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UNDER THE TERROR

BY ROMA

[These sketches purport to be true incidents of Russian prison life, witnessed by the writer.]

I.

OUR cell is cold and dark. A mere glimmer of light penetrates through the tiny barred windows. Black shadows with white faces cower on the half-rotten straw. To-day, we are still eighteen. To-morrow, we shall have more room, for five in a few hours will feel the muzzle of a Brown-ing against their necks. Thank God, I am not one of them. But Filimonoff and Jacobson are. Who are the others? Dvoretzky? Little Geilis?

I move with a start. A moist, cold hand touches my shoulder, and quick, hot words are whispered in my ear. 'Roma! Listen! In God's name listen! I am perfectly sure that the beasts will shoot me to-day like a dog. No, don't try to comfort me; so far as possible I'm reconciled. But I have a favor to ask — Don't refuse it, for it's the last request of a dead man. You may be liberated; you have the best chance. Go to Odessa, Derivassovskaya Street 21, and break the news to my parents as gently as you can. Tell them I died of typhus — or anything — but you will pardon my asking. . . .'

Are they coming already? No, it is only the guard with his little dim, smoky petroleum lamp.

How remarkably still it is in the building! No wonder; it is Wednesday.

To-day, the Extraordinary Commission sits, and to-night, the condemned men will be shot. Every Wednesday there are three to four hundred.

Although the names of the condemned are never given — not even to the victims themselves — yet most of those who are to go know that their knell has sounded. None feels safe, even the most innocent, even those who have not yet been heard. A sort of animal terror lurks in every breast.

Hour follows hour. Deep silence reigns in the immense building. Only the slow steps of the guards echo in the corridor. Stump! Stump! Stump! Seldom does a prisoner speak. Now and then one catches part of a whispered sentence: 'Do you hear the auto trucks coming? Six of them again. So at least three hundred.'

'Where do they take the corpses?'

'The devil knows! Now they are getting cautious and burying their tracks. Last year Denikin disinterred the men they slaughtered and had photographs taken to publish to the world. The pictures appeared in foreign newspapers.'

'A silly proceeding. Denikin and his butchers were no better; in fact they were often worse. It's just like the war. Each side boasts its justice and accuses its enemy of atrocity, but at the bottom they are all of them beasts.'

Stump! Stump! Stump!

'See Jacobson. It's a close call for him. I believe he'll go mad before they get him. What is the matter with his eyes? Why is his head constantly shaking? Isn't it fearful! When they let me out a minute this morning, I saw his wife and daughter in the court. They had brought him bread and gruel. Yes, they'll come a good many days, I guess, before they find out.'

Stump! Stump! Stump!

Now they are coming. We hear new steps in the distance. Soldiers! And a minute later rifle butts thud on the floor. There is a rasping of keys in locks. People are going back and forth. The motors are chugging in the court. We know why. Everyone listens intently.

'Do you hear? — Once more!'

A trained ear quickly detects the reports of a revolver, punctuating the noise of the motors. The latter keep going without interruption. Twenty minutes, — half an hour!

Suddenly, before we expect it, the door opens, — so abruptly that three of the prisoners shriek. Men are standing in the doorway. They enter. An official holds a list. Two men stand at his side with drawn revolvers. Behind them are other men with arms.

'Jacobson!'

Silence.

'Jacobson!'

Silence.

My eyes involuntarily search the darkness. Practically every head is bowed. Only one form is visible, standing with almost comic stiffness in the corner. Slowly, very slowly, it separates itself from the wall. It advances. The face is as pale as that of a corpse. The eyes stare fixedly into the distance. The commissar steps up to him. Jacobson vanishes from the chamber without a sound.

Dvoretzky springs up: 'Have you got me down?'

'What's your name?'

'Dvoretzky.'

'Dvoretzky? Dvoretzky?' The officer's eyes run down his list. He turns it over to look at the back. 'Dvoretzky? No, apparently not.'

I see a gleam of relief and mad hope flash in Dvoretzky's eyes.

'Sure! Here! What's your name? Dvoretzky? Vladimir Nikolayevich?'

'Yes.'

'This way, please!'

The victim's arms sink limply by his side. What must he have lived through in those few seconds! He casts a half-despairing glance back into the cell. His eyes rest on me a second. Then he disappears in silence.

