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The Jewel of St Petersburg

Written by Kate Furnivall

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The Jewel of St Petersburg

Kate Furnivall

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Valentina Ivanova did not intend to die. Not here. Not now. Not like this. With dirty feet and tangled hair and her life barely started. She looked down at her fingers in the fuzzy green gloom of the forest and was surprised to see them so steady. Inside she was shaking.

She always paid attention to fingers rather than faces because they told so much more. People remembered to guard their faces. They forgot their hands. Her own were small, though strong and supple from all the hours of piano playing – but what use was that now? For the first time she understood what real danger does to the human mind, as flat white fear froze the coils of her brain.

She could run. Or she could hide. Or she could stay where she was, moulded to the trunk of a silver birch, and let them find her.

Dark figures were flitting silently from tree to tree, swallowed by the sullen vastness of the forest around her. She couldn't see them now, couldn't hear them, yet she knew they were there. They seemed to vanish like beetles into the bark, invisible and untraceable, but each time she flicked her head suddenly to one side or the other, she caught their movement at the corner of her eye. A trail of air, thin and secretive. A shift of light. A break in the twilight of the forest floor.

Who were these people? They carried rifles, but they didn't look

like hunters. What hunters wore black hoods? What hunters had face masks with narrow slits for eyes and a jagged hole for a mouth?

She shivered. She wasn't willing to die.

Her feet were bare. She'd kicked off her shoes after the long gallop up the slope through the fields. The sky was still dark when she'd crept out of bed. She'd ignored the hairpins and the buckles, the gloves and the hat, all the paraphernalia that her mother insisted a young lady must wear at all times outdoors. At seventeen, she was old enough now to make her own choices. So she'd pulled a light sleeveless dress over her head, sneaked out of the house, saddled up Dasha and come up here to her favourite spot on her father's country estate. She'd plunged into the dark sombre fringe of the forest from where she loved to watch the dawn rise over Tesovo.

Her bare toes relished the black earth, moist as treacle. The wind had whipped her long dark hair in a fan across her cheeks and twined it round her neck. There was a freedom up here that loosened something inside her, something that had been wound too tight. It was always the same when the family left St Petersburg and arrived in Tesovo for the drowsy months of summer and the long white nights when the sun scarcely bothered to drop below the horizon.

That was until she saw the rifles.

Men in hoods. All in black and moving with stealth through the shadowy world of the forest. Sweat pooled in the hollow of her back as she dodged behind a tree. She heard a murmur of blurred voices, nothing more, and for a while she waited, willing them to leave. But only when the crimson dawn drew a line like a trail of blood between the trees did the men suddenly spread out, vanishing completely, and Valentina felt her heart thump in panic.

A whisper? Was that a whisper behind her?

She spun round. Peered into the shadows but could see no one.

A moment later a shape flickered. Dark and quick, off to one side. Another directly ahead. They were circling her. How many? She sank down into the dense mist that rose from the ground and,

crouching low, she started to scramble through the thick undergrowth. Thin grey ropes of mist coiled around her ankles and fronds reached for her face, but she didn't stop until she almost crashed into a pair of legs crossing an animal trail in front of her. She froze. In her leafy cavern under the ferns she didn't breathe. The legs paused, her terrified gaze fixed on a cloth patch that was badly sewn on to the knee of the trousers, but then they moved on. She jinked to her left and scuttled further. If she could find the edge of the forest where her horse was tethered, she could—

The blow came from nowhere. Knocked her flat on her back. She lay sprawled on the damp earth, striking out at the hand that seized her shoulder, sinking teeth into its wrist. Bone jarred on her teeth but she bit harder and tasted blood. The hand abruptly released its grip with a curse and she bounded to her feet, but a heavy swinging slap cracked against her jaw and sent her crashing into a tree, cheek first.

'She's over here!' a deep voice yelled.

