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**EXTRAORDINARY PRESENCE OF
MIND OF A RUSSIAN OFFICER
(1825)**

TRANSCRIPTION BY

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EXTRAORDINARY PRESENCE OF MIND OF A RUSSIAN OFFICER

Count Tottleben, so celebrated in the history of Germany for his numerous adventures, and the strange vicissitudes of his fortune, was once, while a general in the Russian service, on a journey from Warsaw to Petersburg. Travelling in an open chaise, accompanied by a single servant, he was one day overtaken by a violent storm, in the province of Eivonia, twelve or fifteen miles from the town where he had intended to pass the night. The season was cold, the evening advanced, and he himself was wet to the skin; the rain contributed to render it still darker. A decent public-house, that stood detached by the road-side, very opportunely presented itself to our traveller. He alighted and entered, resolving to set out so much earlier the next morning.

The people of the house seemed very attentive and obliging. He was shewn into a room up stairs [sic] that was clean and neat, and was promised a good supper; in short, Tottleben had every reason to be satisfied with his accommodations. Accustomed from his youth to a wandering life, he used when in houses of public entertainment to pass very little time in his own apartment, but to associate with the other guests in the public room. There he entered into conversation with every one, whether a foreigner or a native, was affable, [186] and even humorous; knew how to give and take a joke; told stories, and listened to those of others; and to this sociable disposition he joined prepossessing manners, and a figure distinguished for manly beauty. He seldom met with a man who was not pleased with his company; and still more rarely with a female who was not, at least secretly interested in his favour. If she betrayed her sentiments for him, he was ready to take the slightest hint, and to avail himself of every advantage.

On the present occasion he adhered to his usual custom, and passed an hour or more below in the tap-room. He conversed with the host, who had formerly been in the military service, and still more with the hostess, a young and extremely pretty woman, but now pregnant, and near her time. He offered to stand godfather to her

first-born; jocosely enquired how her husband behaved; asked how she liked the married state, and predicted that she should have a son, or perhaps two at a birth. In a word, he indulged in that kind of chit-chat which young females of that condition, and under such circumstances, are fond of hearing, though they pretend that, from modesty, they cannot raise their eyes from the floor. During this conversation a young servant-maid was frequently backward and forward in the same room. The count might possibly not have observed her, but she had so much the more notice of him. His handsome figure, the vivacity of his conversation, and even the foreign uniform which he wore, delighted her. She could have listened to him for a day together, but would have been still better pleased to converse with him herself. She was besides acquainted with a subject that very nearly concerned him, of which it was necessary that he should soon be informed, otherwise it would be too late. His ignorance, his security afflicted her; at the same time her interference was likely to cost her dear. Nevertheless, as often as she looked at him, she thought within herself – “No; he is too amiable!” At length she could refrain no longer, and as she passed him, she pulled him by the coat.

Tottleben perceived it. He looked at the girl, and observed her wink to him, but for what reason he knew not. From the usual vanity of his sex, he was not long, however, before he ascribed her conduct to a motive which seemed as though it might have admitted a little longer delay. However, the girl was young, and, in his opinion, not a bad figure; there could be no harm in looking at her, and hearing what she had to say. Accordingly when she had gone away again, he withdrew, under pretext of taking a little fresh air. She was already waiting for him at the door of the kitchen; she beckoned him to go into the yard, followed him in haste and agitation, and thus addressed him: “For God’s sake, Sir, take care of yourself! You are not among such honest people as you imagine. They know that you have money with you. They intend to-night to rob you, not only of that, but also of your life, and for this purpose they have already sent for assistance. Be upon your guard; but, for God’s sake, do not betray me! If they perceive that I have given you warning, it will cost me my life, that I am sure of; but yet I could not for my soul suffer such a brave officer, and so fine a gentleman to be cut off in his sins.”

This address, as may easily be conceived, made a deep impression upon Tottleben. A man of ordinary understanding would immediately have sought the means of escape by flight. He, though he had but a moment for reflection, was instantly convinced that every attempt to fly in the night, and in a country to which he was an utter stranger, would be attended with an equal, if not greater danger than he would incur by quietly remaining where he was. [187] A presence of mind, almost incredible, inspired him with a very different idea. The maid was about to retire, when he quickly drew her back by the arm. "One word more, my girl," said he. "Does your master live on good terms with his wife?" "Yes, on the best," was the reply. "Does he really and truly love her?" "Almost as much as his own life." "Very well! very well" Now you may go. If I escape, your fortune shall be made. If I die, your warning shall die with me; I will never betray you. But mention not a single word, even to my servant."

The girl flew to the kitchen, and the count returned to the public room. Not a look betrayed him; his tone and temper were just the same as before, or at least so they appeared. He even ordered supper to be laid below, and would not sit down to it, except on condition that his kind host and hostess should partake of it with him. He concealed his suspicions beneath the disguise of affability. After supper he ordered his servant to bring a box that was still in his carriage. "There is not much in it," said he to his host. "It contains perhaps two hundred rubles, that are to carry me to Petersburg. I should wish good care to be taken of them, and where can they be safer than in your hands? In eight weeks, when I return, I hope it will be heavier with gold than it now is with silver. Then I shall certainly call here again, and if, as I hope, my little godson has found his way into the world, I will bring a present of at least fifty rubles for him." This declaration called forth a thousand thanks, and the landlord promised to keep the box all night under his pillow. He immediately prepared to retire to bed, and the landlord to light him to his chamber. "Do you know, Madam," said Tottleben, laughing, "that this lighting is a job which I had much rather you would perform? But joking aside, I am so superstitious as to fancy that I always sleep as well again when a handsome woman shews me to bed as when a man attends me." At this proposal the woman looked rather strange, and shewed no great inclination to perform the office. The count, still continuing in his jocular strain, put the candle into her hand, and took hold of her arm, observing, that she ought not to refuse the future godfather of her child such a trifling

gratification; that motion after supper, especially in her situation, was wholesome for her; and that she might take the conjugal protector of her honour along with her. By these and other similar representations he at length prevailed upon her to accompany him, followed by her husband.

