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THE RIVER

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

*Paviloff, Russia,
7 May, 1926.*

*Algernon E. Downes, Esq.,
21 St. James Row,
London, England;*

MY DEAR Mr. Downes:—
I am writing to let you know that I am resigning my position as foreman of the men working on the dam here at Paviloff. My reason for so doing is a most unusual one indeed, and no doubt you will feel obliged to discredit it—nor can I blame you for doing so, for even I am tempted to disregard the indubitable evidence of my own senses—so bizarre are the events that have led up to this culmination of my efforts here. Let me assure you, had I known of what I was facing at the outset of this project, I should never have entered upon any contract with you.

On the twenty-fourth of February last your representative, Mr. Solar Hamilton of Oxford, arrived to confer with Mr. Randeur and myself on the building of the dam across the Volga at this point. Present at this meeting was a Professor Sergei Boursky-Maminoff, late of the University of Moscow, and a former pupil of Metchnikoff. He was here to represent the peasants of Paviloff and the surrounding country. Professor Boursky-Maminoff related the story of peculiar superstitions strongly believed by the peasants, and he admitted that he also believed in them, owing, he said, to certain curious happenings bordering directly on these

superstitions. Mr. Randeur scoffed at him, Mr. Hamilton enjoyed himself immensely throughout the professor's entire relation, but these tales of his had an odd effect upon me from the beginning.

It seems that the peasants believe the Volga River is guarded by spirits, who will rise up against us if we attempt to stay the course of the river in any manner. You will say, as did Randeur, that the idea is utterly preposterous. I admit that it does sound preposterous. Professor Boursky-Maminoff warned us repeatedly to go and leave the river, but Randeur could not consider the idea. Finally the professor departed in anger. I endeavored to argue with Randeur and Hamilton, but both of them ridiculed me. At length Mr. Hamilton left, saying as he went that if I did not wish to stay he would see that another man would be sent to fill the vacancy. Please notify Mr. Hamilton to supply that other man.

God knows what prompted Randeur to do so rash a thing, but he built his cottage on a little knoll almost directly in the course of the river. Everyone feared that if the dam should suddenly go out, Randeur's cottage would go out with it.

One day not long ago, the twenty-seventh of April to be exact, as Professor Boursky-Maminoff stood on this knoll rebuking Randeur for his rash act, and again warning him to watch for the river spirits, a most repulsive hunchback approached the two men, screaming at the top of his voice, "The boatmen sing tonight.

The boatmen sing tonight." This in itself was an odd occurrence, but it developed that the hunchback was quite mad, and so Randeur again scoffed at what the professor said. The boatmen that the hunchback referred to are the *ghosts* of those slavish men, or rather, half-men, half-beasts, who were treated as animals by the nobility of Russia; the men forced to pull the heavily laden boats of the nobility up the Volga. There are no such boatmen now, although they still existed in 1917. Randeur questioned Professor Boursky-Maminoff and he learned that the peasants believed that whenever the boatmen sing it is a sign of death. The professor told Randeur that their singing had never failed to bring death. Of course, you can well imagine what an effect this had on Randeur—none at all. He waved it away, but——!

On the following day Randolph Smith, our best patrolman, apparently accidentally fell from the framework at the extreme outer edge of the dam into the swirling current below, and was whisked away in the space of a moment. I say *apparently*, because we do not know. Randeur was stunned for a moment, but he blamed it upon coincidence. However, he endeavored to keep it from Professor Boursky-Maminoff, but the professor heard of it and came directly to Randeur, and again implored him to cease his task. But Randeur would hear none of it.

Last night while the professor was speaking to our manager, the hunchback came again, shrieking his unearthly warning. And even as he spoke, the professor paled, and muttered that he, too, heard them chanting in the distance; and we looked at the river, but there was nothing there.

And today, Mr. Downes, the entire left end of the dam has gone out, the stronger side, wiped out completely! And the men have all quit, but Randeur is still there; he is going to build that dam, he says!

Hoping that you will soon find a man to fill the unfortunate vacancy left by me, I remain,

Very cordially and sincerely yours,
NEMO H. LAWLOR.

