HEN Véra Pavlovna read that last letter of the pile
Signora Lombardi told her was hers she went as white
as if the hand of Death in that moment had clutched
her being. The mainspring of the machinery of her
life seemed to snap in one moment. White, stricken,
she sat motionless, the sheet in her hand, her eyes on
its envelope. For years now her emotions had blazed
at white heat; she was only a girl when the fires should have been
gently kindling—and now, in one moment, the light went out.

Something, however, came to pass, afterward. Have you ever
noticed, after a paper has burned to blackness, a spark suddenly
appearing and firing up the ruins? Have you ever heard a clock
give a gasp of ticking or a discordant last sound after the break?
So the machinery of Véra’s being gave its last ungoverned cry, the
fire of her emotions sent up their final spark and supplied the news-
papers with a column.

And yet the day had begun so normally. Nikolenka had risen
early, had brought her coffee, and then, sketch-book in hand, had
gone out to work. Later she, too, had forsaken her bed, and being
happy for the first time in six long suffering years, her old spirits
had revived, and as she dressed she felt more and more like the old
Véra who had come years before, a rich petted girl, to this same
loved Florence.

But then—she laughed at the memory—she had stayed at the
Hôtel de la Ville, not in a single room of Signora Lombardi. She
shrugged her shoulders over her clothes, also; they seemed a collec-
tion from the rag-bags of Russia. But what mattered it how one
lived or how one dressed in these days of revolutions?

Singing a little French song, she lifted her slender white hands
to arrange her hair before the small round mirror which stood on
the chest of drawers in the one room which served as living room,
dressing room and studio for her husband.

"Now I have Nikolenka," she thought, "so what matter, since
he loves me?" and she pulled her hair about. It was very dusky, and
as she arranged it over the brow in the way Nikolenka best liked, it
added its note of mystery to the strange, almost prophetic looking
little countenance. The wild dark eyes, with their expression of
seeing far out and beyond the horizon of everyday vision, the pathetic
curve of the large, sensitive mouth, the thoughtful brow, seemed to
announce from their dusky frame that here was one whom the stage
manager of life’s comedy had assigned to the rôle of tears, and her
movements, too, as she arranged her hair were entirely without those
impulses of coquetry which seem to animate every daughter of Eve
when she touches hair or hairpins.
Véra Pavlovna’s dressing was rather the necessary act of a woman whose thoughts are on other things, and not light things, either. And yet she was almost beautiful—a little intense thing whose whole being seemed vibrant, an instrument to be played upon by any masterful emotion.

Suddenly, however, she laughed like a child, and its echo seemed to cry, “I might have been such a merry girl, a merry girl, happy, oh, so happy!”

“Nikolenka!” she cried, “Nikolenka!” for, the door behind her opening, a face had suddenly reflected itself side by side with her own in the glass.

“Nikolenka! Nikolenka, stand still!” she cried, and laughing, moved about until her cheek seemed to press close against that of her husband.

“I embrace you, Nikolenka! I embrace you!”

The second face was a strange one, so entirely puzzling and enigmatical in expression that words retreat before an attempt to describe with any portraying adequacy its clear-cut, handsome features framed by a shock of light hair in artistic disorder, and which, either because of repression of nature or acquired caution, possessed the appearance of being trained to conceal all inner feeling.

The effect of the two faces, so momentarily in reflected proximity, was a strange one, mystery seeming to covet the poetic features of the woman, lodging in the great dark eyes, vibrating the wonderful hair, wandering about the curves of the mouth of strength and pathos, drooping the eyelids and then lifting them, enigma writing itself in those of the man, so definite in outline, so firm, so absolutely emotionless and controlled in expression.

As the sun pales the moon at daybreak, the masculine one of definite cutting forced its indefinite companion into the position of almost a shadow, and its personality suddenly faded.

Nikolenka laughed, too, but there was nothing merry about it.

“What a child you can be,” he said. His voice was controlled, and a little deliberate.

“Véra,” he said, and drew near; “Véra!”

She ran from the glass man to the real one, and throwing herself in his arms, clung to him like a child, lifting her face for kisses. With one hand, it was a handsome, well shaped member, he caressed her gently, with the other he lifted her chin and rested his fingers lightly across her laughing lips.

“Nikolenka,” she whispered, her eyes full of a never to be entirely answered questioning: “You love me? You love me?”