Valentina tried to run. Her head was spinning but she saw the second slap coming and dropped to one knee. She heard her attacker's hand snap as it smacked into the trunk instead and a bellow of rage. Her feet were up and moving but the earth wouldn't keep still. It was swaying under her, merging with the grey mist and flaring into flames each time she crossed a streak of sunlight.

'Stop her!'

'Shit! *Dermo!* Put a bullet in her!'

A bullet?

The sound of lead rattling into the breech of a rifle ripped into her mind. She jerked behind a tree and saw her hands quivering uncontrollably on the peeling bark.

'Wait!' she called out.

Silence. The noise of bodies crashing through the forest ceased.

'Wait!' she called again.

'Get out here where we can see you.'

'No bullets?'

A voice laughed at her, an angry sound. 'No bullets.'

They hadn't fired at her yet. Maybe they couldn't risk the noise of shots – in the countryside, sound travels far. She tried to swallow but her throat was raw. These men weren't playing games. Whatever it was they were doing, she had disturbed them at it and they weren't going to let her just walk away. She had to talk to them.

'Hurry up! *Bistro!*' the angry voice shouted.

Valentina's heart stopped in her chest as she stepped clear of the tree.

There were five of them. Five men, five rifles. Only one, the tallest figure, had his rifle slung loosely over his shoulder as if he didn't expect to use it. The black masked faces stared blankly back at her and her skin crawled at the sight of them.

They didn't put a bullet in her. That was a start.

'It's just a girl,' one scoffed.

'Quick as a bloody rabbit though.'

Three of them moved nearer. She tensed, up on her toes, ready to run.

'Don't look so fierce, girl, we're just—'

'Get away from me.'

'No need to be unfriendly.'

'You're trespassing on my father's land,' she said. Her voice didn't sound like hers.

'The land of Russia,' one of the hoods growled, 'belongs to the people of Russia. You stole it from us.'

Chyort! Revolutionaries. The word swelled in her head, crushing all other thoughts. Stories circulated throughout the salons of St Petersburg about men like this, about how they intended to seize control of Russia and kill off all the ruling classes. She would be just the beginning.

'What are you doing here?' she demanded.

A loose lecherous chuckle came from the one closest to her. 'Enjoying the view.'

She felt her cheeks flush. Her thin muslin dress was plastered to

her body where sweat and sodden foliage had streaked the material. Defensively she looped her arms in front of her, but shook her hair back from her face in a gesture of defiance. The three loomed closer and one moved behind her to cut off her retreat. Caging her. She breathed warily. She couldn't see their faces behind their black hoods but she could tell by the speed of their rangy limbs and the eagerness in their voices that they were young. The other two men seemed slightly older, more solidly built, and kept themselves further away across the break in the trees, murmuring to each other in low tones. She couldn't tell from their masks whether they watched her or not but the taller of them was clearly the one in authority.

Why were they here in Tesovo? What were they planning? She had to get away, had to warn her father. But two of the young men started shouldering each other, jostling like jackals for the spoils.

'Who are you?' she asked in an attempt to divert them.

'We are the true voice of Russia.'

'If that is so, your voices should be heard in the Duma, our parliament, not by me in a forest clearing. What use is that?'

'I can think of one use,' the stockiest of the three responded. He touched her breast with the tip of his rifle.

She knocked it fiercely to one side. 'You may claim the land,' she hissed, 'but do not think you can claim me.'

His two companions burst out into coarse laughter but he yanked the belt from his waist and wound one end around his fist, swinging the buckle threateningly.

'Bitch! *Suka!*'

Valentina's heart slid into her throat. She could smell his anger on him, sour in the fresh morning air.

'Please.' She addressed the tall man among the trees. There was a stillness about him that frightened her even more than the unfocused energy of his men. 'Please,' she said, 'control them.'

The man stared back at her from within the dark folds of his hood, slowly shook his head and walked away into the forest. For a moment she panicked, her hands clenched together to stop them

shaking. Yet it seemed that he'd left instructions because the man to whom he'd been talking pointed abruptly to the one standing behind her.

'You,' he said, 'deal with her. The rest of you, follow me.'

