

THE IRON RING--By Gerald Villiers-Stuart



"I will curse you if you speak. I will hate you. The pain is nothing—let it drip," moaned Kousienhoff."



"Markovitch need through the door."

It was such a little thing that set the spider brain of Markovitch spinning the cruel web; just the pretty fooling of a loving woman.

They were standing outside the shop of Oblonski, the dealer in second-hand furniture, in a back street in Moscow. Natalie Ermhoff with Kousienhoff, her betrothed, and so intent were they on examining the contents of the windows and each other's eyes that they were unconscious of the presence of Markovitch, of the secret police.

Before the revolution began Markovitch had made very little progress in the world. He had the hunting instinct, but not the courage to hunt on his own account. He did not steal, because he was afraid of what men do to those who steal. He stopped short at coveting, and more than anything in the world he coveted Natalie Ermhoff.

He had passed his days when they were students together, following her like a dog with longing, cringing eyes, and all the time an undercurrent of hatred mingled with his love, because all that he wanted in the world was so very near, and yet this slim girl had the power to withhold it.

Many of the students he had known were rotting in prison or slaying in Siberia, but Kousienhoff, his successful rival, and Natalie, who had humiliated and rejected him, were still at liberty. Markovitch knew well enough that they were revolutionaries, but no domiciliary visits, no questioning or bribing of other students, had put into his hands even such slight evidence as would satisfy a Russian court. Yet Kousienhoff and Natalie were members of "The Iron Ring."

The society had not even a name by which it could be identified, but because of the extraordinary loyalty of the members, and because of the band of metal which was handed to a comrade when he had been appointed executioner, each member thought of the society as "The Iron Ring."

By a process of deduction, Markovitch had come to the conclusion that Kousienhoff and Natalie must belong to the mysterious organization. And a dreadful plan formed in his brain, whereby he might unmask the secret and take his revenge on the two people whom most in the world he hated, and the pretty fooling of a loving woman gave Markovitch the idea.

There had been a shower of rain the afternoon on which the lovers looked into the window of Oblonski's furniture shop, and the edge of an awning over the confectioner's next door was rimmed with little drops; the sunlight came through them and left a baby rainbow in the heart of each. The rope which was used for raising the awning swung near to the hand of Natalie and the spirit of mischief entered her pretty heart.

"Look up, quick, Maruska," she said—for that is Russian for sweetheart, and her lover, who was standing beneath the edge of the awning with his soft black hat in his hand, looked up, and a number of baby rainbows fell on his face as Natalie with a merry laugh put it to the rope.

Kousienhoff pretended to be angry. "You have a cruel disposition, Natalie," he accused; "that is the torture of the Inquisition."

The girl laughed and dabbed the moisture off his face with soft little touches of her handkerchief.

Markovitch had seen the little play; had heard the words, "The torture of the Inquisition;" had noted how the girl's hands lingered about this man—the yearning touch of a woman with an infinite capacity for loving.

No information had come to Markovitch from his spying, but a plan had formed in his brain. His afternoon was not wasted.

The day after Natalie and Kousienhoff were married Markovitch paid them a domiciliary visit in their new home. He brought with him three men, who at his orders handcuffed Kousienhoff and his wife. They were taken into the kitchen while the sitting room was being searched.

All the time they were in the kitchen they heard the sound of hammering in the sitting room. "They are taking up the floor," said Natalie.

"They will have to pull it down again," said Kousienhoff; "it is all they will have for their trouble."

When they were taken back to the sitting room they saw that the floor had not been disturbed, but against the wall a framework had been erected. Some scantlings had been spliced into the wall, and into the



"Look up quick, Maruska," she said."

Like the rope of the awning. They held up her right wrist and about it fastened the end of the rope.

Markovitch took the cigar out of his mouth. "I warn you," he said to Natalie malevolently, "not to lower your arm." Then he dismissed his satellites, for he did not mean to share with any one the information he meant to extract.

Markovitch locked the door, then he returned to his seat at the table, and fear began to invade the hearts of the lovers.

"The reason I advised you not to lower your pretty arm is this," he told Natalie. "If you lower it you will pull the stopper from the flask above your husband's head; the contents will fall on him drop by drop. Your arm will be very tired, but when you wish to be released you have only to give me certain information I want about the secret society to which you belong, the names of your comrades and the plans of the organization then both of you will be free."

"There is no organization," Markovitch, you spying devil! cried Kousienhoff angrily, "but if there was, a few drops of water would not make me a traitor."

"I forgot to mention," answered Markovitch, in his smooth, malevolent voice, "that it is not water. There was water on the awning, but there is vitriol in that flask. Surely, Natalie, you will not drop vitriol on your dear husband's face rather than speak a few words."

"You devil! you devil! you devil!" hissed Natalie, writhing, yet afraid to move very much.

Kousienhoff went rather white and strained at his bonds as a mastiff strains against his chain. A sound issued from his lips, more a growl than a moan, such a sound as a strong man makes when he finds himself helpless in the power of a weak man. Markovitch laughed and allowed himself the luxury of a fresh cigar.