'Filimonoff, Andrei Vassilyevich!'

'Here!'

Calmly and composedly, this man raises his magnificent figure erect: 'Good-by, comrades! Perhaps we'll meet again.'

'Voranzoff!'

'In the next cell,' we reply in chorus.

'Nikitin!'

'I? How? Impossible! I have not had a hearing. There is some mistake!'

'Permit me. Are you Nikitin?'

'Yes.'

'Alexander Leotyevich?'

'Yes.'

'Come then! I merely have orders to get you. The rest is no business of mine.'

'But I'll not permit myself to be shot by you this way. My whole imprisonment was due to a mistake. I don't even know what I am charged with!'

'Please don't delay me. I am not permitted to converse with the prisoners!'

'But I'll not go! Even a worm turns when it's trodden on.'

'Come out!'

'No!'

'Take him, guards!'

A short struggle . . .

'Kranz!'

'Not here!'

'Potapoff!'

'Also not here!'

The door is slammed, the key turns in the lock. We are alone. These terrible five minutes rest like a nightmare on our souls. All are silent. The motor keeps chugging.

A light snicker breaks the silence, rising to hysterical laughter.

'Ha! Ha! Ha! They've forgotten me! Ha! Ha! Ha! Now they'll let me out, for on the list I am counted as dead. Don't you see? From now on I am a living corpse. Ha! Ha! Ha!'

Little Geilis' laughter dies away in sobs, and he speedily collapses on the floor with hysterical contortions. I wonder if he has suddenly gone mad.

That question, however, remains forever unanswered. Five minutes later they come back for him, and must carry him limp and unresisting from the cell.

II

'I PRAY you, by all that's holy! It's a mistake! The names have got changed. I, Sergei Semyenovitch Edrianoff, have been acquitted. I am to be released to-morrow. The papers have already been signed and now you want to shoot me! — Would you rob a healthy, strong man of his life? Kill him just because he has been confused with someone else? Check up your list! Telephone. . . .'

'Kindly come out and don't keep your comrades waiting. I can't help you. Your name's on the list. Whether there's been a mistake or not, I am just obeying orders. Moreover, I know that joke. Many a black-hearted criminal has sung the same song right here, so . . .'

A murmur of voices, and the sound

of footsteps comes from the corridor. The unrhythmic clicking of a typewriter can be heard in the next room.

Commissar Leontyeff is alone. The after-effects of a sleepless night weigh him down like lead. 'Thank God that was the last!' he pondered. 'It was a narrow escape for poor Edrianoff . . .'

Leontyeff yawns and stretches and mechanically picks up the first paper on the pile before him. It is a list of the condemned: he glances over it indifferently, then suddenly — 'Stop! Is n't that Edrianoff? And does n't he get 'Semyenovitch' from his father? Hang it! Has there been a mistake?'

Leontyeff grabs his cap from the hook and hurries out through the vaulted passage to the courtyard.

Crack! . . . Crack! . . .

He hastens his footsteps, reaches the exit, bursts open the door, and steps into the courtyard.

At first, he merely sees the dark outlines of a big auto truck. Then, some twenty steps beyond, the brightly lighted interior of a shed. Two sentries stand at the entrance.

Trrrach!! Trrrach!!!

'Halt!'

With two springs, Leontyeff is in the shed, slips and half falls, and slaps his hand into something fluid and gluey. Fifteen white forms spattered with blood and brains lie in a contorted heap upon the floor. Their faces are distorted, their arms and legs form a chaotic tangle. The hair of one has fallen down over his brows and his glassy gray eyes shine with the fixed stare of death beneath. The head of another has been fairly blown to pieces by shots from a Colt revolver. The forehead and eyes are gone, and only the lips remain fixed in a ghastly grin. There is blood on the walls, blood on the floor, blood spattered over the two executioners.

'Is Edrianoff still here?'

Leontyeff gazes around the shed.
'Edrianoff! Edrianoff!'

A few forms as white as chalk cower in the background. Leontyeff steps up to them and throws a flashlight in their faces. Terror stricken eyes glare at him from bloodless countenances.

'Why didn't you answer? Come with me! We'll investigate this tomorrow.'

