

## *The Red Chest*

### An Experience in the Life of a Russian Detective

In 188- I was briefly in the service of the Imperial Criminal Detective Police Bureau, in St. Petersburg, which is distinctly different from the civil secret service, dealing almost wholly with political offenders, with whose infamously barbarous employment I would have nothing to do.

A series of extraordinary robberies had been effected from the luggage van of a number of trains on the St. Petersburg & Odessa railway.

I was, therefore, not surprised at being one day summoned by General Triposki, the chief of the department, who said to me, after some preliminary words:

“Go to see Herr Moyenstein, the luggage superintendent, and see what you can make of these robberies. You can even conceal yourself in the van of the next through train if you see fit.[”]

“If you succeed in solving the mystery and bringing the perpetrator or perpetrators to justice, I guarantee you speedy promotion, and the company will doubtless fill your pouch with rubles.[”]

“If not, ahem!”—General Triposki stroked his huge moustache, and glanced down complacently over the perfect polish of his military top boots, with a peculiar glint in his hard, gray eyes—“well, that will be less fortunate for you; in fact, I don’t know but that I should be displeased—perhaps seriously displeased.”

To incur the displeasure of a Russian bureaucrat is equivalent to an unceremonious kick into disgrace or obscurity for the unfortunate delinquent.

I made my salute and proceeded to the railway station and stated my business to the official mentioned.

Herr Moyenstein was a German of a very excitable temperament, and I found him in the midst of pressing business incidental to the near departure of the Odessa express.

“Ah, you have come to investigate?” he managed to exclaim, semi-confidentially, to me.

“General Triposki is very good, to be sure; but what is there to investigate?”

“The through luggage van is locked and sealed from the moment of starting, and with nothing but the heaped luggage within, and yet the robberies continue.[”]

“At the end of the route what is found? All locked and sealed as before, and yet confusion and dismay in the interior—trunks, chests, boxes, hampers bursted and rifled of their choicest valuables, but not a sign of the thief, with the company booked for damages as before.

“A mystery? I should say so. It beats even the organized robberies and murders that have so mystified and appalled the environs of Odessa itself for the last two years, with not a trace of their source. Perhaps not quite so bad as that, but almost. There, there! I am too busy to give you any more pointers just now, my friend.”

He was hurrying away from me when I laid my hand on his arm.

“Pointers?” I said, imperatively. “You have given me none not known before. You will at once, if you please, devote yourself exclusively to my edification.”

“Sir!”

“Very good! I suppose I had better return to General Triposki and say—”

“No, no! excuse my hastiness, my dear sir. Wait; then I am wholly at your disposal.”

He hurriedly placed his office in the hands of his chief clerk and submissively escorted me to the long platform where the train was in readiness for starting, and the porters were busily loading the luggage van.

Herr Moyenstein still further explained the interior to me, which I found just as he had first stated, so far as security was concerned, and also offered some theories as to the manner of the depredations, but they were too far-fetched for serious consideration.

As we stepped out of the van, my companion was instantly surrounded by passengers, who were waiting for their luggage certificates, and who were anxious to know if they were to run the risk of a repetition of the mysterious robberies.

Having rid himself of these questioners as best he might, the superintendent was next approached by about the most regally handsome woman I had ever set eyes on.

Tall, dark, magnificently dressed, and attended by two servants in livery, she looked like an Oriental queen as she superciliously signed to my companion and indicated her luggage, which some porters had just trundled in from the drosky and cab stand.

She spoke a few haughty words, though in a singularly sweet, melodious voice, expressive of the hope that her luggage might this time pass through unmolested, and then, after obsequious assurances on the part of Herr Moyenstein, and receiving an immediate certificate for the articles from his own hand, she sailed away.

Her luggage consisted of two immense wooden chests or strapped boxes—one larger than its fellow and painted red, the other travel-worn and of no particular color—such as are much used by the upper traveling class in Russia.

A certain peculiarity in the red chest had attracted my attention while the porters were affixing the necessary labels, and I had also been struck by something furtive or sinister in the faces of the liveried servants.

“You seemed to recognize the lady.” I observed, taking the superintendent to the side.

“I should say so,” he replied, “It was the Countess Rustanovich, of the old castle and impoverished estate of the same name near Odessa. A good traveler, the Countess, either in her own person or by proxy.”

