

Weird Tales

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FARNSWORTH WRIGHT, Editor.

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AN EXAMINATION IN DIPLOMACY

By EDITH M. ALMEDINGEN

HE HAD not enough daring to tell them he did not want to be assigned to that particular post. They would have laughed at him had he ventured to give an outlet to his vague fears; a trusted tool of the Tcheka, afraid to spend a few nights on duty at the Paul Castle, just because he had happened to hear some old woman's tales about its being haunted! Glebov realized that his bold hopes of rapid promotion would have been dashed to the ground had the chief but caught one glimpse of the almost animal terror in his heart. So he merely bit his lips and lashed himself into a sham attitude of glad readiness. "So good of the chief to think so highly of him, Glebov; certainly he'd try and do his utmost." And he added a few more similar commonplaces, before leaving the grim Tcheka house, a fateful mandate to the commandant of the castle in his pocket.

Glebov's duty did not begin till a few hours later. These he spent in breathless feverish activities, carefully abstaining from drink during the day. "One's mind had to be clear before an emergency," he thought. And, following an unaccountable trend of reasoning, he had his pockets well stuffed with numbers of *The Atheist*. Its pages gave one food for thinking on "the right lines," convinced one that things supernatural were impotent to

frighten, because they did not exist. "I have not been attending all those anti-religious lectures for nothing," Glebov tried to comfort himself, and, by dint of heroic efforts, he well-nigh managed to conquer his fears, when it was time for him to go up to the castle.

But no sooner had he crossed the sinister drawbridge, no sooner had the castle gates slammed to behind him, than he became aware that, if anything, his fears were as mighty as ever before. His very tread, sharp against the worn flagstones of the dark, deserted courtyard, was expressive of those fears. He cast an upward look at the gloomy, lightless walls around him, and all at once his treacherous mind remembered the details of the ghastly tragedy enacted within those very same walls more than one hundred years ago. Yes, that was why even the bravest of the brave men held the castle to be haunted. For the Emperor Paul met here with a most violent death, and his son and successor shunned the place like a plague-cemetery of old, and none of the later sovereigns even dreamt of living here. And the Tchekist shuddered, as though visualizing the loathsome details of that scene on the eleventh of March, 1801. He had read all about it in some old book or other. He now wished he had not, because the pictures rose in his

mind, suddenly, unwantedly, and he could not clear his vision from its blood-curdling details. The emperor, cornered in a back study of his, madly spinning round and round the table to evade the murderous touch of his enemies, and finally captured, pinned down to the floor, four cruelly determined hands clasping at his throat, clasping tighter, tighter, tighter, till all life went out of the small, wizened body and the curse of a foul crime descended upon the castle to darken it for the generations that were to come.

Yes, the Tchekist remembered all that. And half-way down the yard he stopped, as though struck by lightning. The eleventh of March! And was not this very day the eleventh of March also?

His blood ran cold. His forehead was bathed in clammy sweat. His reason alone, the reason of a well-trained and hardened communist, urged him to go on. After all, these things had their existence only in the befogged minds of those poor, deranged folk who would not be persuaded to cease from believing in that strange God of theirs. He, Ivan Glebov, was gloriously free from all such prejudices. The party would scarcely have trusted him so much if it were proved that he, too, was tainted with these puerile superstitions. But, for all his reasoning, his hands felt unpleasantly clammy and his heart beat terrifically fast as he crossed the threshold of the commandant's lodge.

THE commandant was glad to see him. Vodka and cigarettes were produced at once, but Glebov stoically resisted the temptation.

"I have work to do, comrade," he explained somewhat lamely. "See, I have brought all these papers with me. So I must keep my mind clear."

"As you like," acquiesced the stout, pig-faced commandant. "Of

course, you know this is hardly an enviable job, taken all around. The Tcheka must send us their bravest men."

Glebov pricked his ears.

"Why not exactly an enviable job?" he asked, making an almost superhuman effort to remain quiet. "Surely, the responsibility——"

The commandant waved his fat hand impatiently.

"Oh, the responsibility is all right. Rather too much of it. You see, we have reasons to believe that those accursed counter-revolutionaries are keen on making their headquarters in this old castle. We have not been able to trace them as yet—too many unexplored cellars and rooms underground," he added almost apologetically.

True diplomatic sense prompted Glebov to pass no comment on these remarks; he was not going to wander about the unexplored regions of the castle, thank you!

The commandant went on: "And there are all sorts of queer stories running about the place, you know"—deftly he shifted his viewpoint—"no use talking about them to a Tchekist, is there?"

"I think not." Glebov forced a short laugh. "Grandmother's tales about its being haunted and all that rot, eh?"

"Quite, comrade." The man joined in the laugh. "Things unfit for enlightened citizens, like ourselves, to listen to."

GLEBOV duly took over the night charge of the castle from the commandant, made a careful round of the premises (without descending underground, however), looked over the numerous sentry posts, and, half certain that things seemed all right, went to his own particular den, a spacious, well-heated, well-furnished room on the second floor, with a bal-

cony overlooking the quiet, slumbering courtyard.

He lit the candles on the big empire table in the middle of the room and switched off the electric light. The latter always gave a funny nervous pain to his eyes, and he really wanted to work that night—to read and reread those precious atheistic pamphlets, which stuffed his pockets, and thus to force his mind to turn to sane rational thinking, such as befitted a true servant of the Soviet Republic.

A filled decanter, some glasses and an invitingly open box of choice cigarettes were placed on a tray on the writing-table. Glebov looked at them longingly for a moment, then pushed them aside, a stern expression on his usually expressionless face. Drink would be perilous and smoking was likely to fog his mind.

