of keeping guard at night in a deserted gallery was by no means a pleasant one, although no one page was required to be there for more than three hours in the twenty-four. Moreover, a small room opening out of the gallery had been suitably furnished for the ladies to relax themselves in during their solitary watch.

"On the night in question Boris had repaired to the gallery to relieve his comrades at nine o'clock. He had similarly to remain there till twelve, and then, as soon as the clock struck, he was at liberty to retire to his own quarters.

"It wanted very few minutes to the hour, and he was pacing the gallery, impatiently waiting for his release, when he happened to stop opposite one of the windows, and look out into the grounds. It was a bright moonlight night, and every tree and shrub in the garden stood out with startling distinctness.

"He gazed idly, letting his eye roam over the expanse, when all at once his attention was arrested by a sight calculated to disturb anyone living in the alarmist atmosphere of the Russian court. This was a tall and closely muffled figure, stealing along in the broken shadows of the trees, and making its way towards the nearest corner of the building.

"It was inevitable that the startled page should at once connect this figure with the audacious intrigues of the dreaded secret society whose plots constitute a perpetual menace to the imperial throne. His impression that he was watching a Nihilist emissary was confirmed when he saw him confidently approaching a door in the wall of the palace, which was never used, and was supposed to be securely fastened against ingress and egress. This door, on the contrary, appeared to yield to the touch of the mysterious visitor who disappeared from sight beneath its arch.

"Greatly disturbed by what he had seen, Boris kept his station in the gallery, considering what it was advisable for him to do. To have given the alarm might have been of the greatest danger to the prince. The first person whom he approached with the news might have been a secret Nihilist, and

have repaid such a communication with a knife-thrust. The whole court is honeycombed.

"While the prince was still hesitating, he suddenly became aware of an unusual sound, coming from the far end of the gallery, where it ended in the disused apartments I have described. The sound appeared to be that of a door slowly turning on its hinges. In an instant Boris realized, or thought he realized, the situation. The personage of the garden had arrived in the vacant suite by means of a secret stairway from the garden door, and was now about to pass through into the gallery, with the object, no doubt, of making his way finally into the imperial corridor.

"There was not a moment to lose. Unarmed, as he stood there, Boris fortunately recollects that in the little chamber, which I have spoken of as set apart for the use of the pages, there were a pair of loaded pistols and a sword. He darted in through the open door of the room, snatched up the sword and one of the pistols, and had got back nearly as far as the threshold, when he was arrested, and his very limbs were rooted to the ground, by the sight of the figure which passed noiselessly along the corridor outside.

"Imagine a tall and somber apparition, with long black robes sweeping the floor, the head shrouded in a deep cowl, from whose recesses gleamed out, pallid and spectral in the light of the moon, the features of the dead monarch, Alexander III!"

"At this point his excellency pretended to perceive for the first time the change which had taken place in the position of the chessmen.

"'Boris!' she exclaimed in a voice of reproof. 'You have omitted to pay your respects to the baron.'

"The young prince blushed, and hastened to make his apologies, with that grace which he inherits from his parent.

"'Ah! You have moved your king,' he exclaimed, and promptly shifted his attacking bishop so as to give me a fresh check. Then he returned to the narrative.

"A moment passed. The first shock of terror over, the awe-struck page ventured to the door of the chamber and glanced out into the gallery. The ghost had disappeared, as suddenly and as mysteriously as it had come."

"'Were there no other room off the gallery into which it might have passed?' I demanded, not to appear too credulous.

"There were none. The only other door in this part of the gallery was that which I have already described as closing off the imperial corridor.

"Be sure that I put the same question myself when my young friend told me the story. His manner convinced me that he was not lying, and that he really believed himself to have seen the specter he described.

"As you know, I am not a believer in the supernatural. I sought to shake the boy's superstitious state of mind.

"'What you saw was some illusion, some trick of the imagination,' I said to him.

"He shook his head mournfully.

"'I am as certain of what I saw as if it were before me now,' he replied. 'My mother will tell you that I am not subject to idle fancies.'

"The princess confirmed this statement with a nod of her head.

"'I am sure that my son must have seen something like what he describes,' she said to me, 'though it is evident to me that it must have been some living person, masquerading as the ghost of the tsar. The question is for what purpose such a disguise could have been assumed, and on this point I confess I feel uneasy. What do you say, my friend?'

"I shook my head.

"'I fear that the first suspicions of Boris were correct,' I replied, 'and that the enemies of his majesty have resented their infernal schemes.'

"Both mother and son appeared struck by this view of the circumstances. But Boris was by no means prepared to abandon his belief in the supernatural character of what he had seen.

"'It may very well be that this was merely a first visit,' I added, 'a reconnaissance, to discover the nature of the ground, before introducing some explosive machine or other, and the villain may easily have kept himself out of sight for a few minutes. Doubtless he returned immediately, only you had then left the gallery.'

"But there is an easy way of putting the matter to the proof. If I am right in my suspicions this creature, whoever he may be, will infallibly return at the same hour another night.

"Tonight, on account of the presence of everybody at this ball, will be his most favorable opportunity, as he may confidently expect to find the imperial suite deserted. I propose to you that we repair to this little room of yours together, at the moment when the page who has replaced you tonight comes off duty, and if this mysterious personage again presents himself, I will compel him to disclose his identity."

"Boris welcomed this idea. I could see that he was secretly ashamed of the ridicule which attached to him for his story of ghost-seeing, and that he was anxious to re-establish his character. The princess was good enough to express her opinion of my courage and devotion in terms which it would not become me to repeat to you. In the end we arrived at an understanding, and departed to the palace together.