“She does not impress one as being personally impoverished, at all events.”

“No; she is said to be rich now. It is understood that she is settling up a wealthy chattel estate here, left her by inheritance six months ago, portions of which she is sending to her castle from time to time. These boxes probably contain some of the property now. Mostly they are solely accompanied by one of her retainers. She now goes with them in person, perhaps it is the last shipment.”

“An odd way of shipping valuables, as personal luggage.”

“The nobility have the privilege of being odd, my friend—especially when they pay for it,” dryly.

“Six months ago, you say—this inheritance?”

“About that, I believe.”

“How long have the mysterious plunderings been going on?”

“Humph! And an odd coincidence, but about the same length of time.”

“Has the Countess Rustanovitch ever suffered thereby?”

“The deuce! I should say so. She has even now a suit against us for damages, together with many others. Twice, on the van being opened at Odessa, has one or another of her boxes, with numerous others, been found broken open and ransacked.”

This piece of information did not weaken a certain suspicion, which had suddenly come into my brain, and my plan of action was already decided on.

“What does that package contain?” I asked, pointing to a long box of new, unpainted wood.

“A coffin.”

“What! Pray explain.”

“It contains a rich burial casket, which is being shipped by some wealthy Jews for the remains of the Rabbi Joseph Smoleskinski, so famous and esteemed in Southern Russia, and who died in Odessa some days ago.”

“Is it to go by the van?”

“No; as freight.”

“It shall go in the through van, and with myself inside of it. Listen now, Herr Moyenstein, to my instructions, and be careful that they are carried out to the letter.”

He had stared at me, but was quickly enlightened as I proceeded to give my instructions: and while these were being carried out in their preliminaries, I hurriedly telegraphed in cipher certain data and memoranda of great importance to the Chief of the Criminal Secret Service in Odessa.

Ten minutes later I occupied the burial casket intended for the rabbi’s remains and was speeding southward as one of the chief features, externally, at least, of the contents of the locked and sealed luggage van.

Luckily, I was a small man, while the casket was designed for a very large and corpulent body.

Still I had no notion of remaining in such quarters any longer than was necessary, and, therefore, speedily set myself at liberty and began to take in the situation.

A thousand miles or thirty hours’ journey, was before me, but I was not unprepared for the emergency.

There had been room for provisions and wine in the casket.

I had effected my release with little or no noise.

The van was but dimly lighted by some stout slats or blinds over each side sliding door.

The interior was stacked two-thirds full of traveling paraphernalia of every description.

My own receptacle had been stowed on top of a pile of stuff in the remotest corner, by my special instructions.

After seating myself on the top of my wooden case and accustoming my eyes to the dim light, I looked searchingly around for the red chest.

There it was, also on top of heaped luggage at the opposite end of the van, with its smaller and less pretentious companion chest at its side.

That it had not been thrust in underneath or at random was doubtless the result of a surreptitious fee to one of the porters on the part of the Countess or one of her servants.

How long and patiently I watched that red chest!

It must have been for hours and hours; but I held out.

At last I detected the sound of a movement within it, and noiselessly slipped behind my burial case, while still keeping on the lookout.

A few moments later the false straps surrounding the chest—I had marked a sham in their construction when first setting eyes on it—gave way, the great lid was raised and a bushy human head peered out from the interior.

Then there were shoulders added to the head, then a body, until at last the entire robber—yes the mysterious depredator himself—rose into view and began to take in his surroundings with a practiced eye.

He was a small man, yet seemingly a concentrated bunch of muscle, sinew and nerve.

The requisite tools were in his hands, and after stretching himself he proceeded upon his vandalism with methodical calmness and expertness, as if perfectly aware that there was plenty of time.

Box after box, trunk after trunk was ruthlessly broken open and discriminately rifled, after being judiciously selected from among those of less promising and encouraging general appearance.

In his special choice of plunder the rascal was no less critical, with a particular penchant for jewelry, laces, fans, expensive robes, money, or whatever else of the sort came in his way; and these he would carefully stow away in his red chest, with a due regard for reserving enough room for his own accommodation when he should see fit to resume his hiding, which would probably be near the journey's end.

He even smashed open his own companion chest, turning its rather insignificant contents upside down, which was, of course, merely to serve as a blind.