He settled himself very comfortably in the velvet-covered armchair, stretched out his rather tired legs and began delving through articles in *The Atheist*. Yes, that was the one he specially wanted to find, *The Impossibility of Ghostly Happenings*.

The crudely violent, unlearned language of the paper was familiar to him. He had heard these things time and again shouted from various platforms, urged by wild-eyed, fanatical individuals, whose sole objective in this life seemed to be the raising of an insurmountable barrier between its course and the possibility of any further immaterial existence.

Glebov's parched tongue flicked over his lips as he read on. Of course, he must have been utterly insane even to allow such stupid ideas the right of entering his mind at all! Here he was all alone, in the middle of the night, in that same old dreaded castle, and nothing was happening, and nothing was likely to happen. These things could not exist. Supernatural, indeed! Super-

natural rubbish! Really, he might indulge in just one tiny drink.

He filled his glass slowly and deliberately, and held it against the light. They knew how to provide for their best workers, did the Tcheka chiefs. He sniffed the amber contents. Golly, if it was not real British whisky! Glebov chuckled, as he noisily gulped it down. Most likely the happy result of a raid on some dirty Englishman's house! Well, it served a much better purpose now! Glebov smacked his lips and helped himself to a cigarette.

"Wonderful chaps to write so clearly and helpfully!" he muttered, scanning over a virulent paper on *Christian Mythology*. "Such things should be translated into all languages."

He laid down the paper, leant back luxuriously and puffed at his cigarette. It was really wonderful what two short hours of sane reading had done to him. Gone were his imbecile anxieties, his vague disturbing fears. He was a fully fledged Tcheka communist, who feared neither God nor the Devil, because he denied both.

Glebov looked at his expensive gold watch. Nearly twenty-five minutes to 12. He would make another round at midnight. Would it not be lucky if he caught some real counter-revolutionists? And red-handed, too? Rosy-tinted thoughts of amazingly quick promotion sped through his mind.

The one and only door, at the farthest end of the room, gave a gentle squeak. Glebov started. . . . No, how silly of him! Of course, he had not locked the door and the wind was gently blowing from the half-opened window. Why, he wondered, should the window be opened? Suddenly he felt chilly—because it was March—and the eleventh of March as well. Ominous recollections, at-

tached to the date, again crowded into his mind.

He would ring for the sentry presently. He did not feel like getting up and shutting the door himself. After all, if these things were non-existent (as they most certainly were, he hastened to assure himself), still one had to mind one's nerves just a little.

He shivered again. The wind was getting decidedly chilly. But he knew it would be unwise to ring for the sentry before midnight. The chiefs were known to lend their ears to quite unfounded stories, and it might then be said of him that he was actually scared.

GLEBOV held out his hand toward the decanter. Just another drink would help steady his nerves. His eyes fell on the hideously blasphemous cartoon on the paper's page lying open in front of him. Somehow he did not like the cartoon. "Really a bit too thick," he thought, and turned the page over.

Then he refilled the glass, which was never meant to reach his lips; for at that moment the door gave another gentle squeak, opened wider, and a dark-cloaked, middle-sized figure stepped into the room.

From the table where Glebov sat, he could just face the door. His blood turned to ice. He wanted to scream, but his lips were frozen into silence. The only sound heard was the crash of the glass and the steady drip-drip of the spilt whisky.

For a terribly long moment the strange figure stood immobile. Then it moved slowly toward the table—slowly, just one step at a time. The fitful candle-light lent a grotesque uncertainty to its outline, but Glebov's terror-stricken mind could still register a few definite details. The man was of middle height, wore a loose, dark cloak, and, as he made another step nearer the table, the

hapless Tehekist's terror increased hundredfold; the stranger had that peculiar tricorne hat, so common in the period of the Emperor Paul. Glebov knew it. He had seen some pictures. His hands clutched at the table. His eyes stared ahead, frozen in their look of utter terror.

Because it was *he*, the victim of that foul crime committed in these very walls. . . .

Glebov's brain battled for a scream, but his lips were too inert to obey. And the cloaked figure, all the more terrible because of his silence, was advancing, one step at a time, slowly, revengefully. . . . Yes, revengefully. One sovereign about to settle the score for another. . . .

Glebov would not look at the face. . . . He would not see it. . . . The bell was out of reach, he could not move a muscle. . . . What was there to do except—

He remembered, and the swift recollection prompted him to stagger to his shaking feet. Yes, *they* did exist, then! Was there not a prayer against all evil ghosts his grandmother had taught him to say when, as a boy, he was fearful of going to sleep in a dark room? What was it? Oh, curse it, he could not remember a word, and he *knew* that unless he uttered it, the strange cloaked figure would be upon him and seize him by the throat and strangle him, even as *he* had been strangled more than one hundred years ago.

The figure made another step. The world turned black for Glebov. Wildly he stretched out his trembling arms, as though pushing the stranger away from him, and then, with the vilest of vile oaths, fell down in a limp heap.

EARLY the next morning the little, stout commandant trotted to the Teheka headquarters. The thin, scarred-face chief received him in a

private sanctum, but their conversation was amazingly brief.

"Not a detail was forgotten, comrade," hurried the obsequious commandant. "Not even the tricorne hat, though it was hard to get it."

"We shan't forget it," snapped

the chief. "Run away, and not a word to anyone! We'd suspected the fellow to be unfit for a long time. Glad the little test didn't prove a washout! Eh, what? Oh, yes, send a line to his widow—make it heart failure or something."