

THE BECKONING HAND:

Olga Davidoff's Husband

**By
Grant Allen**

1887

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OLGA DAVIDOFF'S HUSBAND.

I.

Tobolsk, though a Siberian metropolis, is really a very pleasant place to pass a winter in. Like the western American cities, where everybody has made his money easily and spends it easily, it positively bubbles over with bad champagne, cheap culture, advanced thought, French romances, and all the other most recent products of human industry and ingenuity. Everybody eats *pâté de foie gras*, quotes Hartmann and Herbert Spencer, uses electric bells, believes in woman's rights, possesses profound views about the future of Asia, and had a grandfather who was a savage Samoyede or an ignorant Buriat. Society is extremely cultivated, and if you scratch it ever so little, you see the Tartar. Nevertheless, it considers itself the only really polite and enlightened community on the whole face of this evolving terrestrial planet.

The Davidoffs, however, who belonged to the most advanced section of mercantile society in all Tobolsk, were not originally Siberians, or even Russians, by birth or nationality. Old Mr. Davidoff, the grandfather, who founded the fortunes of the family in St. Petersburg, was a Welsh Davids; and he had altered his name by the timely addition of a Slavonic suffix in order to conciliate the national susceptibilities of Orthodox Russia. His son, Dimitri, whom for the same reason he had christened in honour of a Russian saint, removed the Russian branch of the house to Tobolsk (they were in the Siberian fur-trade), and there marrying a German lady of the name of Freytag, had one daughter and heiress, Olga Davidoff, the acknowledged belle of Tobolskan society. It was generally understood in Tobolsk that the Davidoffs were descended from Welsh princes (as may very likely have been the case—though one would really like to know what has become of all the descendants of Welsh subjects), if indeed they were not even remotely connected with the Prince of Wales himself in person.

The winter of 1873 (as everybody will remember) was a very cold one throughout Siberia. The rivers froze unusually early, and troikas had entirely superseded torosses on all the roads as early as the very beginning of October. Still, Tobolsk was exceedingly gay for all that; in the warm houses of the great merchants, with their tropical plants kept at summer heat by stoves and flues all the year round, nobody noticed the exceptional rigour of that severe season. Balls and dances followed one another in quick succession, and Olga Davidoff, just twenty, enjoyed herself as she had never before done in all her lifetime. It was such a change to come

to the concentrated gaieties and delights of Tobolsk after six years of old Miss Waterlow's Establishment for Young Ladies, at The Laurels, Clapham.

That winter, for the first time, Baron Niaz, the Buriat, came to Tobolsk.

Exquisitely polished in manners, and very handsome in face and bearing, there was nothing of the Tartar anywhere visible about Baron Niaz. He had been brought up in Paris, at a fashionable Lycée, and he spoke French with perfect fluency, as well as with some native sparkle and genuine cleverness. His taste in music was unimpeachable: even Madame Davidoff, *née* Freytag, candidly admitted that his performances upon the violin were singularly brilliant, profound, and appreciative. Moreover, though a Buriat chief, he was a most undoubted nobleman: at the Governor's parties he took rank, by patent of the Emperor Nicholas, as a real Russian baron of the first water. To be sure, he was nominally a Tartar; but what of that? His mother and his grandmother, he declared, had both been Russian ladies; and you had only to look at him to see that there was scarcely a drop of Tartar blood still remaining anywhere in him. If the half-caste negro is a brown mulatto, the quarter-caste a light quadroon, and the next remove a practically white octoroon, surely Baron Niaz, in spite of his remote Buriat great-grandfathers, might well pass for an ordinary everyday civilized Russian.

Olga Davidoff was fairly fascinated by the accomplished young baron. She met him everywhere, and he paid her always the most marked and flattering attention. He was a Buriat, to be sure: but at Tobolsk, you know——. Well, one mustn't be too particular about these little questions of origin in an Asiatic city.

It was at the Governor's dance, just before Christmas, that the Baron got his first good chance of talking with her for ten minutes alone among the fan palms and yuccas in the big conservatory. There was a seat in the far corner beside the flowering oleander, where the Baron led her after the fourth waltz, and leant over her respectfully as she played with her Chinese fan, half trembling at the declaration she knew he was on the point of making to her.

"Mademoiselle Davidoff," the Baron began in French, with a lingering cadence as he pronounced her name, and a faint tremor in his voice that thrilled responsively through her inmost being; "Mademoiselle Davidoff, I have been waiting long for this opportunity of speaking to you alone, because I have something of some importance —to me at least, mademoiselle—about which I wish to confer with you. Mademoiselle, will you do me the honour to listen to me patiently a minute or two? The matter about which I wish to speak to you is one that may concern yourself, too, more closely than you at first imagine."