Deal with her.

They were well trained, she'd give them that. The angry one with his belt in his fist strutted away at once with no comment, the other alongside him. Behind her the solitary figure shifted his rifle purposefully and shuffled his handmade boots in the damp earth.

'Sit,' he ordered.

She thought about it.

'Sit,' he said again, 'or I will make you.'

She sat.

An hour passed, maybe more. Valentina lost track of time. Her limbs ached and her head cramped. Each time she attempted to move or to speak, her guard made a sound of disgust and jammed the metal tip of his rifle into whichever part of her anatomy took his fancy: her ribs, her shoulder, an arm. Worst was the nape of her neck.

But he didn't shoot her. She clung to that faint thread of hope.

What were the others doing? The question ricocheted, splitting her thoughts into a thousand answers.

They could be thieves. She prayed so fiercely that they were not here to rob her father's house that she almost convinced herself it were true. Here to steal the antique paintings, the gold statues, the oriental carvings, her mother's jewels. It had been tried before, so why not again? But what thieves would wait till daylight? What thieves were stupid enough to rob a house when the servants were up and about?

She pulled her knees to her chest, sank her chin on them and in return received a prod in the spine from the rifle. Behind her heels she dragged a stone to within reach.

She wrapped her arms round her shins and shivered in the breeze that was thinning the mist. Not that it was cold, but she was frightened: frightened for her parents and for her sister Katya who

would be rising from their beds about now, totally unaware of the black hoods that stalked Tesovo. Katya was only thirteen, a blonde bubble of energy who would come bounding into Valentina's room to entreat a swim in the creek after breakfast on their first morning at Tesovo. Mama liked to keep to her room first thing in the morning but Papa was a stickler for punctuality at breakfast. He would be ruffling his whiskers and glaring at his pocket watch because his elder daughter was late.

Papa, be careful.

'Are you Bolsheviks?' she asked suddenly, tensing herself for the blow.

It came. On the neck. She heard something crunch.

'Are you?' she asked again. She wished she could turn and look into his hooded face.

'Shut your mouth.'

The second blow was harder, but at least he had spoken. It was the first time she'd heard his voice since he'd ordered her to sit. She wasn't certain how far behind her he was crouched, silent as a spider, except that it was obviously less than a rifle's length away. She'd been submissive so long, he must have dropped his guard by now, surely. If she was wrong . . . She didn't care to think about that. She needed to lure him within reach.

'You know who my father is?'

The rifle slammed into the side of her jaw, jerking her head almost off her neck. 'Of course I bloody know. You think we're stupid peasants or something?'

'He is Minister General Nikolai Ivanov. A trusted adviser in Tsar Nicholas's government. He could help you and your friends to—'

This time he thrust the tip of his rifle against the back of her head, forcing it forward till her face was jammed against her knees.

'Your kind is finished,' he hissed at her, and she could feel his breath hot on the bruised skin of her neck. 'We'll trample you bastards into the earth that you stole from us. We're sick of being kicked and starved while you stuff your greedy mouths with caviar. Your father is a fucking tyrant and he's going to pay for—'

Valentina's hand closed on the stone hidden under her skirt. With a violent twist she spun round and slammed it into the front of the hood. Something broke. He screamed – high-pitched, the way a fox screams. But she was too quick, gone before he could pull the trigger. Racing, ducking, dodging under branches and plunging into the darkest shadows while his cry fluttered behind her. She could hear him charging through the foliage and two shots rang out, but both whistled past harmlessly, raking the leaves and snapping off twigs as she stretched the distance between them.

She slid down a slope on her heels, desperate to find the river. It was her route out of the forest. She swerved and switched direction till she was certain she had lost her pursuer, then she stopped and listened. At first she could hear nothing except her pulse in her ears, but gradually another sound trickled through: the faint but unmistakable ripple of water over rocks. Relief hit her and to her dismay she felt her knees buckle under her. She was stunned to find herself sitting upright on the damp earth, fretful and weak as a kitten. She forced herself shakily back on to her feet. She had to warn her father.

