

THE LEVELLER

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649400553

The leveller by Alexander McArthur

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ALEXANDER MCARTHUR

THE LEVELLER



"I am ready"

The Leveller

By

Alexander McArthur

(Author of "Gemmo," "Rubinstein," "Irish Rebels," Etc., Etc.)



New York
C. H. Doscher & Co.

Inscribed to
SIR FRANCIS W. BRADY, Bart.

2137987

The Leveller

CHAPTER I.

Out of the gloom of the great Isaacs Cathedral a young girl, wrapped to the teeth in furs, stole furtively, and casting an eager glance up and down the snow-covered roadway, beckoned to a passing *iswostschik*, who quickly responded to her order and drove up to the sidewalk.

"Wasily Ostroff, Line Four," Louboff Malkiel said briefly.

"Twenty-five kopecks, *Barishnya*."

The young girl shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. Bargaining is a custom and a necessity in Russia.

"Twenty-five kopecks!" she echoed. "Do you take me for the Minister of Finance? I will give you fifteen or nothing."

"Make it twenty, *Barishnya meliya*," pleaded the driver, as he looked down admiringly into the dazzling fairness of her lovely face. "I will take you for fifteen, but a beautiful young lady like you, I know, would not have the heart to force so close a bargain. You see, the day is cold, my horse is hungry,

and I—I am hungry, too. *Ye Bokha barishnya!*”

The soft, delicious curves of Louboff Antonivna's beautifully chiseled mouth widened into a smile.

“I don't believe you,” she replied with mock severity, “but *charasho*; I will give you tea money.”

Smiling, the *iswostschik* threw back the fur of his sleigh with that servile yet gracious courtesy so characteristic of the peasant Russian, and handed her in.

He buttoned the rug at the back of the seat with clumsy fingers, for his hands were encased in thick fur gloves, tucked the fur well about her feet, and got up on his own seat with as much alacrity as the heavy swathings of his body would allow; then with a grunt of approval and a word of endearment to his lean and hungry beast, he drove off in the direction of the Neva.

Louboff settled down under her heavy fur coverings comfortably; then the noise of horses' hoofs behind her made her look round suddenly. All at once the usual fairness of her complexion deepened with a flush of annoyance, and her starlike eyes lost their softness in one swift flash of anger.

"Ah, so I am under surveillance!" she muttered petulantly.

The she bent forward to the *iswostschik*. "Turn and drive toward the Winter Palace," she commanded briefly. "Drive quickly and there is big tea money for you!"

"*Charasho! Charasho!*" assented the driver, and turning immediately, Louboff was enabled to get a good look at the official following her. Then, as she expected, the latter gave a like order to his *iswostschik*, seeing which Louboff laughed.

"And it is to such stupids as these that they entrust our surveillance!" she thought sneeringly.

A few seconds later she bent forward again. "It is too cold to go farther. Drive directly to Wasily Ostroff," she said, not without a tremor in her voice as her hand touched some papers inside the fur lining of her cloak.

"I hear; I obey," replied the man gladly, and whipping up his horse they drove swiftly along the quay and over the Nicholaifsky Most or Nicholas Bridge; the winds sweeping up the frozen Neva cutting the exposed flesh of their faces till it tingled.

Turning to the right, they entered the quarter of St. Petersburg which corresponds to

the famous *Quartier Latin* of Paris. The Masily Ostroff, or Basil Island, is one of the many islands of the Neva—the quarter of the city where the various schools, colleges and academies of art are situated, and the quarter where students of all classes congregate daily and usually find lodgings.

They drove up Line Four, and again Louboff cast an anxious glance behind. The same official was following.

Calling to the *iswostschik* to stop, Louboff Antonivna got out and paid the man his fifteen kopecks, with twenty-five extra for *natschai*, or tea money, listening with a smile of amusement to his blessing, which embraced the whole hierarchy of heaven. Then she went through a small garden, up a steep flight of wooden steps, and after ringing was admitted at once.

A young man, like her in features and coloring, but unlike her in that he was sinister and forbidding, whereas she was beautiful with a beauty that was startling in its fresh youthfulness and candor of expression, came to the door.

“I waited a full half hour,” she began crossly, “but no one came. I have the papers