What a funny way to begin proposing to one! Olga Davidoff's heart beat

violently as she answered as unconcernedly as possible, "I shall be glad, M. le Baron, I'm sure, to listen to any communication that you may wish to make to me."

"Mademoiselle," the young man went on almost timidly—how handsome he looked as he stood there bending over her in his semi-barbaric Tartar uniform!—"mademoiselle, the village where I live in our own country is a lonely one among the high mountains. You do not know the Buriat country—it is wild, savage, rugged, pine-clad, snow-clad, solitary, inaccessible, but very beautiful. Even the Russians do not love it; but we love it, we others, who are to the manner born. We breathe there the air of liberty, and we prefer our own brawling streams and sheer precipices to all the artificial stifling civilization of Paris and St. Petersburg."

Olga looked at him and smiled quietly. She saw at once how he wished to break it to her, and held her peace like a wise maiden.

"Yes, mademoiselle," the young man went on, flooding her each moment with the flashing light from his great luminous eyes; "my village in the Buriat country lies high up beside the eternal snows. But though we live alone there, so far from civilization that we seldom see even a passing traveller, our life is not devoid of its own delights and its own interests. I have my own people all around me; I live in my village as a little prince among his own subjects. My people are few, but they are very faithful. Mademoiselle has been educated in England, I believe?"

"Yes," Olga answered. "In London, M. le Baron. I am of English parentage, and my father sent me there to keep up the connection with his old fatherland, where one branch of our House is still established."

"Then, mademoiselle, you will doubtless have read the tales of Walter Scott?"

Olga smiled curiously. "Yes," she said, amused at his *naïveté*, "I have certainly read them." She began to think that after all the handsome young Buriat couldn't mean really to propose to her.

"Well, you know, in that case, what was the life of a Highland chieftain in Scotland, when the Highland chieftains were still practically all but independent. That, mademoiselle, is exactly the life of a modern Buriat nobleman under the Russian empire. He has his own little territory and his own little people; he lives among them in his own little antiquated fortress; he acknowledges nominally the sovereignty of the most orthodox Czar, and even perhaps exchanges for a Russian title the Tartar chieftainship handed down to him in unbroken succession from his earliest forefathers. But in all the rest he still remains essentially independent. He rules over a little principality of his own, and cares not a fig in his own heart for czar, or governor, or general, or minister."

"This is rather treasonable talk for the Governor's palace," Olga put in, smiling

quietly. "If we were not already in Tobolsk we might both, perhaps, imagine we should be sent to Siberia."

The Baron laughed, and showed his two rows of pearly white teeth to the best advantage. "They might send me to the mines," he said, "for aught I care, mademoiselle. I could get away easily enough from village to village to my own country; and once there, it would be easier for the Czar to take Constantinople and Bagdad and Calcutta than to track and dislodge Alexander Niaz in his mountain fortress."

Alexander Niaz! Olga noted the name to herself hurriedly. He was converted then! he was an orthodox Christian! That at least was a good thing, for so many of these Buriats are still nothing more than the most degraded Schamanists and heathens!

"But, mademoiselle," the young man went on again, playing more nervously now than ever with the jewelled hilt of his dress sword, "there is one thing still wanting to my happiness among our beautiful Siberian mountains. I have no lovely châtelaine to help me guard my little feudal castle. Mademoiselle, the Buriat women are not fit allies for a man who has been brought up among the civilization and the learning of the great Western cities. He needs a companion who can sympathize with his higher tastes: who can speak with him of books, of life, of art, of music. Our Buriat women are mere household drudges; to marry one of them would be utterly impossible. Mademoiselle, my father and my grandfather came away from their native wilds to seek a lady who would condescend to love them, in the polite society of Tobolsk. I have gone farther afield: I have sought in Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg. But I saw no lady to whose heart my heart responded, till I came back once more to old Tobolsk. There, mademoiselle, there I saw one whom I recognized at once as fashioned for me by heaven. Mademoiselle Davidoff—I tremble to ask you, but—I love you—will you share my exile?"

Olga looked at the handsome young man with unconcealed joy and admiration. "Your exile!" she murmured softly, to gain time for a moment. "And why your exile, M. le Baron?"