He continued his work uninterruptedly for a couple of hours when he desisted, and, making himself comfortable, proceeded to refresh himself with some biscuits and a flask of liquor, which he drew from the bosom of his coarse serge blouse.

I began to pick my way down towards him with the stealthiness of a cat.

In spite of my precautions I displaced a valise and set it rolling.

Knife in hand, he was on his feet in an instant.

But, with the fall of the valise, I had precipitated myself upon him.

There was but a short struggle; the dagger went flying from his grip, and then I had him down, gasping and gnashing his teeth, but powerless.

Having finished disarming him I propped him up, and presenting a cocked revolver to his forehead demanded a full confession.

He remained silently mute at first, but I instantly fired, though gauging the shot so that a wag of his head befriended him to the extent of my bullet only nipping a notch in his ear.

I cocked and leveled the weapon afresh, as if for a truer aim.

Then he weakened, making a full confession.

Briefly, it was to this effect:

Not only had he been the Countess Rustanovitch's instrument in all the preceding robberies in the van, but he also admitted she was the head of a band of criminals which had long terrorized the region in the vicinity of Odessa.

Her dilapidated castle was at headquarters.

The band was exceptionally powerful, its uniform success thus far being chiefly due to the intelligence and cunning of their noble patroness and the extreme circumspection attendant upon achieving a membership, every intending member being subjected to a severe preliminary examination by the lady chief herself, who would then apportion such nefarious work as she had planned.

The simple plan was for the thief to stuff the chest in which he had been concealed with as many valuables as it would accommodate, in addition to his own personality, and then lock himself in it again before reaching Odessa, where Mme. Rustanovitch or her agents would obtain the luggage on the presentation of the certificate, raise a great clamor on account of the minor box having been rifled, and carry off the red chest to her castle for the purpose of liberating their confederate and appraising the pilferings at leisure.

Having rendered my prisoner sufficiently powerless, I permitted him to finish his lunch and attacked my own store of provisions and wine.

I then watched my man until pretty well tired out, after which I secured him hand and foot, and indulged myself in a long, unstinted repose, which lasted throughout the approaching night.

As we drew near our final destination I gagged my prisoner, in addition to tightening his bonds, and boxed him up in the rabbi's burial casket.

Then I managed to get into the red chest myself, though it was a tight squeeze by reason of the pelf that kept me company, to close the lid down over me and make everything snug.

An hour later I was called for at the station, there being the great hullabaloo over the dismantled luggage that I had anticipated.

After two or three hours' conveyance over rough roads, I felt myself being carried somewhere.

Voices, including a soft and melodious one, apparently in command, that I had not forgotten, were murmuring over and around me, as the red chest containing me was again set down.

“Come forth, little Garovitch—come forth!” called out the musical voice, accompanied by a rap on the lid. “Loosen the hasp and come out, little Jack-in-the-box! Let us see what pretty new things you may have brought us out of the luggage van.”

Though feeling half smothered, I managed to respond for the missing manikin thus felicitously addressed by suddenly hurling up the top and leaping out among them with a shout, revolver in hand.

But the surprise of the criminal crew surrounding me speedily turned to fury and my life would not have been worth a minute's purchase, save for the cipher-dispatch that I had taken the precaution to telegraph to the prefect of the Odessa police.

He had taken his measures accordingly, a strong body of gendarmes, with the prefect at their head, having secretly tracked the removal of the red chest to the castle.

I had only to fire a shot in the air as a signal to bring them rushing to my rescue.

After a brief struggle the entire band and their beautiful leader were secured, the cunning little Garovitch being apprehended later on at the undertaker's, whither he had been conveyed in the burial casket.

All the miscreants, including their daring lady chief, presented a defiant front to the authorities when brought to trial, but were convicted, without exception, and condemned to terms of imprisonment.

This unlooked-for double success on my part earned me no end of professional fame, besides a handsome purse at the hands of the railway corporation and the unstinted praise of my official superiors.

But the promised promotion I failed to obtain, though this was altogether owing to certain conscientious scruples of my own.

General Triposki and other bureaucrats, who were his superiors, would not be contented unless I should enter the abhorred civil secret service forthwith; and as I could neither consent nor afford to risk their displeasure by my continued obduracy, I surreptitiously made my way across the frontier at the first opportunity and have never been in the Czar's dominions since—Boys of the Empire.

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