"You'd better speak now, my dear Natalie. Why put yourself to the inconvenience of holding up your arm so long, for when you find that the vitriol is spoiling

Kousienhoff's pretty face you will speak fast, since you have had the bad taste to admire it. Oh, I do not think you will like to place vitriol on instead of kisses—the day after your wedding, too. Come, speak, my pretty one, and get it over."

Natalie turned her head round; her terror-widened eyes looked into those of her beloved. She was dumbly asking his permission, for she knew now that love of country and loyalty to the brotherhood were as nothing when weighed in the balance against her love. She would hold out to the last moment, but she would speak before one single drop branded that dear face.

Kousienhoff read her mind in the look and tried to brace her fortitude. With his eyes fixed steadily on his wife, he spoke to Markovitch.

"My wife knows," he said, in a slow, intense voice, "that I would endure a worse torture than your devil's mind has invented before I would allow her to say one word which she has no right to say. I am not a coward like you, Markovitch, and my wife knows it. I would kill myself afterwards, and she knows it. I would curse her, and she knows it."

"All the same she will speak, my dear Kousienhoff. She may know all that, but she will speak. Won't you, my pretty Natalie?"

"No! no! I won't speak. Release me. You have no right to do this. There is no law!"

"The law will not be very severe to me, for I shall have pretty valuable information from those pretty lips, and perhaps—who knows?—some kisses."

"Again that strange sound came from Kousienhoff's lips. He was wondering what he would do to Markovitch if he could get free. His tormentor felt a tremor of fear go through him in

"Perhaps, my pretty Natalie, your imagination is not capable of appreciating the sensations which can be caused by a drop of vitriol; you did not, I remember, attend the chemistry classes. It would be kind if I gave you a demonstration. He dipped a glass tube into a bottle under the table, came over to the girl and touched her left hand with the tube. She screamed at the unexpected agony.

"That is how it feels, my dear Natalie. That is only one drop, and there are many drops above your beloved Kousienhoff's head. If you are not careful you will shake them down on him as you shoot the water from the awning."

"She will not speak," said Kousienhoff.

"She will not speak," said Kousienhoff.

Markovitch laughed. "We will see."

Natalie's right arm was trembling; already it felt numb and detached. At any moment she knew that she might lose control, but the burning pain in her left hand helped her to keep her forces together. She looked at the cheap American cigar on the shelf behind her tormentor. It was half past five. At six her husband's brother would come to tea. Ivan, the farmer brother, who was stronger even than her husband. He would come, but long before that she would have spoken—unless—unless he came early, but it was more likely he would be late. Her husband did not know his brother was coming, it was to be a surprise.

In such moments the attention becomes idly concentrated on some one object. Natalie's became fixed on the clock; it seemed to be making faces at her while it ticked out "Drip, drip, drip, drip," but the hands stood still. Sometimes she had to remove her gaze from the clock to look at her right arm. It was the only way she could tell that she was keeping it up. It was very numb and yet the thread of pain trembled through it all down the bone.

At intervals Kousienhoff spoke, always the same words: "You are wasting your time, Markovitch. My wife will not speak. Drop the stuff over me and be done with it."

Always Markovitch made the same answer: "I am in no hurry, and she will speak."

The hands of the clock, for all its mockery, pointed to a quarter to six, but in spite of Natalie's efforts the room began to revolve. Very slowly at first, for all her will was concentrated on holding it in its place, but it was slipping out of her grasp; she looked at her arm. It was lowered, but too numb to feel the weight of the rope. She managed to raise it by bending her body—too late. A drop had fallen on Kousienhoff's head. By the exercise of superhuman control he managed to endure the pain in silence.

"Courage, Natalie! courage!" he said between his teeth. His voice revived her for a moment, but after a little while her arm lowered again, and this time Markovitch saw the drop fall.

"You are spoiling his pretty face, Natalie. Look what you have done to him."

Natalie turned her agonized eyes and saw a red line tracing itself on her husband's cheek. His hands were drawn up backwards, for he had nothing to grip.

"I will speak!" she shrieked. "Take away the rope and I will speak."

"But, no, my dear Natalie, you would rest your arm; then I must begin all over again. Come, the names."

Natalie looked at the clock. It was ten minutes to six. Markovitch took up pen.

Natalie had opened her mouth to speak, when she heard a heavy tread on the wooden stairs. The rooms were on the top floor of the house; the man might be on his way to one of the lower floors, but the hope that it might be Ivan, faint though it was, gave the tortured girl a little strength.

"Now he is at the second floor," she thought, and the steps seemed to cease; nothing moved but the whirling room.

"I am waiting," said Markovitch, dipping his pen in the ink.

Again she opened her mouth to speak; again she heard the steps ascending the stairs and bent her body beneath her swaying arm. Whoever it was had reached the landing below. Natalie heard him knock on a floor. Then she moaned out a name—all hope had left her.

"I can't hear," said Markovitch, his pen poised above the paper. "Speak louder."

"I can't speak. I can't remember anything. Take off the rope and I will speak."

"Lower your arm if it is tired, my sweet Natalie. It will only mean a few tears of vitriol trickling down Kousienhoff's face."