"Mademoiselle," the young Buriat continued very earnestly, "I do not wish to woo or wed you under false pretences. Before you give me an answer, you must understand to what sort of life it is that I venture to invite you. Our mountains are very lonely: to live there would be indeed an exile to you, accustomed to the gaieties and the vortex of London." (Olga smiled quietly to herself, as she thought for a second of the little drawing-room at The Laurels, Clapham.) "But if you can consent to live in it with me, I will do my best to make it as easy for you as possible. You

shall have music, books, papers, amusements—but not society—during the six months of summer which we must necessarily pass at my mountain village; you shall visit Tobolsk, Moscow, Petersburg, London—which you will—during the six months of holiday in winter; above all, you shall have the undying love and devotion of one who has never loved another woman—Alexander Niaz. . . . Mademoiselle, you see the conditions. Can you accept them? Can you condescend of your goodness to love me—to marry me?"

Olga Davidoff lifted her fan with an effort and answered faintly, "M. le Baron, you are very flattering. I—I will try my best to deserve your goodness."

Niaz took her pretty little hand in his with old-fashioned politeness, and raised it chivalrously to his trembling lips. "Mademoiselle," he said, "you have made me eternally happy. My life shall be passed in trying to prove my gratitude to you for this condescension."

"I think," Olga answered, shaking from head to foot, "I think, M. le Baron, you had better take me back into the next room to my mother."

II.

Olga Davidoff's wedding was one of the most brilliant social successes of that Tobolsk season. Davidoff *père* surpassed himself in the costliness of his exotics, the magnificence of his presents, the reckless abundance of his Veuve Clicquot. Madame Davidoff successfully caught the Governor and the General, and the English traveller from India *via* the Himalayas. The Baron looked as gorgeous as he was handsome in his half Russian, half Tartar uniform and his Oriental display of pearls and diamonds. Olga herself was the prettiest and most blushing bride ever seen in Tobolsk, a simple English girl, fresh from the proprieties of The Laurels at Clapham, among all that curious mixed cosmopolitan society of semi-civilized Siberians, Catholic Poles, and orthodox Russians.

As soon as the wedding was fairly over, the bride and bridegroom started off by toross to make their way across the southern plateau to the Baron's village.

It was a long and dreary drive, that wedding tour, in a jolting carriage over Siberian roads, resting at wayside posting-houses, bad enough while they were still on the main line of the Imperial mails, but degenerating into true Central-Asian caravanserais when once they had got off the beaten track into the wild neighbourhood of the Baron's village. Nevertheless, Olga Davidoff bore up against the troubles and discomforts of the journey with a brave heart, for was not the Baron always by her side? and who could be kinder, or gentler, or more thoughtful than her

Buriat husband? Yes, it was a long and hard journey, up among those border mountains of the Chinese and Tibetan frontier; but Olga felt at home at last when, after three weeks of incessant jolting, they arrived at the Buriat mountain stronghold, under cover of the night; and Niaz led her straightway to her own pretty little European boudoir, which he had prepared for her beforehand at immense expense and trouble in his upland village.

The moment they entered, Olga saw a pretty little room, papered and carpeted in English fashion, with a small piano over in the corner, a lamp burning brightly on the tiny side-table, and a roaring fire of logs blazing and crackling upon the simple stone hearth. A book or two lay upon the shelf at the side: she glanced casually at their titles as she passed, and saw that they were some of Tourgénieff's latest novels, a paper-covered Zola fresh from Paris, a volume each of Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, and Swinburne, a Demidoff, an Emile Augier, a *Revue des Deux Mondes*, and a late number of an English magazine. She valued these things at once for their own sakes, but still more because she felt instinctively that Niaz had taken the trouble to get them there for her beforehand in this remote and uncivilized corner. She turned to the piano: a light piece by Sullivan lay open before her, and a number of airs from Chopin, Schubert, and Mendelssohn were scattered loosely on the top one above the other. Her heart was too full to utter a word, but she went straight up to her husband, threw her arms tenderly around his neck, and kissed him with the utmost fervour. Niaz smoothed her wavy fair hair gently with his hand, and his eyes sparkled with conscious pleasure as he returned her caress and kissed her forehead.

After a while, they went into the next room to dinner—a small hall, somewhat barbaric in type, but not ill-furnished; and Olga noticed that the two or three servants were very fierce and savage-looking Buriats of the most pronounced Tartar type. The dinner was a plain one, plainly served, of rough country hospitality; but the appointments were all European, and, though simple, good and sufficient. Niaz had said so much to her of the discomforts of his mountain stronghold that Olga was quite delighted to find things on the whole so comparatively civilized, clean, and European.