After that she moved at a steadier pace. It didn't take long to locate the river and set off along the narrow track that ran along its bank. Disjointed thoughts crashed around inside her head. If these hooded men *were* revolutionaries, what plans did they have? Were they just hiding out in Tesovo's forest or had they come here for a specific purpose? Who was their target? That last one wasn't hard. It had to be Papa. She clamped her lips together in an effort to silence the shout of rage that roared inside her and her feet sped up again, weaving a jerky path through the overhanging branches.

A sound jolted her. She recognised it at once: the noise of a horse's hooves splashing through water. Someone was coming upriver. It was shallow here, a silvery burble over a bed of stones, the morning sunlight flouncing off the eddies and swirling back up into the trees. She crouched, curled in a ball behind a bush, the skin

stretched tight across her cheeks as if it had somehow shrunk in the last few hours.

‘Liev Popkov!’

The big man on the ugly flat-footed horse swung round at the sound of her voice. ‘Miss Valentina!’ He was leading her mount, Dasha, behind.

The expression on his face under his black corkscrew curls surprised her. It was one of shock. Did she look that bad? Normally Liev Popkov was a young man of few words and even fewer expressions of emotion. He was four years older than she was, the son of her father’s Cossack stablemaster, and seemed to have time and interest only for four-footed companions. He leapt out of the saddle and stomped in his long boots through the shallows. He towered over her as he seized her arm. It surprised her that he would touch her – he was only an outdoor servant – but she was far too grateful to him for bringing her a horse to object.

‘I heard shots,’ he growled.

‘There are men in the forest with rifles.’ Her words came out in gasps. ‘Quickly, we have to warn my father.’

He didn’t ask questions – he wasn’t that kind of person. His gaze scoured the forest and, when satisfied, he swept her up on to the back of her horse.

‘What made you come up here?’ she asked as he untied Dasha’s reins.

Popkov’s massive shoulders shrugged, muscles stretching the greasy leather tunic. ‘Miss Katya came looking for you. I saw your horse was gone’ – he rolled a hand fondly over the animal’s rump – ‘so I rode up. Found her tethered.’ As he handed her the reins his black eyes fixed on hers. ‘You well enough to ride?’

‘Of course.’

‘You don’t look good.’

She touched her cheek, felt blood and saw scarlet slither down her fingers. ‘I can ride.’

‘Go slow. Your feet look bad.’

She gathered the reins in her hands and twitched Dasha's head round. 'Thank you, Liev. *Spasibo*.' With a brisk touch of her heels she set the horse into a canter and together they raced off down the river, water scything like a rainbow around her.

She rode hard through the forest, with Liev Popkov and his big-boned animal tight on her trail. At one point a tree was down across their path but she wasted no time finding a way around it. She heard an annoyed shout behind her but she didn't stop, just put Dasha to it and lifted her into the jump. The horse soared over it, pleased with herself, and swerved to avoid the roots that writhed up from the black earth to trip the unwary.

They burst out of the forest fringe into the open, into the quiet sunlit somnolence of the landscape, a quilt of greens and golds, of fields, orchards and pastureland that was spread out lazily before them. It made Valentina want to cry with relief. Nothing had changed. Everything was safe. At the top of the slope she reined in her horse to give her a moment to breathe. She'd tumbled out of the forest nightmare back into the real world – a world where the air was scented with ripening apples and the Ivanov mansion sat half a mile away at the heart of the estate, fat and contented as a honey-coloured cat in front of a stove. It quickened something inside her and, like Dasha, she breathed more freely. She shortened the reins, eager to ride on.

'That jump was dangerous. You take risks.'

She glanced to her right. The young Cossack and his horse were silhouetted against the sun, solid as a rock.

'It was the quickest way,' she pointed out.

'You're already hurt.'

'I managed.'

He shook his head. 'Have you ever been whipped?' he demanded.

'What?'

'That jump was difficult. If you had fallen off, your father would have had me whipped with the knout.'