

Weird Tales

REGISTERED IN U.S. PATENT OFFICE



A MAGAZINE of the

BIZARRE and UNUSUAL

VOLUME XII

NUMBER 2

Published monthly by the Popular Fiction Publishing Company, 2457 E. Washington Street, Indianapolis, Ind. Entered as second-class matter March 20, 1923, at the post office at Indianapolis, Ind., under the act of March 3, 1879. Single copies, 25 cents. Subscription, \$2.50 a year in the United States; \$3.00 a year in Canada. English office: Charles Lavell, 13, Serjeant's Inn, Fleet Street, E. C. 4, London. The publishers are not responsible for the loss of unsolicited manuscripts, although every care will be taken of such material while in their possession. The contents of this magazine are fully protected by copyright and must not be reproduced either wholly or in part without permission from the publishers.

NOTE—All manuscripts and communications should be addressed to the publishers' Chicago office at 450 East Ohio Street, Chicago, Ill. FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.
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THE JUSTICE OF THE CZAR

By CAPTAIN GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

DIMITRI MININ, chief executioner of the prison of St. Peter and St. Paul, rose from his seat as an imperative knock clattered at the door of his quarters, high in the north tower.

"Be at ease, Tasia," he said to his wife, who had also started up. "I have many a summons lately, since this conspiracy against the holy person of His Majesty has been discovered. Doubtless it is but some wretched boyar to be put to the question."

He flung open the door. In the shadows of the stair-landing the light of a guard lantern gleamed on the accouterments of a sergeant of the Praeobajensky Regiment.

"To the lower dungeons, butcher!" snapped the soldier. "Quickly—you are wanted!"

"Dog!" retorted Minin. "Is it thus that you address an official of the Czar's household? Perhaps—you would like to feel the butcher's hands at work on you?"

He extended his long, powerful, sinewy hands toward the man, opening and closing the fingers suggestively.

"With the hot pincers, eh?" he added.

The soldier shuddered visibly. "No, no, good Dimitri!" he said. "I but spoke in haste. Yet come quickly, for it is the governor's own order!"

Dimitri nodded.

"I come," he said, and flinging a black cloak round his shoulders he stepped out on the landing.

"I think I shall not be long, Tasia," he said. "Have a bit of soup warm against my return—those dungeons are chill enough, all of them, but the lower dungeons especially!"

He closed the door behind him and followed the sergeant down the narrow, winding stair.

DOWN, down through the heart of the grim prison-fortress, past the guardroom, past the doors opening into the great hall, down to the cellars; then past a little iron door leading to the upper dungeons, and still the stair descended into black, dank chill—along a corridor, lit only by a single torch guttering in the cold air; then another iron door. Here Dimitri knocked, with a peculiar sequence; and instantly chains and bolts rattled within, the door was flung open, and Dimitri stepped into a vaulted chamber, lit by a dozen flaring lamps. A harsh voice—that of the prison governor—dismissed the sergeant.

The door clanged shut behind Dimitri as he bowed low to the governor.

The scene within was familiar enough to the executioner, and yet this night it had some novel features. There was the governor, and the slender, dark-clad figure of the prison physician. There, hanging from the ceiling of oft-used chains, was the naked figure of the victim: a slender white body, apparently that of a young man, his wrists high

above his head in the grip of the iron bracelets, his ankles locked to the floor by the stocks provided for that purpose.

But—and this was strange to Dimitri—the victim's face and head were hooded and concealed by a black sack, drawn over the head and secured about the man's neck by a stout cord. It was the first time that Dimitri had ever seen this done, and he wondered.

One of his assistants silently glided forward from a corner and handed Dimitri a knout. Dimitri gripped the heavy oaken handle of the terrible whip in practised fingers—ran through his hands the long knotted thongs, with their cruel steel goads at the ends. He nodded.

"A good knout, Paul," he said, and turned expectantly toward the governor.

He was ready to begin.

But the governor was not looking at Dimitri. He was staring across the room—staring at a little group of men standing at the farther side, out of the direct glare of the lamps.

The governor's face was white beneath the brim of his fur hat; the eyes which had looked unmoved on so much torture and death were filled with a strange emotion.