A few days' sojourn in the fort—it was rather that than a castle or a village—showed Olga pretty clearly what sort of life she was henceforth to expect. Her husband's subjects numbered about a hundred and fifty (with as many more women and children); they rendered him the most implicit obedience, and they evidently looked upon him entirely as a superior being. They were trained to a military discipline, and regularly drilled every morning by Niaz in the queer old semi-Chinese courtyard of the mouldering castle. Olga was so accustomed to a Russian military

régime that this circumstance never struck her as being anything extraordinary; she regarded it only as part of the Baron's ancestral habits as a practically independent Tartar chieftain.

Week after week rolled away at the fort, and though Olga had absolutely no one to whom she could speak except her own husband (for the Buriats knew no Russian save the word of command), she didn't find time hang heavily on her hands in the quaint, old-fashioned village. The walks and rides about were really delightful; the scenery was grand and beautiful to the last degree; the Chinese-looking houses and Tartar dress were odd and picturesque, like a scene in a theatre. It was all so absurdly romantic. After all, Olga said to herself with a smile more than once, it isn't half bad being married to a Tartar chieftain up in the border mountains, when you actually come to try it. Only, she confessed in her own heart that she would probably always be very glad when the winter came again, and she got back from these mountain solitudes to the congenial gaiety of Tobolsk or Petersburg.

And Niaz—well Niaz loved her distractedly. No husband on earth could possibly love a woman better.

Still, Olga could never understand why he sometimes had to leave her for three or four days together, and why during his absence, when she was left all alone at night in the solitary fort with those dreadful Buriats, they kept watch and ward so carefully all the time, and seemed so relieved when Niaz came back again. But whenever she asked him about it, Niaz only looked grave and anxious, and replied with a would-be careless wave of the hand that part of his duty was to guard the frontier, and that the Czar had not conferred a title and an order upon him for nothing. Olga felt frightened and disquieted on all such occasions, but somehow felt, from Niaz's manner, that she must not question him further upon the matter.

One day, after one of these occasional excursions, Niaz came back in high spirits, and kissed her more tenderly and affectionately than ever. After dinner, he read to her out of a book of French poems a grand piece of Victor Hugo's, and then made her sit down to the piano and play him his favourite air from *Der Freischütz* twice over. When she had finished, he leant back in his chair and murmured quietly in French (which they always spoke together), "And this is in the mountains of Tartary! One would say a soirée of St. Petersburg or of Paris."

Olga turned and looked at him softly. "What is the time, dearest Niaz?" she said with a smile. "Shall I be able to play you still that dance of Pinsuti's?"

Niaz pulled out his watch and answered quickly, "Only ten o'clock, darling. You have plenty of time still."

Something in the look of the watch he held in his hand struck Olga as queer and

unfamiliar. She glanced at it sideways, and noticed hurriedly that Niaz was trying to replace it unobserved in his waistcoat pocket. "I haven't seen that watch before," she said suddenly; "let me look at it, dear, will you?"

Niaz drew it out and handed it to her with affected nonchalance; but in the undercurrent of his expression Olga caught a glimpse of a hang-dog look she had never before observed in it. She turned over the watch and looked on the back. To her immense surprise, it bore the initials "F. de K." engraved upon the cover.

"These letters don't belong to you, Niaz," she said, scanning it curiously.

Niaz moved uneasily in his chair. "No," he answered, "not to me, Olga. It's—it's an old family relic—an heirloom, in fact. It belonged to my mother's mother. She was—a Mademoiselle de Kérouac, I believe, from Morbihan, in Brittany."

Olga's eyes looked him through and through with a strange new-born suspicion. What could it all mean? She knew he was telling her a falsehood. Had the watch belonged—to some other lady? What was the meaning of his continued absences? Could he—but no. It was a man's watch, not a lady's. And if so—why, if so, then Niaz had clearly told her a falsehood in that too, and must be trying to conceal something about it.

That night, for the first time, Olga Davidoff began to distrust her Buriat husband.

Next morning, getting up a little early and walking on the parapet of the queer old fortress, she saw Niaz in the court below, jumping and stamping in a furious temper upon something on the ground. To her horror, she saw that his face was all hideously distorted by anger, and that as he raged and stamped the Tartar cast in his features, never before visible, came out quite clearly and distinctly. Olga looked on, and trembled violently, but dared not speak to him.

A few minutes later Niaz came in to breakfast, gay as usual, with a fresh flower stuck prettily in the button-hole of his undress coat and a smile playing unconcernedly around the clear-cut corners of his handsome thin-lipped mouth.

"Niaz," his wife said to him anxiously, "where is the watch you showed me last night?"

