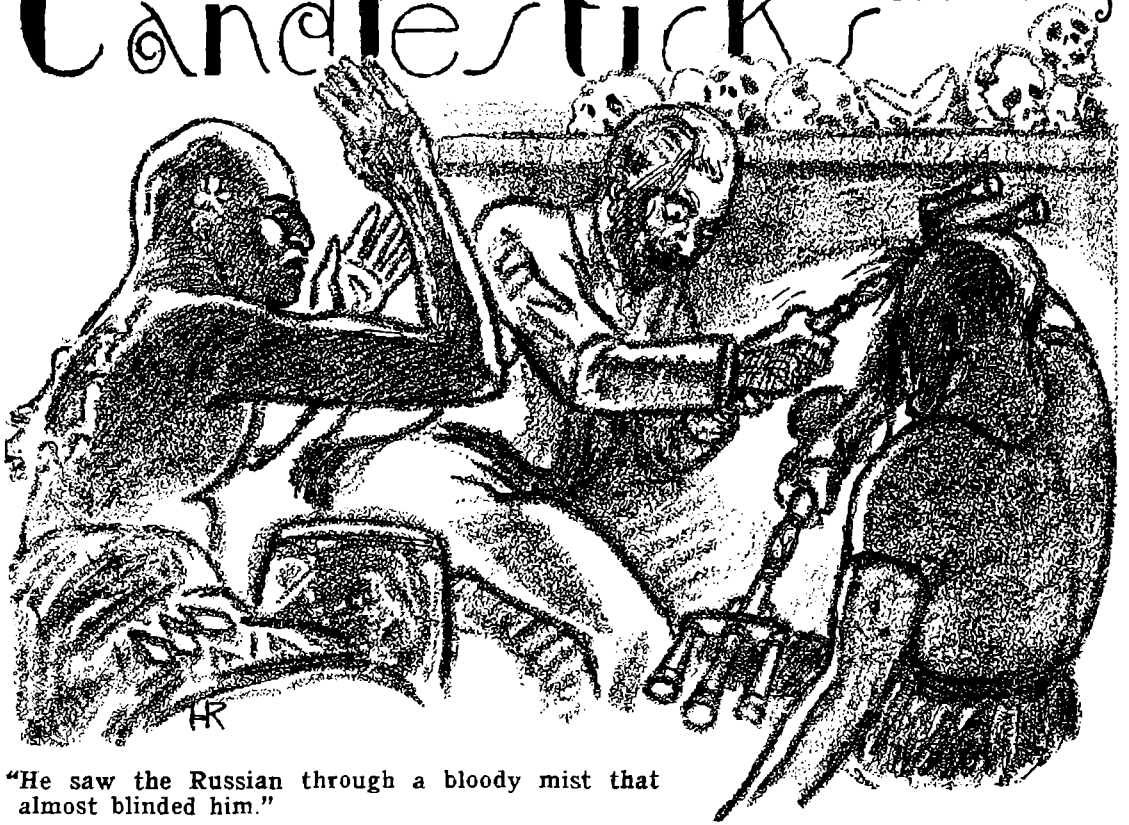


# A Wager in Candlesticks

by Robert T. Griebeling



"He saw the Russian through a bloody mist that almost blinded him."

**D**URING the generation or more in which I did business as a New Bedford ship chandler, sailors brought many a strange story of even stranger lands to me. There was that yarn of the girl on Johnnyeake Hill, the story of Margaret Vandegrift and the wishing-tree, the weird stories of India and China. There was that old tale Michob Fuller brought with him from the Arctic. I have told and retold them through the years, and never have these yarns lost their relish for me.

One of the strangest of them all was the one old Joab Doane told to his guests at the wedding of Sarah Doane to Peter Bradford. Joab and I had grown up together, and

through the years remained fast friends. He always remembered me with a gift of some sort or other when he came home from his whaling voyages: a serimshawed whale's tooth, carved ivory from Korea, macabre jewelry from India or Arabia.