A caress was his answer, but in his cold blue-gray eyes there was
FOR RUSSIA

a look which was almost impersonal, a critical contemplation of
the crimsoning of her cheeks, the glowing of her countenance, the
rising and falling of her throbbing breast, which was singular.

He held her close, he kissed her cheeks, her eyes, her lips, and
then, loosening his hold, but in the reluctant, almost self-denying
manner of a man who would linger, his arm still about her waist,
he led her to the table arranged at one end of the huge studio, and
which served for writing as well as for eating purposes.

"I have an hour, Vera Pavlovna," he explained, and opened his
watch case. "It is nine." He turned the face toward her. "At ten
I go to the Academy. We can examine the papers now," and he
drew a packet from an inner pocket. "Are you willing?" He raised
his eyebrows.

In a moment Vera was a new woman. Her slight figure lost its
vibrancy, and capacity mastered emotion. She drew forward pen
and ink, and like two confidential comrades they read, discussed,
and annotated letters and papers, the man's attitude flatteringly
deferential, and encouraging confidence.

They were Russians, and their talk, straying now and then to
the personal, revealed them to be refugees, in exile in Florence,
members of the same secret revolutionary organization, who, meeting
in Switzerland, at Zurich, after a short impassioned courtship had
married and later come to Florence.

Vera was one in whom thought ever struggled for expression, and
it followed that her speech was fluid. Nikolenka, on the contrary,
was of rarer breed, a listener. Playing his own part, he encouraged
her confidence to full growth, checking now and then a thought,
clipping extravagance of expression as the gardener trains the
wayward branches of a shrub or luxuriant output. Like the gar-
dener, also, Nikolenka induced the growth of this confidence by a
look, an interrogation, and, rarely but subtly, by a caress or com-
pliment.

Then her eyes would glow, her mouth tremble, and her whole
slight figure reciprocate with a quiver of passion. She had much
to say, and her enthusiasm, her ardor, her outcry against wrong made
for her such visions against the horizon that reality too often stood
there overshadowed.

The things they discussed in that high ceiled, great windowed old
room of Florence were not light ones. They had for subject matter
affairs of life and death of international importance, principles of
social well being and the ruler and existence of a nation in revolution.
Vera's ardor warmed to a heat which fired her to confidence after
confidence.
FOR RUSSIA

Once, when she spoke of Russia as a world power, her husband warmed also, a light suddenly flaming in his cold strange face. Then catching herself, Véra blushed and ceased to speak.

"Véra Pavlovna," her husband cried out, "why do you stop? Am I to be told so much and not all—I, Nikolenka? What more did Ivan Posenak confide in you? Tell me."

Véra drooped over her letters.

"Tell me," said Nikolenka. She looked up quickly at his tone and hesitated.

Ivan Posenak had not sworn her to secrecy; no. He had not forbidden her to tell her husband. He held Nikolenka as a friend. Others, however, had made protest.

"What do we know of him?" they asked. "What do you know of him, Véra Pavlovna? He belongs with us, yes, but in matters of life and death——"

Véra was silent then, as now with her husband. Nikolenka was Nikolenka. That was all. She knew nothing of him, but he was Nikolenka and she loved him, her husband. As she had given her one self wholly to Russia, she had given her other to Nikolenka. He held her body and soul. A cold glance from him, and he could give them, was more freezing than the ice, more cutting than the blows she had endured in a Russian prison.

"Véra Pavlovna," he repeated. The coldness of the tone struck her heart and chilled it. He drew away his hand from her own, not roughly, gently but entirely. Certain natures can thus withdraw affection even more effectively than others can strike a blow.

She caught it again with passion, but he withdrew it without response.

"Véra Pavlovna," his voice was charged with hurt and reproach, "did I not warn you that I can love well, but"—she nodded, her head drooped—"love only where I am warmed by a trust which is absolute?" Then he narrowed his eyes, he surveyed her sternly, as we do a child we have threatened. "Why should Ivan Posenak not trust me, also?" he asked in a cold fury, "and why do not you, Véra Pavlovna—tell me, tell me!"

"No, no, Nikolenka, it is not that." She flung out her hands in protest. "No one doubts you, and surely never I, dear—never Véra Pavlovna," and she laughed. "Are not my deeds known all over Europe? Would I marry where harm could come to Russia?"

But unmoved he stood silent, cold and offended. She struggled to appease.