Was it—fear? Dimitri, accustomed to reading the expressions in men's eyes, felt a sudden unaccountable dread clutch at his heart.

If his Excellency the Governor of St. Peter and St. Paul—known far and wide in Holy Russia as Black Nikolai—was *afraid*: Black Nikolai *afraid!*—ah, then common men might well look to themselves. God! what business was this?

Dimitri followed the governor's gaze.

There were five men at the far side of the dungeon—no, there were more; for in one corner were half a dozen Tartar troopers of one of the newly raised regiments of irregular horse, which the Czar had recruited in the

south. Brutish, pig-eyed fellows these, short and squat and bow-legged: in stolid silence they watched the scene before them. A block stood there also, and a Tartar ax—and Dimitri thought he understood.

Here was quick release for the victim—after the knout had ripped his secrets from his quivering body! Dimitri had had experience of such methods.

But the silent group of five in the other corner—one in a long red cloak and hat drawn well down over his eyes, the others officers of the Imperial Guard in military cloaks, booted and spurred—why were they so silent? Were they witnesses—were they—? Again, unaccountably, Dimitri felt the icy grip of that strange fear.

The man in the red cloak suddenly inclined his head.

The governor bowed; turned to Dimitri. "Begin," he said in low tones.

Dimitri, in silence, stepped forward into the center of the floor, placing himself with practised deliberation at exactly the proper distance from his prey. He flung off his cloak, tossed it to his assistant; removed also his tunic, and stood bared to the waist, his tremendous muscles rippling under his hairy skin, his splendid torso like a figure of some pagan god there in the flickering lamplight.

He swung the knout experimentally; the thongs whistled through the air; the naked man in chains shrank at the sound, as well he might. Dimitri, his strong hands gripping the handle of the awful knout, stepped back, poised for the first stroke—

"Wait!"

Surprized, Dimitri turned. It was the man in the red cloak who had spoken. Some great one, this, without a doubt; for instantly the governor confirmed with a sharp word the order given.

The red-cloaked one looked over the muffing edge of his cloak at the trembling victim.

"One last word, Alexis," said he. "The knout is ready—you have heard the whine of its thongs—will you speak? The names of your accomplices—of those who have led you into this conspiracy! The names! Speak—and a swift and merciful death shall be your reward!"

And then for the first time the masked one spoke. One word, muffled by the black hood, yet firm, resolute, determined: "Never!"

The eyes of the man in the red cloak glared with a rage truly infernal. "By the bones of Saint Andrew!" he swore, grinding out the words between his teeth; "ere this night is over, you will speak, and gladly. Proceed, executioner!"

Again Dimitri took his stance; poised; swung back the knout. The thongs whizzed through the air and bit deep into the back of the naked man.

A scream rang out—a terrible scream, the scream of a man who has never before known physical pain; it echoed away through the arches of the vaulted roof, those grim old arches which had echoed so many screams of agony.

Across the white back of the victim were now seven red weals as the thongs fell away—weals dotted with larger spots of red, where the knots had torn little gouts of flesh from the quivering back as with practised hand Dimitri jerked them aside.

Again the knout swung back—forward—whined and struck home—again—again—and all the time the screams rang through the dungeon, till the Guard officers turned away their heads and even the stolid Tartars muttered in a vague distress which was as near to pity as they could come.

TWENTY strokes of the knout had fallen; now the back of the naked man was one great mass of raw, pulsating flesh. No skin at all remained, save a few strips still hanging precariously here and there. And still the pitiless red whip rose and fell.

The screams were not so loud, now; they lost their piercing quality, sank into mere moans of unutterable agony. And at last even these were silent.

Dimitri paused in his dreadful task. "I think he has fainted, sir," he said to the physician.

"Revive him, and continue," grated the man in the red cloak, at the governor's inquiring—almost shuddering—glance.

The physician gave low-voiced instructions to the assistants; a bucket of water was flung over the poor bleeding body hanging there by its wrist-chains. It washed away some of the blood, some of the loose flesh; not only the back had suffered, for in front, on the stomach and chest, the flesh had been torn to ribbons by the steel tips of the thongs as they curved round the body at the conclusion of each stroke.

Another bucket of water; now the physician was forcing brandy between the clenched teeth of the victim—teeth which had at the last met and fixed themselves in the lower lip. There was a low moan—a choking sob; the torn body moved a little.