Joab's vessels would come back from their journeys with a fair regularity, if one can refer at all to whalers as "regular," when their voyages took anywhere from three to seven years, but there was one time when we didn't hear from him for quite a while. Yet he returned in the end, and on a ship not his own; told us he had been wrecked somewhere in the East Indies, and that's all we could learn about him.

He brought a reddish, ugly scar with him; it ran from the middle of his forehead well into the line of his hair, where it disappeared somewhere in its bushy growth. When asked about it, he told us he had been hit by a boom and refused to say more. Of course we never believed that, and we teased him about an accident such as would only happen to a landlubber. He cut us short deftly, and the scar remained a mystery until the day of Sarah's wedding. Then, in one of his rare bursts of confidence, he told us about it.

Joab gave Peter a check for \$100,000 and Sarah the most perfectly matched rope of pearls it has ever been my privilege to see. She, quite naturally, asked him where he got it, and then, without any further introduction, he told us the story.

"All of you remember, I believe," he began, "most of the details of my life. You recall my early whaling days and the time when I changed to trading. I hated to give up the thrill of the whale hunt, but did it for my wife and Sarah, and took command of the *Alopex*. Jerez Mitchell was my first mate, and much of my knowledge of trading I gained from him. We tramped along the coasts of South America, around the Horn, across the Pacific, and into the East Indies. Jerez wanted to go to the Indies direct, but I followed the old whaling routes as long as I could.

"On one of our voyages we stopped at the Marquesas for water and then proceeded in the general direction of Papua. But after we passed Tahiti and the Society Islands we were driven before the wind in a terrific gale. We raced toward the south for two days and then were dashed on a reef near an island that wasn't even given on our chart. Every man jack of us was ready for disaster. Our craft had been dashed to pieces in no time, and

with the help of a spar, a crate, or a piece of driftwood, we made our way to the island as best we could.

"A pleasant, cheerful sunshine spread itself over the seascape as we swam toward shore. The natives had long ago seen us and came out to help. They paddled us back in their canoes and gave us refreshments. Once on the island, we were immediately conducted to a large hut and quartered there. Fatigued beyond endurance, we threw ourselves on the rattan mats and fell into a deep sleep.

"I don't know how long I remained there, but when I awoke I found a native sitting at my side. He respectfully said to me: '*Parlez-vous français?*'"

"'*Un peu,*' I answered. He then told me that 'the Master' wanted to see me, and asked me to follow him. I walked after him as he made his way through the little village, and watched the natives basking in the sun or mending their nets. Once outside the village, my guide turned sharply into a footpath that led through the jungle. We began to ascend, passed a tumbling little rill of water, veered to the left, and then began to climb in earnest. After about five minutes of this we reached a plateau.

"Along this we walked until we came to a clearing in the middle of which, much to my surprise, I saw a wide, comfortable bungalow. A veranda ran all around it, and several natives lolled in the sun before the main entrance.

"My guide turned to me and asked me whether I was fatigued from the climb. I told him I wasn't, but he insisted that I rest on the veranda until 'the Master' was ready to see me.

"I lit my pipe and looked at the landscape. Far below me I could see the shore line, to the left a bit of the village, and in the distance the wide, inscrutable sea. What

manner of man is this, I wondered, who would build on such a deserted island?

“IN THE midst of my ruminations my guide came out and motioned to me. I followed him through a short corridor into a room which was evidently the library. It was long, low, and dark, yet not without its comfort, and thousands of books lined the walls. A few heavy leather chairs stood about the room, in the center of which there was a beautifully carved oak table, bare except for a Persian rug, used as a runner, and a priceless majolica vase. That the owner was a man of taste and refinement was manifest. The object that arrested my attention from the beginning, however, was a fireplace set in the center of the north wall. A mantelpiece, made of a block of solid oak, ran across the top of it. On each end was set a solid silver candlestick, beautifully wrought. One of these was a trifle bent above the base, and both of them showed nicks, as though they had been battered about.