"Only, dear Nikolenka," she cried, her voice a supreme caress
of loving apology, "as yet you are but known for opinions, not deeds. Your chance is to come; mine came first, that is all."

She held out her hand, but there he stood, sulky, his head sunk in his shoulders, his lips protruding in scorn. Her eyes sought his and gazed eagerly.

"I must be trusted," he said, and half turned. "Ivan Posenak does not trust me, nor you, Véra Pavlovna, you."

She felt for his hand, but he would not suffer her to find it. Then she clutched at it and held fast. He almost pushed her away. It was his first roughness, and she quivered.

"Why does Ivan confide in you, not me, Véra Pavlovna?" he asked. "Why are you more to the Committee?"

Was he jealous? Her eyes dilated with that new-born fear.

"Listen, Nikolenka," she cried. "Listen," and a wild look flashed in her face. "It is cruel, cruel that you ask that of me, Véra Pavlovna. Was I not two years in the prison at Kief? Do you think," she leaned forward, "that a girl, a rich girl, too, a petted girl, one who had all life offers, who has lain in a Russian prison two years for her country, who has," she gasped, "borne what I have borne, can ever be false to her cause? Look—look," she tore back her blouse. "See, Nikolenka, see, the stripes, the blows! I bore them all, all for Russia, and what had I done?" Her tone became quiet. "I went one day to the home of my old governess, that was all, with my parents' permission, only to see her. There were papers found there and they took me, too. Poor old Anna, she died there in Kief, in that prison. I could not help her, poor Anna. I was a revolutionist, yes; one visit to my father's factories made me, but I had nothing to do with that printing press, those papers, nothing. Oh, my husband"—her eyes dilated, and she ran and clung to his arm—"there are those who say they are glad when they come to the prisons, for there they may at last sit still and not fear danger. But I? I had never feared, and in prison all is gray, gray, gray." She clutched at her heart and shivered.

"There were flowers then in the fields, Nikolenka. I love flowers," she said, very simply. "There were the dogs barking, Nikolenka. I had six and we roamed together in our old forests. There were the birds, Nikolenka. I love the birds, too," and her voice caught in a sob. "There were my parents. They were always good to me, always. I saw things, Nikolenka, I suffered things which robbed me of my childhood. I saw men, women, children shot down in the name of the Czar and of Christ. Christ!" She rolled the word on her lips with scorn. "I saw blood and filth and shame and cruelty and," she flung out her hands in repudiation, "I saw Russian law! The Committee knows this, Nikolenka."
FOR RUSSIA

Her face flushed and she hung on his arm, clung with sobbing desperation. “I think,” she said, in a voice so sweet and low that it might have brought tears to eyes other than those of Nikolenka—“I think if there were a God in Russia even He might trust me, Véra Pavlovna.”

Her husband, standing there, enduring her caress, listening, unrelenting, maddened her.

“And you.” She caught his hand. “Every day I love you more, more, Nikolenka. When my parents sent me forth I had nothing, but now I have you, you, you. Oh, Nikolenka, of you our Russia even may be jealous.”

His sulkiness lessened, and her face relaxed in response. “I must go now,” he said, and loosened her arm; then he turned. He had not kissed her, he had not kissed her! She swayed between the forces of conflict, and he moved away.

“I will prove by my trust how I love you,” she cried. “Nikolenka! Nikolenka!”

There was surrender in her voice, and he turned. The look of the man was like heaven after the opposite to her, and drawing close she told him all.

We all now know the plot. It was well planned, safe at every point. A Cossack had been suborned. The Czar was to die in May. She gave him even the date.

Then Nikolenka opened his arms and drew her to him entirely. He gave her caresses such as she never before had received from him. It seemed to her as if he would reward her trust with the whole warmth of his being.

“It was only a test, dear one,” he whispered, his lips against her cheek, “only a test to try you. Now I know that you trust me entirely and utterly, and my love, all my love, such as it is, is yours.”

In that moment it seemed to Véra that she should die of the joy. She was to meet him at twelve in the Piazza Signoria, and they would dine at a little past noon. As he left her voice took up the little French song and she ran back to the mirror to rearrange her toilet.

The song again stopped short, for again Nikolenka’s face was reflected in the mirror, this time as he passed in the street. Was that her husband? Véra started. She had never seen that expression. Was it exultant? Why not? Did he not love her also? Had he not proved her? And yet—

“Avanti,” she cried when a knock a little later came at the door.