"Will you speak, Alexis?" demanded the inexorable voice of the man in the red cloak.

And again, from the depths of that black hood, faintly now but still with that ring of deathless resolution, came one word: "Never!"

The red-cloaked one snarled wordlessly; motioned with his arm; the governor spoke.

Again the knout rose and fell, rose and fell, rose and fell; now at every blow blood and flesh spurted forth, splattered the walls, reddened and

soaked into the earthen floor beneath the victim, where no stones had been laid, so that there might be no need to remove the blood of countless poor wretches who suffered there.

The physician whispered to the governor.

"What is that?" snapped the red-cloaked one.

"He is saying, lord," replied the governor, "that a few more strokes will kill."

"So be it!" exclaimed the other, savagely. "Go on, executioner; finish your work!"

"To the death?" asked Dimitri, panting from his exertions, while the red thongs of the knout trailed their horror on the floor.

"To the death!"

The voice of the man in the red cloak seemed to break for a moment, but he spoke no more; the governor nodded, and the knout was at work again.

Swiftly now the strokes fell. Dimitri charged from one side to the other, shifting the knout from his right hand to his left. Long practise had made him equally dexterous with either hand, and the knout had been busy these past years.

The terrible shreds of what had been a strong and vigorous youth hung limply from the wrist-irons. No cries, no moans; not a sound save the whistle of the lash, the deep breathing of Dimitri, and the sodden thud of the blows.

Again the physician whispered to the governor.

"Enough!" said Black Nikolai.

Dimitri ceased his horrible exertions; stood aside, silent, waiting.

The physician stepped forward to the bloody thing that had once been human. A moment—then he bowed his head on his breast.

"It is done, lord," he said; and suddenly turned, sprang to the door, tore open the bolts and was gone. They could hear his footsteps clattering up the stone stair in mad haste.

An assistant executioner, at a sign from the governor, loosed the chains from their ring and lowered the body to the ground.

The man in the red cloak stepped forward to its side, moving slowly, almost wearily. Long he looked down at it in silence; then with a sudden motion tore the cloak from his shoulders and flung its ample scarlet folds over the horror on the floor, not less scarlet.

"Come!" he cried in a great voice to the Guard officers. "Come! Take up the body of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince Alexis Petrovitch Romanoff, and bear it with all fitting honors to the chapel of the fortress!"

He raised his head—his burning eyes seemed to shrivel Dimitri's very soul.

It was the Czar—Peter the Czar, surnamed the Great!

For a moment he stared at the executioner; then slowly his terrible eyes traveled downward to the hands which still gripped that bloody knout. There they rested for a long moment.

"Go, Nikolai, and see that all is done well!" said the Czar, choking on the words. Already the Guard officers were lifting, as gently and carefully as they could, the torn remnants of the Crown Prince of Russia. In silence they bore the body from the room; the governor followed.

"Dismiss your assistants," ordered the Czar; and Dimitri, still wondering, still with that chill of fear at his heart, obeyed.

The Czar took a step back.

It was over, thought Dimitri; his mind turned from the dreadful scene that had been to the hot soup that Tasia would have waiting for him in the tower. God! He would need a measure of brandy first, after this!

He glanced furtively at the lowering figure of the Czar; that burning gaze again was fixed on his hands—on the knout.

The Czar was trembling. Suddenly, with an indescribably violent movement—almost as though it required a terrific effort to tear his eyes from those blood-stained hands and that scarlet whip—the Czar turned away. His eyes fell on the silent Tartar troopers, on the block and ax that were to have been the instruments of his imperial mercy.

The Czar took a step forward—paused—

“Seize him!” he cried in a terrible voice, pointing at Dimitri.

The Tartars sprang forward in

instant obedience; Dimitri, his blood congealing in his veins, felt their strong fingers grip his arms.

“To the block with him!” cried the Czar. “Strike off those hands—those hands that have torn the life from my son—ah, God! my son! my son!”

The Czar turned toward the stair; the last sound that came to Dimitri’s ears as the Tartars dragged him toward the corner where waited the block and the ax was that despairing cry: “Ah, God! my son! my son!”

Then the door closed on the horror that remained.
