

LOLA PULASKI;

The Victim of Circumstantial Evidence.

A Story of Nihilistic Plotting and Crimes.

BY LEON EDWARDS.

CHAPTER VII.

BLACK FOR GENERAL PAUL AND BLACKER FOR LOLA PULASKI.

As soon as Count Linwood could leave the Emperor, he hastened down to the court, and jumping into his own waiting sleigh he called to the shivering driver perched on a high seat in front:

"Drive with all haste to my palace at once."

The Count's palace was on that magnificent street bordering the Neva, and known to the world over as "The Alexander Prospect."

As he dashed the spirited horses, three abreast, to the music of their own bells and the encouraging cries of the muffled driver.

Though nearing the hour of midnight the Count's palace was ablaze with colored lights, and the passers by stopped to listen to the sound of music that poured out when the great doors opened, and to watch the dancing shadows that fell like spirited silhouettes on the drapery of the great windows.

It was the birthday of the Countess Elvira Linwood, the only child of her widowed father.

The Countess Elvira, for her own great sorrow, was twenty-six years of age.

She had fair, towy hair, light expressionless eyes, and the angularity of person that is never associated with physical beauty.

These peculiarities of person and evidence of premature age, the Countess Elvira attempted to hide by a manner and dress that were conspicuously juvenile.

There was a gay company of ladies and cavaliers present, but one man above all others attracted the attention of the hostess.

This was Colonel Orloff, of the naval artillery.

He was a well-formed middle-aged man, with a face that must have been striking, if not handsome, before dissipation and the viler passions that led up to it had curved their indelible traces about eyes and mouth, though the latter was partly hidden by a short, dark moustache.

The Colonel and the Countess had strolled into the conservatory—which, despite the darkness and the cold outside, bloomed with all the luxuriance of a tropical garden—and were talking in low tones, such tones as lovers use when, from the lofty steeple of St. Isaac's, near by, the deep-toned bell clashed out the midnight hour.

"Ah," said the Countess, "my father is due at this time."

"And you are sure that he has insisted with General Paul on publishing the engagement?" asked Colonel Orloff.

"There can be no doubt of it, yet that should not disturb you," she replied, at the same time laying her hand on his arm, in an assuring way.

"Yet it does disturb me; I see you slipping from my grasp," and Colonel Orloff pressed the thin hand to keep it from vanishing.

"General Paul will not keep the contract, mark me—"

"I wish the fellow was dead," hissed Colonel Orloff, who could see his own advancement in the death of his supposed rival.

"I would not care if he were dead," she said, slowly, "but not till after he has refused the contract, and of that we shall know to-night."

"What has refusal of the contract to do with it?"

"Only this, Colonel Orloff, that in that event the estates of the Prince of Moskwa lapse to the crown; and the Czar, with whom my father is now in great favor, has half promised that they shall be mine. Were they mine, and you my husband—"

"As I shall be," said Colonel Orloff, fiercely.

"Then," she continued, "I could make you Prince of Moskwa, and the most powerful of all the Czar's nobles."

At that instant the sudden ceasing of rapidly vibrating bells, near the door, told that Count Linwood's sleigh had arrived, and the lovers hastened to the magnificent drawing-rooms.

Count Linwood soon appeared among his guests, with the fixed smile and graceful, easy manners of a born courtier.

"Why, my dear fellow," said Orloff, who could not help seeing his friend's agitation, "you could not be more excited if you were ordered to execution."

"As I would rather be than to carry out this order," replied General Paul, as he crumpled the paper in his iron grip.

"Is the order secret?"

"Not to you, my dear George. I am here ordered to arrest at once and send to the Neva prison Count Pulaski. My God! it is only a few days since that he came back a wreck, from the quarries of Siberia."

"You amaze me! Is there any charge?" asked Orloff, his fine face showing surprise and sorrow, for through his friends, the Berghers, he had met Lola's father, and his kind heart had gone out to the afflicted old man.

"Charge? No, the powers that be keep the charges, and would soldiers must blindly carry out our orders."

"We must accept things as they are," said the young Count philosophically, "not as we would have them; yet, for the honor of Russia, I wish things were otherwise. I do not envy you your duty."