"Throughout the progress of the ball—during which the Grand Duchess Olga condescended to become my partner in a waltz—I kept my eyes and ears open, and observed that Boris' adventure of the night before was a general topic of conversation. The more highly-placed officials were evidently in a conspiracy to treat it as a mere boyish delusion, but among the general body of the guests I found there were not a few who shared my



Never Shall I Forget the Thrill, the Absolute Stupor of Amazement Which Overcame Me at What I Beheld.

suspicion. I ventured to approach the tsar's confidential chamberlain at an interval between the dances, and to sound him delicately on the subject. His reply was characteristic of his nation and government.

"'My dear baron,' he said sharply, 'there is nothing so detestable as court gossip. It is most annoying to his majesty to have his late father's name connected with the wanderings of a moon-struck boy. Take my advice, and dismiss the affair from your mind.'

"His manner convinced me that more importance was attached to the incident than he pretended. However, I feigned to be perfectly satisfied, and returned to the grand duchess, who was anxious to know whether her robe would have been approved in Paris.

"The hour agreed on for the rendezvous was approaching, and I had to make the best excuse I could think of to tear myself away from the imperial lady.

"Boris met me, as we had arranged, in a small passage leading out of the anteroom, and we made our way unobtrusively up a back staircase into the famous haunted gallery. The page on duty was just leaving as we arrived.

"I laid my fingers on the oaken handle, and turned it with infinite delicacy and slowness. As soon as it ceased to revolve under the pressure of my hand, I gave a gentle push to the door. To my delight it yielded. I gave another push, equally slight, and the door responded with a horrible grating sound. Further concealment was useless; I boldly flung the door open, and stepped through.

"The first glance was sufficient to tell me that I had merely gained an ante-chamber, forming a sort of general approach to the various rooms of which the suite was composed. This anteroom was deserted, but immediately on the right lay a room of which the door was partly open, and from which proceeded the light that had filtered out into the gallery. Hastily closing the outer door behind me, I made two steps into this inner room.

"Never shall I forget the thrill, the absolute stupor of amazement, which overcame me at what I beheld. There, half-risen from the chair on which he had doubtless been seated when aroused by the breaking of the door, I saw the very figure which Boris had described to me, the tall form, the dark robes, and, above all, the pale and terrifying countenance of the monarch whose death had cast half Europe into mourning.

"Half an hour passed in this way, without anything occurring. I began to grow impatient, and to accuse Boris in my own mind of having invented some fable. But when I hinted this to him he became so indignant that I was compelled, in spite of myself, to believe that the boy had really some grounds for his story.

"At last, tired of this useless performance, I rose from my seat and moved cautiously out into the gallery.

"I glanced up and down without perceiving anything in the least resembling the figure of the previous night. All at once, however, I did see something which caused my heart to give a great bound. Looking at the far end of the gallery, where the deserted apartments of which Boris had told me were situated, I distinctly perceived a faint glow of light along the floor.

"Instantly I turned to the threshold of the room in which I had left the young prince, and beckoned to him to come out into the gallery. He saw by my manner that I had made some important discovery, and obeyed my gesture with shaking limbs. No sooner had he emerged from the doorway, and followed with his eyes the direction in which I pointed, than he gave a great gasp of terror.

"'The deserted suite!' he exclaimed in a hoarse whisper. 'There has never been a light there in all the years that I have known this part of the palace!'

"I nodded my head.

"'It is what I expected you to tell me,' I whispered back.

"'But what is to be done?' he murmured. 'Shall I summon the guards, or inform Volevitch, of the secret police?'

"I considered well before answering.

"One of those subtle intuitions which are born of a long experience in secret politics warned me that I stood on the threshold of some discovery of no ordinary kind, one which I might perhaps regret having to share with the secret police, and which, for many reasons, it might be better that Boris himself should not be made acquainted with.

"Throughout the progress of the ball—during which the Grand Duchess Olga condescended to become my partner in a waltz—I kept my eyes and ears open, and observed that Boris' adventure of the night before was a general topic of conversation. The more highly-placed officials were evidently in a conspiracy to treat it as a mere boyish delusion, but among the general body of the guests I found there were not a few who shared my

"'No,' I said at last, 'we have no right to act precipitately. Whatever we may suspect, we as yet know nothing that would warrant us in communicating with the authorities. As the

you into my confidence. It is fortunate that you have come alone, and that your rigid honor is not less calebrated than your dexterity.'

"I bowed deeply at these compliments. His majesty continued:

"'The only return I can make to you for a fidelity of which I assure myself beforehand, is to explain to you my reasons for what must seem to you an extraordinary state of things. The fate of my father, Alexander II, slain by a bomb in the streets of St. Petersburg, is, of course, familiar to you. But it is not easy for you to realize the effect produced by that fearful event on my mind.

"'The perils of a battlefield may be faced by a brave man, in the enthusiasm which battle calls forth. But the perpetual secret peril which dogs one day after day and year after year, and never slackens for a single moment—that is a very different thing.'

"'I am not ashamed to confess to you, baron, that from the moment I ascended the bloody throne of Russia, my life was one long haunting agony. Never once did I have one hour of perfect freedom from care. And I could do nothing. I was helpless, a martyr bound to the stake of my autocracy. They prated to me of reforms. You are a man who knows Russia as few men know it, and you can tell me whether the first step in the direction of reform would not have drawn down on my head the vengeance of men beside whom the Nihilists are bungling apprentices.'

"I could only bow my acquiescence in this sorrowful truth.

"'For years,' proceeded Alexander, 'I had secretly set my heart on abdicating. I only waited till my son Nicholas was of an age to face the dangers and difficulties of his task. But by the time that the hour of release drew near, I had learned that abdication would