His face never altered for a moment as he replied, with the same bland and innocent smile as ever, "My darling, I have broken it all to little pieces. I saw it annoyed you in some way when I showed it to you yesterday, and this morning I took it out accidentally in the lower courtyard. The sight of it put me in a violent temper. 'Cursed thing,' I said, 'you shall never again step in so cruelly between me and my darling. There, take that, and that, and that, rascal!' and I stamped it to pieces underfoot in the courtyard."

Olga turned pale, and looked at him horrified. He smiled again, and took her

wee hand tenderly in his. "Little one," he said, "you needn't be afraid; it's only our quick Buriat fashion. We lose our tempers sometimes, but it is soon over. It is nothing. A little whirlwind—and, pouf, it passes."

"But, Niaz, you said it was a family heirloom!"

"Well, darling, and for your sake I ground it to powder. Voilà tout! Come, no more about it; it isn't worth the trouble. Let us go to breakfast."

III.

Some days later Niaz went on an expedition again, "on the Czar's service for the protection of the frontier," and took more than half his able-bodied Tartars on the journey with him. Olga had never felt so lonely before, surrounded now by doubt and mystery in that awful solitary stronghold. The broken watch weighed gloomily upon her frightened spirits.

Niaz was gone for three days, as often happened, and on the fourth night, after she had retired to her lonely bedroom, she felt sure she heard his voice speaking low somewhere in the courtyard.

At the sound she sprang from her bed and went to the window. Yes, there, down in the far corner of the yard, without lights or noise, and treading cautiously, she saw Niaz and his men filing quietly in through the dim gloom, and bringing with them a number of boxes.

Her heart beat fast. Could it be some kind of smuggling? They lay so near the passes into Turkestan and China, and she knew that the merchant track from Yarkand to Semipalatinsk crossed the frontier not far from Niaz's village.

Huddling on her dress hastily, she issued out, alone and terrified, into the dark courtyard, and sought over the whole place in the black night for sight of Niaz. She could find him nowhere.

At last she mounted the staircase to the mouldering rampart. Generally the Tartar guards kept watch there constantly, but to-night the whole place seemed somehow utterly deserted. She groped her way along till she reached the far corner by a patch of ground which Niaz had told her was the Tartar burial-place.

There she came suddenly upon a great crowd of men below on the plain, running about and shouting wildly, with links and torches. Niaz stood in the midst, erect and military, with his Russian uniform gleaming fitfully in the flickering torchlight. In front of him six Turcoman merchants, with their hands bound behind their backs, knelt upon the ground, and beside him two Tartars held by either arm a man in European dress, whom Olga recognized at once as the English traveller from India by way of

the Himalayas. Her heart stood still within her with terror, and she hung there, mute and unseen, upon the rampart above, wondering what in Heaven's name this extraordinary scene was going to end in. What could it mean? What could Niaz be doing in it? Great God, it was too horrible!

A Tartar came forward quietly from the crowd with a curved sword. At a word from Niaz he raised the sword aloft in the air. One second it glanced bright in the torchlight; the next second a Turcoman's head lay rolling in the dust, and a little torrent of blood spurted suddenly from the still kneeling corpse. Olga opened her mouth to scream at the horrid sight, but happily her voice at once forsook her as in a dream, and she stood fixed to the spot in a perfect fascination of awe and terror.

Then the Tartar moved on, obedient to a word and a nod from Niaz, and raised his sword again above the second Turcoman. In a moment, the second head too rolled down quietly beside the other. Without a minute's delay, as though it formed part of his everyday business, the practised headsman went on quietly to the next in order, and did not stop till all six heads lay grim and ghastly scattered about unheeded in the dust together. Olga shut her eyes, sickening, but still could not scream for very horror.

Next, Niaz turned to the English traveller, and said something to him in his politest manner. Olga couldn't catch the words themselves because of the distance, but she saw from his gestures that he was apologizing to the Englishman for his rough treatment. The Englishman in reply drew out and handed to Niaz a small canvas bag, a purse, and a watch. Niaz took them, bowing politely, "Hands off," he cried to the Tartars in Russian, and they loosed their prisoner. Then he made a sign, and the Englishman knelt. In a minute more his head lay rolling in the dust below, and Niaz, with a placid smile upon his handsome face, turned to give orders to the surrounding Tartars.

Olga could stand it no more. She dared not scream or let herself be seen; but she turned round, sick at heart, and groped her way, half paralyzed by fear, along the mouldering rampart, and then turned in at last to her own bedroom, where she flung herself upon the bed in her clothes, and lay, tearless but terrified, the whole night through in blinding misery.

