

Weird Tales



JULY, 1953

Cover by W. H. Silvey

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L'Affaire Verenekin

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“. . . an incident—a Kismet, if you prefer—which may cure you of wanting to know too much.”

“THE beauty of dying young,” said Colonel Verenekin philosophically, “is that one doesn’t have to face one’s mistakes.” The Colonel set his glass down on a copy of the *Stars & Stripes* and flicked a finger at the front page picture of a dead infantryman. “Notice how they fall,” he said didactically. “Completely relaxed.”

We sat alone at the bar in the Kretchma. The cafe had closed and the haze of smoke left by the customers thinned gradually. Over at the counter the manager was checking the night’s receipts. Three musicians in the corner softly strummed their balalaikas while they finished their cigarettes. An ancient scrubwoman worked slowly across the floor.

“So,” the Colonel said, drawing the cork from a bottle of Cognac, “the war goes well?”

“We’re across the Rhine,” I said.

“Fine. Excellent. Soon it is finished and you can go home.” The Colonel said “home” in a dead tone that had no connection with any emotion. As he sat there, tunic open at the throat and his karacul cap leaning up against the bottle, I wondered if he had ever had a home.

The Colonel seemed genuine, not like most of the other White Russians in Paris. He never first-named the Romanovs or spoke of lost estates—but his bitter silence told more than the time dulled stories of the other refugees. Personal conversation was not his forte. He spoke of Russia almost never.

The Russian colony in Paris sprouted threadbare full dress and tarnished decora-

tions around Easter. The rest of the year they looked too natural as waiters, boot-blacks or cab drivers to be taken seriously as nobility. The Colonel was different.

His beard had a square trim that practically screamed "Imperial Guards." Slashes of cartridges on his chest and the fourragere around his shoulder made him look like a real Cossack, even in the artificial atmosphere of the dingy cafe. The Colonel walked like a man who had always worn boots.

"What will the end of the war mean for you?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said, cocking an eyebrow. "Many things, perhaps. Perhaps nothing. Who would want to know?"

"You don't care?" I asked, avoiding his eyes.

The Colonel filled my glass and then his own. He poured the liquor carefully until it raised a meniscus above the edge, then quickly swept it to his lips. He accepted a cigarette and blew the smoke slowly through his nostrils.

"It is possible, my young friend," he said dryly, between drags, "to know more than one would care to."

We sat in silence in the smoke filled room. A faded blonde torch singer nodded goodnight as she passed us on her way out. Two of the musicians left. The third switched to some melancholy tune of his own making. The scrubwoman moved methodically toward us. As she drew near the Colonel nodded to her and she spoke a few words of Russian to him.

The Colonel carefully stamped out his cigarette and poured us more Cognac. He looked over his shoulder and saw that the woman was out of earshot.

"I will tell you, if you like," the Colonel said, raising his glass slowly, "of an incident—a Kismet, if you prefer—that may

cure you of wanting to know too much."

I edged my stool closer and turned to offer him a fresh cigarette. He drew sharply on it, letting the smoke trail out of his mouth as he spoke.

"That woman," he said, inclining his head toward the scrubwoman, "before the trouble in Russia she was a . . . never mind, a woman of consequence, at least."

"We were neighbors," he said. "Though not so close as we are now," he added with a smile. "After the revolution—before you were even born—she was in an awkward position. Thrown from her lands, a widow with an only son, she did not get far before the authorities had her."

"The Kerensky trouble was not so bad, you understand. They did not shoot old ladies, at least. For the present regime I do not care to commit myself." The Colonel smiled faintly again.

"But the son, that was a different matter. When the people and their court had finished with him, he had a day to live."

"Fortunately, the old woman was not without friends. I myself was a sergeant in the army at that time. A change in circumstances," he explained, gesturing with his long fingers.

"The Lieutenant in charge of our company was the son of this woman's former steward. All right, in his way, but inclined to drink. However," the Colonel said resignedly, "he kept my little secret, so I should not speak ill of him."

"The officials left the executions up to the military, naturally. What scribbler has the courage of his convictions?" he asked with a snort.

"The Lieutenant agreed to do what he could—for a price. So the woman sent the last of her jewelry, and he managed to get permission for her to take the body after the execution. Holy ground was cheap in those days—even a widow could afford it. So the boy was assured a decent burial, instead of being tossed into the lime pits which dissolved the heart and soul of Russia." The Colonel stared off into the distance for some minutes, then resumed.

"Beyond this," he explained, "we arranged to have the execution faked. It was a simple enough matter. One of my men

was completely loyal—I instructed him to shoot for the shoulder, so some blood would be showing.”

“The other soldiers were stupid recruits from the country. They would never realize that their cartridges were undercharged.”

While the scrubwoman worked past us again the Colonel remained silent. She finished by the door and took her pail back for fresh water.

“I warned the son first, of course,” the Colonel continued, “that he might not die of fright. And so our plot was complete.”

The Colonel loosened his scarf and pulled his tunic open wider. He took another drink and then spoke again.

“A perfect plan, *hein?*” He nodded and smiled. “Yes, perfect. I see that the boy lives. The Lieutenant tells his mother. She pretends to have a funeral and everyone is satisfied. Fortunately, there was a shortage of physicians at the time. Death did not have to be certified.”

The Colonel stopped to refill our glasses. He looked again to see if the woman was near.

“And so it worked,” he continued softly. “Better than I had hoped. The boy fainted from the shock of being hit in the shoulder. It was a piece of luck, that, unconscious, he was hardly likely to give us away. I stepped up to administer the *coup de grace*. I fired my Steyr into the ground on the far side of his head—it looked quite convincing from where the firing squad stood. The concussion might have broken his eardrum, but that was a small price for life in those days.

“It only remained for the mother to pick up the ‘body’ and spirit her boy out of the country. There were many exits.” The Colonel wiped some Cognac from his mustache and continued.

“I found it—convenient,” he said wryly, “to leave the country shortly thereafter. Shooting one’s old friends is not a pastime I enjoy. There was also some question of my hands being too well manicured.” The Colonel studied his long, knotted fingers with their square cut nails. The lines around his mouth hardened.

(Continued on page 88)

L'AFFAIRE VERENEKIN

(Continued from page 11)

"As I was leaving, somewhat abruptly, I passed the boy's funeral procession. Flowers, mourners, priest—everything. A most convincing performance. Even the mother in tears.

"My chance to compliment her on her thoroughness did not come for many years. When we met here in Paris I asked after her son, but she burst into tears.

"'You must know he is dead, Nicolai', she told me, and sobbed.

"When I showed surprise, she reminded me that my own squad had shot him. 'I buried him that very afternoon,' she told me. 'Within the hour.'" The Colonel looked off into the haze, lost in his memories.

"Finally," said the Colonel slowly, "I realized what had occurred. That Lieutenant," he said, slapping his glass down on the bar, "that filthy dog of a lieutenant," the Colonel spat out. "He took the money from the woman's jewels and got drunk. Stinking drunk." The Colonel's eyes blazed up for a second and his fist clenched around the glass. Then the anger ebbed from his face and he relaxed.

"The Lieutenant," he said tonelessly, "never told the mother of our plot." The Colonel looked up at me and smiled faintly with one corner of his mouth.

"She buried her son alive," he said quietly, carefully pouring himself another Cognac.