“Between these candlesticks the owner of the bungalow had arranged one of the most gruesome exhibits I had ever seen. Into my heart it struck a terror which I could not dispel, for from one candlestick to the other there was placed an array of skulls. None of them was whole. They were cracked and broken, and entire parts were missing from some of them. God, what a decoration! One of them had only half a jaw. The whole forehead of another was caved in. Three square inches at the base of another were bashed to bits; a fourth had the teeth knocked out of one side of the face; a fifth showed a ghastly cavity where the nose had been; and so on. I can not, at this late date, even begin to describe them all. I can only tell you that they brought to me an overwhelming horror. I kept my eyes

on them, despite their ugliness. The center piece—the *chef d'oeuvre*, as it were, of the collection—was a sort of receptacle. Upon closer investigation I found it to be a skull sawed in half. The rim was lined with silver and it had a silver base, daintily filigreed. But before I had time to examine it more closely, my guide walked in, stepped deferentially to one side, and announced:

“‘*Le Comte Fiodor Irlamanoff!*’

“I nodded slightly as an immaculately dressed gentleman stepped into the room. He returned my bow and waved me into a chair.

“‘Do be seated,’ he said to me in French. ‘I am overjoyed to be honored with your visit.’

“What he meant by that I was to find out soon enough. Seated at the windows that gave out on the veranda I had a chance to observe my host more closely. He was dressed entirely in white, and over his heart was embroidered a coat-of-arms. His eyes were black, his face swarthy, his hair slightly grayed. He wore an imperial.

“I judged him to be a man of about forty-five or fifty. Not quite stocky in build, he was yet firmly knit, and in a hasty estimate I assumed he could give a very good account of himself in any sort of physical match. I wondered how he kept himself in such perfect condition.

“He noticed at once that I was not a Frenchman, and asked whether I could speak English. I told him I was an American and would prefer to talk in English, although I had picked up enough French in my travels to carry on a conversation. He told me that he, too, could speak the language, as he was a graduate of Oxford. He was a native of Russia, he added. Then he asked me of my voyage, the condition of my finances, the health of my crew, and other matters that occupied my immediate concern. I told him of

our adventures since we had left New Bedford, and since he had never seen a whaling-ship, I offered to take him aboard the next one that came past the island.

"He smiled wistfully at this and said, 'Ah, sir, they do not often come this way.'

"He then gave instructions to have my crew properly taken care of and begged me to stay with him at the bungalow, and he assured me he would entertain me as best he could. I shuddered at the thought of having to stay in the same place that harbored the skulls, but I could not very well refuse. I saw to it that my crew were at ease, told them where I would be in case they wanted me, and went back to the bungalow.

"If there is anything I have to thank Irlamanoff for, I want to thank him for it now, for the days of my stay, with the exception of one somber and sinister influence, were as happy as they could be under the circumstances.

"The Russian was a fascinating conversationist, and he made me laugh time and time again over his pranks at Oxford and over some of the amusing anecdotes of the Russian court. He would tell them at random, upon almost any occasion, while we were hunting, fishing, or swimming in the lovely waters of the bay, where the natives had erected a long breakwater to keep out the sharks. At night, when it often grew quite cool, one of the brown-skinned attendants lit a fire, and then Irlamanoff and I would sit and read, sipping an occasional whisky-and-soda—a remnant of his Oxford days—and later retire after an exhilarating evening among the classics. There was nothing else to do, for the Russian informed me that ships passed by only at great intervals, and that often they would not even stop, for they could not see

the tiny smudge which the natives fired whenever they spied a sail.

"But constantly there hovered this sinister influence over these serene days. Something, I sensed, was not quite right with this carefree existence. The skulls, I was sure, had something to do with it. Time and again I would glance at them anxiously, wondering whether the count would ever tell me about them. I dared not ask.

"He saw my eyes wander in the direction of the fireplace one time, and said leisurely, 'You want to know about them? Never mind, I shall tell you—some day.'

"That day—alas!—came all too soon for me.

"SEVERAL weeks later, after the count had delivered a most charming account of one of his many gay episodes, I asked him to tell me why he chose this place to live in, when he surely could have the pick of any city on the continent.