She did not need to have it all explained to her. Niaz was nothing more, after all, than a savage Buriat robber chieftain.

IV.

What a terribly long hypocrisy and suspense those six weeks of dreary waiting,

before an answer to her letter could come from Tobolsk, and the Governor could send a detachment of the military to rescue her from this nest of murderous banditti!

How Olga hated herself for still pretending to keep on terms with Niaz! How she loathed and detested the man with whom she must yet live as wife for that endless time till the day of her delivery!

And Niaz couldn't help seeing that her manner was changed towards him, though he flattered himself that she had as yet only a bare suspicion, and no real knowledge of the horrible truth. What a sad thing that she should ever even have suspected it! What a pity if he could not keep her here to soothe and lighten his winter solitude!—for he loved her; yes, he really loved her, and he needed sympathy and companionship in all the best and highest instincts of his inner nature. These Buriats, what were they? a miserable set of brutal savages: mere hard-working robbers and murderers, good enough for the practical rough work of everyday life (such as knocking Turcoman merchants on the head), but utterly incapable of appreciating or sympathizing with the better tastes of civilized humanity. It was a hard calling, that of chieftain to these Tartar wretches, especially for a man of musical culture brought up in Paris; and he had hoped that Olga might have helped him through with it by her friendly companionship. Not, of course, that he ever expected to be able to tell her the whole truth: women will be women; and coming to a rough country, they can't understand the necessities laid upon one for rough dealing. No, he could never have expected her to relish the full details of a borderer's profession, but he was vexed that she should already begin to suspect its nature on so very short an acquaintance. He had told her he was like a Highland chieftain of the old times: did she suppose that the Rob Roys and Roderick Dhus of real life used to treat their Lowland captives with rose-water and chivalry? After all, women have really no idea of how things must be managed in the stern realities of actual existence.

So the six weeks passed slowly away, and Olga waited and watched, with smiles on her lips, in mute terror.

At last, one day, in broad daylight, without a moment's warning, or a single premonitory symptom, Olga saw the courtyard suddenly filled with men in Russian uniforms, and a friend of hers, a major of infantry at Tobolsk, rushing in at the head of his soldiers upon the Tartar barrack.

In one second, as if by magic, the courtyard had changed into a roaring battlefield, the Cossacks were firing at the Tartars, and the Tartars were firing at the Cossacks. There was a din of guns and a smoke of gunpowder; and high above all, in the Buriat language, she heard the voice of Niaz, frantically encouraging his men to action, and shouting to them with wild energy in incomprehensible gutturals.

The surprise had been so complete that almost before Olga realized the situation the firing began to die away. The fort was carried, and Niaz and his men stood, disarmed and sullen, with bleeding faces, in the midst of a hastily formed square of stout Cossacks, among the dead and dying strewn upon the ground.

Handsome as ever, but how she hated him!

His arm was wounded; and the Russian surgeon led him aside to bind it up. To Olga's amazement, while the surgeon was actually engaged in binding it, Niaz turned upon him like a savage dog, and bit his arm till the teeth met fiercely in the very middle. She shut her eyes, and half fainted with disgust and horror.

The surgeon shook him off, with an oath; and two Cossacks, coming up hastily, bound his hands behind his back, and tied his legs, quite regardless of his wounded condition.

Meanwhile, the Russian major had sought out Olga. "Madame la Baronne," he said respectfully, "I congratulate you upon your safety and your recovered freedom. Your father is with us; he will soon be here. Your letter reached him safely, in spite of its roundabout direction; and the Governor of Tobolsk despatched us at once upon this errand of release. Baron Niaz had long been suspected: your letter removed all doubts upon the subject."

A minute or two later, the Cossacks marched their prisoners out of the courtyard, two and two, into the great hall of the stronghold.

"I wish to bid farewell to my wife," Niaz cried to the major, in a loud voice. "I shall be sent to the mines, I suppose, and I shall never see her again in this world most probably."

The major allowed him to come near within speaking distance, under guard of two Cossacks.

"Madame la Baronne," he hissed out between his clenched teeth, "this is your hand. It was your hand that you gave me in marriage; it was your hand that wrote to betray me. Believe me, madame, come what may, your hand shall pay the penalty."

So much he said, passionately indeed, but with the offended dignity of a civilized being. Then the Tartar in him broke through the thin veneer of European culture, and he lolled his tongue out at her in savage derision, with a hideous menacing leer like an untamed barbarian. Till that moment, in spite of the horrible massacre she had seen with her own eyes, Olga had never suspected what profound depths of vulgar savagery lay unperceived beneath Alexander Niaz's handsome and aristocratic European features.