"A wrong can never be a duty," said the General fiercely; "I will resign, and give up all before I do this thing."

"Then some one more cruel will do it for you," said the Count. "As you cannot save the old man, try to help him."

"Lady! She is an adventuress."

"Do we know her?"

"Her name is Lola Pulaski—"

"What children?"

"You seem to know her, Elvira?"

"I know of her, father."

"And what do you know?"

"Nothing good."

"That is a negative answer."

"I know that she is an adventuress, and she is 'petite and pretty,' as the French say; also that she has so encouraged all the gentlemen with whom she comes in contact as to turn their heads and make them rivals. It is even said the Grand Duke Alexis has been paying her undue attentions."

"His Majesty must hear of this. Tomorrow she will be driven from the palace; but we must see to it that a dangerous woman is driven from the empire," said the Count, affecting a virtuous indignation.

That it was an affectation was soon evident, for with his courtly smile, assumed on the second, he turned and blended with his daughter's guests.

Soon after midnight the visitors left, but before Colonel Orloff took his departure Elvira found a chance to whisper to him the true state of affairs and to say, encouragingly:

"Keep up a good heart, dear Michael; all goes well."

At her accustomed hour the following morning Lola Pulaski kissed her old father, as was her invariable custom, and made her way to the palace where resided her royal pupils.

Early as it was General Paul was up and it may be the hope of seeing her had something to do with it, for love is the greatest foe of sleep.

Formerly Lola's dark eyes brightened whenever the tall, handsome soldier came to view, but of late she shrank from him and tried to avoid him.

How could he know, in his intense earnestness to seek her out, the awful secret at her heart?

The strongest proof ever presented to man outside the actual act—and that he could have forgiven in his overwhelming love—would not have convinced him that Lola Pulaski was his sworn assassin, and that she carried in her breast the dagger of the Nihilists intended for his heart.

He knew all of Lola's past, but he did not for a moment imagine that she suspected his identity.

It was largely through his influence that General Paul was released, and it was a desire to undo as far as possible his father's awful wrongs that led him to seek out the poor girl.

But in his case a manly pity proved to be akin to a noble love.

From the instant he first saw her he loved her; and the birth of that love was also the birth of the noble resolution to marry her and bless her with his wealth and devotion before he told her all.

He saw her entering the palace, and tried to speak to her, but with a slight nod she acknowledged his presence and escaped.

Perplexed and somewhat mortified, the young soldier began pacing back and forth before the lofty door through which Lola had disappeared.

He had not indulged in this abstracted employment many minutes when he was startled from his reverie by seeing Lola come out again.

Unable to restrain his impulse, he ran to her, and he was about to take her hand when a glance at her white face checked and averted him.

"Merciful heaven, Lola!" he said, "what is wrong?"

"The world is wrong," she said, making as if she would go on.

"Lola, I cannot stand this; you must speak to me. Why are you leaving the palace?"

"Because, your highness, the palace has no further use for me," she replied.

"Explain, I do not understand."

"I am dismissed—"

"Dismissed?"

"Dismissed by order of his highness, the Czar of all the Russias," she said with a little smile.

The General smote his forehead.

He saw through it all.

This was the result of his last night's audience with the Emperor.

He was about to give free rein to his fierce indignation, but checking himself, he said with an intense calmness: "I fear I am to blame; can I see you at your home to-night and explain?"

"You to blame!"

"Yes, Lola; but 'twas through my loyalty to you—"

"You cannot see me at my house to-night," she said, waving her hand and moving off. "Here the dream ends; here we part forever."

He would have stopped her or gone with her, but at that instant an officer appeared, and, saluting, he handed the General an order.

The General glanced at the paper. It was from Count Linwood, asking him to go to his (the General's) office at once, where he would find an order from the Czar awaiting him.

Moving like a man in a dream, General Paul hurried to his office, and here he found awaiting him Count Orloff, a cousin of the Colonel, the Countess Elvira Linwood's accepted lover.

The young men were fellow-soldiers and old friends, and so met with more than the cold formality of mere officials.

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The General hastily tore off the cover and read, and as he did so his hands trembled and the color left his handsome face.

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