They now entered the chamber. Here Tottleben himself, as soon as he alighted from his carriage, had hung upon a nail a double-barrelled carbine, full-charged with ball, and which he always carried with him when he travelled. He took care not to cast a single look at it before the proper time. But while the woman was setting the candle on the table by the window, when she was just going to wish him good night, he quickly took down the weapon, and stepped still more hastily between the landlord and his wife. In a voice which suddenly passed from jest and laughter to the sternest tone of command, he cried, "No, my good woman, we are not going to part with each other so abruptly. On this chair, at this table you must sit down, and pass the night in my company. Your chastity, I swear to you shall run no risk in that time from me. But on the slightest noise at the door of my chamber, or the slightest opposition on your part, or any other, or on the least attack upon myself, the three balls with which each of these barrels is charged, shall dispatch you and your infant at once. This I swear by my hope of salvation."

The landlord and his wife would sooner have expected the dissolution of nature than such an address. Both were silent for a minute, and then both [188] did all they could. The woman piteously entreated Tottleben to permit her to go, threatened to swoon, to fall in labour on the spot, nay even to die; but in vain. The husband was first at a loss to know what all this meant; he then had recourse to entreaties and protestations, assuring the count that he was as safe in his house as though he were in Abraham's bosom. At length, finding nothing avail, he threatened to repel force by force, and to call his people to his assistance. Tottleben's presence of mind did not forsake him. "I have no doubt, Sir, " said he, "that you have plenty of people and assistance at hand; but they are not so near as to rescue your wife from death. If but a dog approaches, if but a hand is raised against me, I will blow her brains out. Besides the two barrels of my carbine, I have here a case of pocket pistols capable of doing excellent service. I may be overpowered, I confess; but at least three or four men shall accompany me, and that charming woman shall go first to shew us the way. This is my

mode in many public-houses. If you do not like it, take care and let my horses be fed and put to the carriage early to-morrow morning. Now begone without delay. This chamber is to-night my apartment.”

Villains commonly lose their courage, when they have true resolution to deal with; such was the case in the present instance. The woman sat down, and the man withdrew. In this extraordinary situation the remaining couple passed the night. Tottleben, seated at the table, just opposite to the hostess, spent the hours in reading and writing as well as he could. At the same time he kept his carbine on his arm, ready to fire, at the least noise that was made in the house. The poor woman immediately trembled like a criminal at the bar, entreating him not to be so hasty, and assuring him that nothing would happen to him. In fact, during the whole night, not a foot was heard approaching the chamber of the count.

At the break of day came Tottleben’s servant; before he was half-way up stairs, he called out to let his master know who it was. He brought the box committed the preceding evening to the custody of the landlord, the count’s breakfast, and a bill with very moderate charges. The count presented his fair companion the first cup of coffee; and after she had drunk it, he took the rest quite at his ease. When he was informed that every thing was ready for his departure, he thanked the hostess for her good company, and begged her to favour him with it to his carriage. He then conducted her down stairs as politely as though she had been the first lady of the court. At the house-door he stopped and enquired for the servant-maid, whom he had seen the day before, and whom he accurately described. She advanced trembling from a corner. All the suspicions of the landlord had already fallen upon her; already had he (as she afterwards related) promised, with the most tremendous imprecations, to give her a suitable reward, as soon as the stranger was gone. When Tottleben saw her by daylight, and looked at her more narrowly, he observed that she was a delicate, elegant girl. He gave her a full purse. “Take that,” said he, and if you are determined to stay here, buy a husband with it. But if you are afraid to remain with your master, come along with me; I will answer for your success, and I swear to provide for you as long as you live.” The girl sprang into the carriage, leaving behind every thing she possessed, which probably, indeed, was of no great value. The count took leave of his fair hostess, begging her not to forget that he was to be godfather. He requested a kiss at parting,

and he continued his journey. He was afterwards informed by his servant, who had slept in the public room, that, about midnight, three robust fellows softly [189] entered the house, went into another room, and after a long conversation with the landlord, sneaked away again. The girl, who had been almost a year in the house, related that during this time two strangers, who had put up there, had disappeared she knew not how.

At the next town the count acquainted the magistrates with the whole affair. Soldiers were immediately dispatched, but they could not, or would not, find either the host or hostess. At the same place Tottleben provided his female deliverer with more decent apparel; she continued his companion, and perhaps something more, to Petersburg, in which city she lived with him several years. At length, when the seven years' war called him into the field, he married her, and settled upon her a considerable sum.

Further note:

- In this fragment, words that we normally use as one, are broken into two or separated by a hyphen, such as "up stairs" (page 185, line 12), "to-night" (page 186, line 41), "day-light" (page 188, line 42), "to-morrow" (page 188, line 16), "every thing" (page 188, line 48).