One more word he uttered coarsely: a word of foul reproach unfit to be repeated, which made Olga's cheek turn crimson with wrath and indignation even in

that supreme moment of conflicting passions. She buried her face between her two hands wildly, and burst into a sudden flood of uncontrollable tears.

"March him away," cried the major in a stern voice. And they marched him away, still mocking, with the other prisoners.

That was the last Olga Davidoff then saw of her Buriat husband.

V.

After Niaz had been tried and condemned for robbery and murder, and sent with the usual Russian clemency to the mines of Oukboul, Olga Davidoff could not bear any longer to live at Tobolsk. It was partly terror, partly shame, partly pride; but Tobolsk or even St. Petersburg she felt to be henceforth utterly impossible for her.

So she determined to go back to her kinsfolk in that dear old quiet England, where there are no Nihilists, and no Tartars, and no exiles, and where everybody lived so placidly and demurely. She looked back now upon The Laurels, Clapham, as the ideal home of repose and happiness.

It was not at Clapham, however, that Madame Niaz (as she still called herself) settled down, but in a quiet little Kentish village, where the London branch of the Davids family had retired to spend their Russian money.

Frank Davids, the son of the house, was Olga's second cousin; and when Olga had taken the pretty little rose-covered cottage at the end of the village, Frank Davids found few things more pleasant in life than to drop in of an afternoon and have a chat with his Russian kinswoman. Olga lived there alone with her companion, and in spite of the terrible scenes she had so lately gone through, she was still a girl, very young, very attractive, and very pretty.

What a wonderfully different life, the lawn-tennis with Frank and the curate and the Davids girls up at the big house, from the terror and isolation of the Buriat stronghold! Under the soothing influence of that placid existence, Olga Davidoff began at last almost to outlive the lasting effects of that one great horror. Stamped as it was into the very fabric of her being, she felt it now less poignantly than of old, and sometimes for an hour or two she even ventured to be careless and happy.

Yet all the time the awful spectre of that robber and murderer Niaz, who was nevertheless still her wedded husband, rose up before her, day and night, to prevent her happiness from being ever more than momentary.

And Frank, too, was such a nice, good fellow! Frank had heard from Madame Davidoff all her story (for madame had come over to see Olga fairly settled), and he

pitied her for her sad romance in such a kind, brotherly fashion.

Once, and once only, Frank said a word to her that was not exactly brotherly. They were walking together down the footpath by the mill, and Olga had been talking to him about that great terror, when Frank asked her, in a quiet voice, "Olga, why don't you try to get a divorce from that horrible Niaz?"

Olga looked at him in blank astonishment, and asked in return, "Why, Frank, what would be the use of that? It would never blot out the memory of the past, or make that wretch any the less my wedded husband."

"But, Olga, you need a protector sorely. You need somebody to soothe and remove your lasting terror. And I think I know some one, Olga,—I know some one who would give his whole life to save you, dearest, from a single day's fear or unhappiness."

Olga looked up at him like a startled child. "Frank," she cried, "dear, dear Frank, you good cousin, never say again another word like that, or you will make me afraid to walk with you or talk with you any longer. You are the one friend I have whom I can trust and confide in: don't drive me away by talking to me of what is so impossible. I hate the man: I loathe and abhor him with all my heart; but I can never forget that he is still my husband. I have made my choice, and I must abide by it. Frank, Frank, promise me,—promise me, that you will never again speak upon the subject."

Frank's face grew saddened in a moment with a terrible sadness; but he said in a firm voice, "I promise," and he never broke his word from that day onward.

VI.

Three years passed away quietly in the Kentish village, and every day Olga's unreasoning terror of Niaz grew gradually fainter and fainter. If she had known that Niaz had escaped from the mines, after eight months' imprisonment, and made his way by means of his Tartar friends across the passes to Tibet and Calcutta, she would not have allowed the sense of security to grow so strong upon her.

Meanwhile Frank, often in London, had picked up the acquaintance of a certain M. de Vouillemont, a French gentleman much about at the clubs, of whose delightful manners and wide acquaintance with the world and men he was never tired of talking to Olga. "A most charming man, indeed, De Vouillemont, and very anxious to come down here and see Hazelhurst. Besides, Olga, he has been even in Russia, and he knows how to talk admirably about everybody and everything. I've asked him down for Friday evening. Now, do, like a good girl, break your rule for once, and

come and dine with us, although there's to be a stranger. It's only one, you know, and the girls would be so delighted if you'd help entertain him, for he speaks hardly any English, and their French, poor things, is horribly insular and boarding-schooly."