'Here, Comrade Edrianoff, are your papers. You're free and you can go where you will. Yes, just one thing more. What I want to say is — um — um — yes — um, don't be offended because I did not believe you last night. You see, when you hear the same tale over again day after day, the same prayers and curses and imprecations and tears and attacks of hysteria — you get so you don't notice them. You have nothing to say? Well, good-by! Sentry, let him out!'

Black clouds chase down the heavens and conceal the moon. From time to time, however, the latter's rays momentarily pierce the gloom, throwing a transient gleam of pale light into the murder courtyard. A raw autumn wind whistles through the trees. Dry leaves rustle here and there. Not a sound breaks the stillness; merely a red glowing dot in the darkness indicates that in the blackest corner of the courtyard a man is smoking a cigarette. It is the sentry, a Red guardist, hardly more than a boy.

Mischa is afraid. A horrible, para-

lyzing fear seizes him. He imagines the invisible hands of spirits are clutching for his throat. In order to compose himself a little, he has rolled a cigarette and seated himself behind some boxes, waiting longingly to be relieved by his successor.

What's that? In the shed? Are yesterday's dead rising? His trembling hands involuntarily make the sign of the cross.

In a moment it is dark again. A black cloud has drifted over the moon. Mischa trembles from head to foot. The ragged edge of the cloud is growing brighter. One can already see the white outlines of the moon behind it. 'God and the Saints, save me!'

Then he sees clearly a cowering form.

'Who's there? Who's there? Stop or I shoot!'

Krrach — Tarrarach! . . .

Men rush up from every direction. There is a hum of voices. Lights are brought.

'Who fired? Why? Where is the sentry?'

Now, everyone sees what it is. Standing stiff and erect against the wall is a tall, white form half clad. Its overcoat and coat and hat lie on the ground.

'What are you doing here? How did you get in this courtyard?'

Commissar Leontyeff recoils.

Wide distended, insane eyes stare at him, and a rasping voice whispers: 'Comrade Commissar, I beg you, by all that's holy, tell 'em it's a mistake!'

LIFE, LETTERS, AND THE ARTS

ST. JOHN ERVINE AND AMERICA

THE impressions of America given to British newspapers by English literary men who have visited 'The States' are almost always full of interest. Mr. St. John Ervine has been lecturing on the common illusions about America, and the process of disillusionment. At a recent meeting of the Irish Literary Society he said:

'I thought of America as a country full of boasting, assertive, and rather mannerless people, closely intent on making money, and convinced that they had won the war. I discovered very speedily that the average American has far better manners than the average Briton, that he does not boast more excessively than he is entitled to boast, and that he is, on the whole, much more submissive to authority than Englishmen are. I did not find one man or woman in the parts of America visited by me, who had not got a very clear idea of the share of their country in the winning of the war.

'Love of money seems to me to be among the least of American characteristics. What one does discover in the whole population, rich and poor, is a real love of doing a job as well as possible. The American seems to like work, and he is fascinated by the power which control of industry gives to him. An American business man, even a very rich American business man, will be at his desk in his office, deeply engaged in his work, before an English business man has finished drinking his early morning cup of tea. I do not think that this is necessarily a virtue in the American business man — in

many respects, indeed, the English business man is his superior — but it arises, partly, from the fact that he must keep on the same level as his competitors, but more especially, from a genuine love of his job. A workman in America has much the same feeling. He would feel ashamed to demand increased wages at the same time that he was deciding to do less work and worse work.

'What we call American brag is the outcome of a quite laudable desire to see things better done in his country than they are done elsewhere. Civic pride is far stronger in American cities than it is in British cities. When I was in Chicago, I used to see banners stretched across the streets with legends such as "Boost Chicago" on them. The citizens were invited not only to brag about their city, but to make it worthy of brag. Something of the temper of Chicago at present was to be found in the people of Birmingham when Mr. Chamberlain was Mayor of that city.

'When I say that Americans are more submissive than Englishmen, I mean that they are more willing to accept the insolence of persons in office than we are. Walt Whitman referred to this aspect of their character more than once in his poems. We respect the law more than Americans do, but we have less respect for officials and politicians than they have. The American mind is more responsive to newspaper opinion than the British mind, and the American people generally are much more patient than we are. I have seen audiences in New York and Chicago