RANDEUR saw the last of his men leave him, and he moved angrily toward the cottage. He sat there some time, mumbling over his charts and plans. After a while he came out and looked about him: up at the remainder of the dam, and at the river flowing by as peacefully as ever, and at the sky to see if there were any signs of storm; but the sky was clear, and away in the distance in the purple haze about the mountains the full moon was rising. And he looked toward the town, and there he saw what he dreaded to see: the dark figure of the mad hunchback moving toward him over the sand. He stood very quietly until the figure came up to him. His eyes were wide with excitement, and his straggly hair framed a pockmarked face; his huge distended nose squatted above his thin, bloodless lips, like a vulture over some half-devoured corpse; his lips opened and closed as he came, and his three remaining teeth were displayed in their rotting gums; his clothes were dirty, ragged, and he wore neither shoes nor stockings. The ungainly hump on his back stuck out prominently. He spoke in a nervous frenzy of fury.

"The boatmen chant again tonight. Do you hear them? Death is in the air. Death! And the river seethes in anger, and it will rise against you tonight. And you are alone in the path of the river! Death!"

Randeur cursed him, and raised his hand in a threatening gesture. The hunchback sped away, and as he ran, he shouted, and Randeur heard the ominous cry echo far in the distance.

"Death! Death! Death!" And a harsh laugh sounded after it, and Randeur shuddered.

It was fifteen minutes past 10 by Randeur's watch when it started. Randeur did not notice the splashing of the waves until after some time had passed. Then suddenly a shutter banged against the side of the cottage, and he started up from his blue-prints and peered anxiously out into the night. The full moon rode high in the sky, and there was not even a fleece in the blue as far as he could see. But the shutter had banged; he had heard it. And even as he looked wonderingly out, the shutter banged against the house-wall for the second time, and immediately after another shutter banged, and another and another, until Randeur rushed madly for the door, but before he reached it, it was flung violently open. He halted for a moment; then ran out, and, turning, looked fearfully back at the accursed cottage. But now all was silent; the shutters sagged listlessly on their ill-fastened hinges, and the door stood half open. There was no hint of a breeze; the night was oppressively hot.

He stared at the cottage until some inner sense beating upon his mind turned his head slowly toward the river. And there he saw a multitude of white shapes, indistinguishable, fantastic, ominous. And as he looked at them moving slowly up the river toward the dam, he became conscious of a loud sound as of the beating of the waves, and he saw the river rise and swell, and a thousand white, foamy waves lashed the air in fury. And from some far point in the distance came the low sound of a hymn.

Randeur listened, terror-stricken. And as he stared at the white shapes almost at the dam, his ears seemed to open, and he heard in mighty chorus:

"Upward, onward, we are one!"

Randeur clapped his hands over his ears so that he might not hear that presentiment of death, the song of the Volga boatmen; but the toilers

mocked his efforts, and raised their voices, and sang louder, louder, louder. And the waves rose higher and higher, and the song increased in volume, and Randeur stood rooted to the ground upon the knoll on which he had foolishly supposed himself to be safe.

Suddenly that same inner sense turned his head upward so that he could see the right side of the dam, and he saw it crumble and vanish in the upheaval of water that followed. And it seemed as if his eyes were suddenly opened, for he saw the spirits of the river pushing the water toward him; and he saw, too, the moon shining tranquilly down upon the seething waters before he closed his eyes in a vain effort to shut out the scenes before him. And he heard the song of the boatmen, rising and falling, ominous, terrible:

"Upward, onward, we are one!"

"No sound did I hear during the night, but the river has avenged itself for the wrong that has been done to it." The professor pointed to the jagged spar that was caught in the crotch of a giant willow that stood upon the knoll where a cottage had once been. "It is all that is left of everything that has been here. Death has come and gone."

And from somewhere in back of the crowd of peasants that gazed in silent awe upon the calm river came the voice of the mad hunchback in wild echo to the professor:

"Death! Death! Death!"

It was the mad hunchback who found Randeur two days later far down the river among the reeds and rushes that grew thickly there. Randeur's bloated face told of the ghastly things he had seen; his bloodless lips were parted and tightly drawn; his hair was torn as if in a frenzy of despair; and his widely opened eyes stared upward in mute, nameless horror.