At last, with much reluctance, Olga consented, and on the Friday she went up to the big house at eight punctually.

Mrs. Davids and the girls were not yet in the drawing-room when she arrived; but M. de Vouillemont had dressed early, and was standing with his back to the room, looking intently at some pictures on the wall, as Olga entered.

As she came in, and the servant shut the door behind her, the stranger turned slowly. In a moment she recognized him. His complexion was disguised, so as to make him look darker than before; his black moustache was shaved off; his hair was differently cut and dressed; but still, as he looked her in the face, she knew him at once. It was Alexander Niaz!

Petrified with fear, she could neither fly nor scream. She stood still in the middle of the drawing-room, and stared at him fixedly in an agony of terror.

Niaz had evidently tracked her down, and come prepared for his horrid revenge. Without a moment's delay, his face underwent a hideous change, and from the cultivated European gentleman in evening clothes that he looked when she entered, he was transformed as if by magic into a grinning, gibbering Tartar savage, with his tongue lolling out once more, as of old in Siberia, in hateful derision of her speechless terror.

Seizing her roughly by the arm, he dragged her after him, not so much unresisting as rigid with horror, to the open fireplace. A marble fender ran around the tiled hearth. Laying her down upon the rug as if she were dead, he placed her small right hand with savage glee upon that ready-made block, and then proceeded deliberately to take out a small steel hatchet from inside his evening coat. Olga was too terrified even to withdraw her hand. He raised the axe on high—it flashed a second in the air—a smart throb of pain—a dreadful crunching of bone and sinew—and Olga's hand fell white and lifeless upon the tiled hearthplace. Without stopping to look at her for a second, he took it up brutally in his own, and flung it with a horrible oath into the blazing fire.

At that moment, the door opened, and Frank entered.

Olga, lying faint and bleeding on the hearth rug, was just able to look up at him imploringly and utter in a sharp cry of alarm the one word "Niaz."

Frank sprang upon him like an angry lion.

"I told her her hand should pay the penalty," the Tartar cried, with a horrible joy bursting wildly from his livid features; "and now it burns in the fire over yonder, as

she herself shall burn next minute for ever and ever in fire and brimstone."

As he spoke he drew a pistol from his pocket, and pointed it at her with his finger on the trigger.

Next moment, before he could fire, Frank had seized his hand, flung the pistol to the farther end of the drawing-room, and forced the Tartar down upon the floor in a terrible life-and-death struggle.

Niaz's face, already livid, grew purpler and purpler as they wrestled with one another on the carpet in that deadly effort. His wrath and vindictiveness gave a mad energy to his limbs and muscles. Should he be baulked of his fair revenge at last? Should the woman who had betrayed him escape scot-free with just the loss of a hand, and he himself merely exchange a Siberian for an English prison? No, no, never! by St. Nicholas, never! Ha, madame! I will murder you both! The pistol! the pistol! A thousand devils! let me go! I will kill you yet! I will kill you! I will kill you! Then he gasped, and grew blacker and purpler—blacker and purpler—blacker—blacker—blacker—ever blacker. Presently he gasped again. Frank's hand was now upon his murmuring throat. They rolled over and over in their frantic struggles. Then a long, slow inspiration. After that, his muscles relaxed. Frank loosed him a little, but knelt upon his breast heavily still, lest he should rise again in another paroxysm. But no: he lay quite motionless—quite motionless, and never stirred a single finger.

Frank felt his heart—no movement; his pulse—quite quiet; his lips—not a breath perceptible! Then he rose, faint and staggering, and rang for the servants.

When the doctor came hurriedly from the village to bandage up the Russian lady's arm, he immediately pronounced that M. de Vouillemont was dead—stone dead—not a doubt about it. Probably apoplexy under stress of violent emotion.

The inquest was a good deal hushed up, owing to the exceedingly painful circumstances of the case; and to this day very few people about Torquay (where she now lives) know how Mrs. Frank Davids, the quiet lady who dresses herself always in black, and has such a beautiful softened half-frightened expression, came to lose her right hand. But everybody knows that Mr. Davids is tenderness itself to her, and that she loves him in return with the most absolute and childlike devotion.

It was worth cutting off her right hand, after all, to be rid of that awful spectre of Niaz, and to have gained the peaceful love of Frank Davids.

TRANScriber NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected.

Inconsistencies in punctuation have been maintained.

Inconsistent use of hyphens and hyphenated words maintained.

Cover created for this ebook.

[The end of *The Beckoning Hand: Olga Davidoff's Husband* by Grant Allen]