Then he spoke a name distinctly, and at that moment the steps were heard mounting to the top floor.

"Help!" shrieked Natalie. "Help! Help! Help!"

The handle turned, was shaken, relinquished. Markovitch dropped the pen and, pulling out a revolver, faced the door with a snarl. The steps backed away.

"Help!" shrieked Natalie again.

For answer the door shook with the terrific impact of a heavy body. There was a snap as when metal cracks, but the door did not open. Again came the impact like a padded shell bursting the lock from its fastening. Markovitch fired through the door and

again as Ivan Kousienhoff charged into the room. Some plaster fell from the wall above, for frightened men fire high. He had not even the nerve to fire again at close quarters, but turned to run and fell senseless from the first blow of Ivan's gigantic fist.

Ivan did not even try to understand the situation. He caught the bar of pain that was poor Natalie's arm, and almost with a sigh of relief she allowed the room to spin as it would and nestled down into her bonds.

"Keep her arm high, Ivan, and get the rope off her wrist. If you lower it I'm done for."

Ivan freed Natalie's wrist with very little difficulty.

"Now, undo these ropes."

Then Kousienhoff issued orders. He was cursing terribly, for several drops had traced the course down his cheek like molten tears, but his head was clear. "Hold up her arm, Ivan. Hold it high."

Kousienhoff released his wife's inanimate body with his own hands. He kissed her right arm; it felt like an icicle. He made no attempt to revive the girl; he had work to do of which he wished her to remain unconscious.

When Natalie opened her eyes once more the room was changed, the furniture was piled against the door, all but the table and a couple of chairs. In one of those chairs by the table sat Kousienhoff. He sat where Markovitch had been seated. Markovitch stood bound beneath the funnel where Kousienhoff had stood. There had been a slight re-arrangement of the apparatus because the stopper rope was now fastened to Markovitch's left wrist. He was holding it high in the air. From his mouth issued a steady stream of sound; sometimes it was cursing, but more often he pleaded for mercy. "I tell you I can hold it up no more, feels like lead," he cried, and the perspiration ran down his face in streams.

"Lower your arm, Ivan," said Markovitch, if it is tired," answered Kousienhoff, using the other's words, mimicking also his voice. "It only means a few drops of vitriol running down your cheeks."

"Why play with him?" growled Ivan, "let me kill him and be done with it." His great hands worked convulsively.

"He has not asked you yet, Ivan," replied Kousienhoff, sombrely; "wait until he asks you. It will be time enough then."

Natalie came up behind her husband and put her hands on his shoulders. "What is it you mean to do with him?"

"What he did to us, Natalie, nothing more."

"Ah, but you don't know the torture of it, the long agony."

"You spoke a name," replied Kousienhoff, and tilted his head back so that Natalie saw the cruel mark on his face; grease had been rubbed on the livid lines. She said nothing, only got the other chair and put it next to her husband's, then she watched eagerly across the table for the lowering of Markovitch's arm. She made no answer when the man pleaded with her, making extravagant promises, of money, of immunity—only looked into his face with cruel, hungry eyes, waiting for the first drop to plunge its falling way down his cheeks.

At last it came. "My arm is falling," yelled the man beneath the mask. The rope came again, and one after another two drops fell on Markovitch. He shrieked and raised his arm once more.

"It burns, it burns; fire is trickling down my cheeks."

Suddenly one of the shrieks ended in a laugh and Markovitch, twisting his head, snapped his arm and raised his arm once more.

"It burns, it burns; fire is trickling down my cheeks."

"Courage, Natalie! courage!" he said between his teeth. His voice revived her for a moment, but after a little while her arm lowered again, and this time Markovitch saw the drop fall.

"You are spoiling his pretty face, Natalie. Look what you have done to him."

Natalie turned her agonized eyes and saw a red line tracing itself on her husband's cheek. His hands were drawn up backwards, for he had nothing to grip.

"I will speak!" she shrieked. "Take away the rope and I will speak."

Natalie had opened her mouth to speak; again she heard the steps ascending the stairs and bent her body beneath her swaying arm. Whoever it was had reached the landing below. Natalie heard him knock on a floor. Then she moaned out a name—all hope had left her.

"I can't hear," said Markovitch, his pen poised above the paper. "Speak louder."

"I can't speak. I can't remember anything. Take off the rope and I will speak."

"Lower your arm if it is tired, my sweet Natalie. It will only mean a few tears of vitriol trickling down Kousienhoff's face."

Then he spoke a name distinctly, and at that moment the steps were heard mounting to the top floor.

"Help!" shrieked Natalie. "Help! Help! Help!"

The handle turned, was shaken, relinquished. Markovitch dropped the pen and, pulling out a revolver, faced the door with a snarl. The steps backed away.

"Help!" shrieked Natalie again.

For answer the door shook with the terrific impact of a heavy body. There was a snap as when metal cracks, but the door did not open. Again came the impact like a padded shell bursting the lock from its fastening. Markovitch fired through the door and



"She did not pick such words as soothe the man's vanity."