The portiere, a tall, thin woman with sallow face and dark eyes, entered and placed the morning letters on the table. They had come before the Signor had departed; she had just run out for a
moment, but what matter? He could read them quite as well later. Véra had another opinion, and the padrona departed furious.

"These Italians will never stand a criticism," she thought, and approached the table.

Her husband always secured his own letters, but today two for him lay in one pile, six for her in the other. Without glancing at the addresses she opened the envelopes of her own with a hairpin and read, laying aside one, and picking up the succeeding.

Just as she opened the last the portiere came again on an errand, and when she returned from the door she took out the sheet without noting the address on the envelope, and that was the one. It was an hour before she moved. One watching would have said that her death blow in that moment had struck her.

The studio boasted one picture, a portrait of Véra herself, well done by her husband. Going to a drawer, she brought out a red scarf of silk. Then she went to the table and with almost firm hand wrote a few words on the reverse of the letter. Then she pinned it to the scarf and threw it across the easel.

In a black dress, a black hat, she then went out. At the corner sat a withered old woman selling flowers; at sight of Véra she set up her cry.

"One red rose, nothing else." Leaving a lira in the astonished fingers, Véra pinned the flower on her breast, where it glowed red, like the blood which had flowed in Russia. Then she entered a little shop nearby, one where her husband bought what he needed for his studio and for his models. The old man kept everything and she paid exactly what the keen-eyed old Egisto demanded and came out with her purchase.

The whole world knows how busy is the Piazza Signoria at noon. There are people of every nation crossing, recrossing, wandering around. The English lady in her trailing skirts, the American with her do-or-die face, the German on the arm of her lord, the straggling Italians, the wagons, the cabs, the diners on the pavements.

Nikolenka looked right and left. The gun had sounded noon long before and the sun was traveling away from the Palazzo Vecchio and the Loggia dei Lanzii.

Why did Véra not come?

He sat down on the steps of the Loggia. A Russian passing stopped and chatted. It was Ivan Posenak. Nikolenka listened, listened, listened, in that strange impersonal way of his, but his eyes wandered in search of Véra for he had risen early and wanted his food. In a flash he was on his feet, his hand waving in greeting.

"There she is," he cried, and pointed to the slight black figure
advancing across the square toward the Loggia and her husband.
She fired the moment his eyes were upon her and fell, the rose
crimson on her heart, amid the havoc of men, women, motor cars,
cabs and buses.

"There was no cause whatever," Nikolenka with white face
assured the police. "We never quarreled. I left her happy, quite
happy."

Ivan Posenak pressed forward to confirm this.

"We parted as ever." Nikolenka spoke with convincing sincerity,
and Ivan nodded. He turned to the crowd. "She was two years
in prison in Kief; the amnesty of October released her. It crazed
her brain," and Nikolenka bent over her, like a man almost paralyzed.
_Ah, sti, sti_, they could all believe that, believe it easily, and the Miseri-
cordia bore her away through the talk.

When Nikolenka found himself again in the studio the red scarf
on the easel called him at once to the letter.

"I read this by mistake," wrote Véra; "the Signora gave it to me
for mine. I did not look at the address before reading, believe me,
Nikolenka."

That was all.

In the waning light of the sun which, departing, flared color high
about old Florence with a new tragedy added to her many, Niko-
lenka read the letter, sitting in the chair before the portrait of Véra.

Here it is, word for word:

"Your last information received. Acting on it we have arrested
many revolutionists. It is too soon to arrest your woman. It is
advisable to obtain further information as to her intentions first."

The signature was that of the secret police of Russia, and it was
addressed to their own political spy, the husband of Véra Pavlovna.

Nikolenka rose.

He removed the red scarf, and turned the portrait from him.
Then, the mask tight over the face of all emotion, he wrote—this
time in cipher—an account of the plot against the Czar; he gave
names, dates and mention of the Cossack and cited his wife as author-
ity. Without a pause he added: "As my woman shot herself at noon
and died an hour ago in the hospital my usefulness here is ended."

He folded the sheet, placed it in the envelope which he addressed
and stamped. Then firmly he went to the easel and placed the pic-
ture in its normal position. The eyes from out the mystery of that
face and hair seemed to challenge him. He looked at her long, nar-
rowing his eyes as if he were but an artist studying his own handwork.

"For Russia," he said, and for that one moment his voice quivered.