"'There is an interesting bit of history connected with my move here,' he volunteered. 'My father had intended that I, as the eldest son, should take over the management of our estates in Russia after my return from Oxford. I loathed the country, and dallied at the imperial court as long as I could while on my way back from London. But I had an unfortunate affair with a woman of the court. Have patience; it's not quite the same sort of an affair you might expect to find in some other man. The woman was the wife of a high official, and one night—she took a fancy to me—while we were at a riotous party, she blabbed out a state secret in an intoxicated moment. Innocently enough I repeated it to my father when I arrived on the estate. He was furious and swore that he would have me out of the country; for any careless repetition of what I had

heard—a drunken confidence—might plunge the whole world into war.

“He communicated with the proper authorities and they arranged to have me cast into exile. The woman and her husband retired precipitantly from court life, and are now, to the best of my knowledge, living in Canada. It was a sore blow to the official—but think of what it meant to me! I had my life before me and was filled to the brim with a *joie de vivre* impossible to suppress. I was so distressed at the idea of leaving Europe that I begged my father to reconsider his resolution. He was too loyal a Czarist to renege, and his Tarquinian severity was well known to me. I knew I was lost. So I asked him if I could tour the world in order to find the place most suitable for me. I found this island and determined to stay. My father arranged all details of settlement.

“Life began to dull fearfully for me. You can understand what a terrible banishment this must be for a man like me, who at the beginning of a brilliant career in the courts of Europe had to give up everything and live among these native swine. But I realized too well that my presence in Russia might be disastrous. My secret was too important. . . . And so you see me here, a hostage for the peace of the world, merely because I had been made a partner in a confidence for which I did not at all care.

“But oh for a taste, just a taste of my former life! For glorious adventure, for stirring combat, for just one hour of exhilaration among the people of my kind! Believe me, sir, I longed for it as no man in a dungeon ever longed for liberty. How I recall those rollicking nights, the wines, the company of those precious officers, the intoxicating music of a Viennese waltz, the company of women! It’s—it’s been a long time ago, but I thirst for this excitement

now as I have never thirsted for it before!’

“His voice trailed off into silence. I saw him tremble slightly, as though he were cold. I pitied him. Turning his eyes toward me, he continued:

“Sir, I am a brave man, and in my fight with this solitude I decided on the brave thing. I determined to pit myself against my fortune. I craved adventure, and for this adventure I was quite willing to give my all—even my life. I created problems, and no matter what their solution, I knew I would win out either way. I have outwitted my fate so far, but there may always come a day when I shall succumb. Do I sound obscure? I will explain.

“Here is my plan: I decided that whoever came to this island should have a chance to “better his fortune,” as they say in French.

“I planned to give him that chance. There is, of course, some risk connected with the undertaking, but no man can hope to better his chances if he isn’t willing to take some risk.

“I planned to duel with my guests. Not with swords or pistols—I know too much about these weapons, and my adversaries would not have an even chance. So I decided on these candlesticks which you see on the mantelpiece. “Winner take all” was my slogan. Whoever would be the better man would become lord over this domain and be wealthy in his own right. My moneys are great. I would prepare a will, lay it on the mantelpiece, and enter my contestant’s name on the blank space. The signatures would be witnessed by two of my natives and the battle would begin. If I won, I would have my adventure and my thrill—God knows they come seldom enough for me—and if the other man would win out, he would take over this estate and the gilt-edged consols I have in the British banks.

“The plan has worked beautifully for me thus far, and that these others’—he waved a hand at the skulls—‘were not able to get their reward has been no fault of mine!’

“His features had changed, and from the suave, cultured gentleman I had seen before me all this time he assumed the guise of a killer. He laughed a cruel laugh and picked up one of the skulls.

“‘This one gave me quite a battle,’ he said. ‘Look at the heavy brows. He was a man of immense height and strength and he almost did for me. But a lucky turn of the wrist and an error on his part, and he lost.’

“I looked at the skull in horror. Despite its thickness it had been bashed in just over the right eye. It was hideous, and before my eyes there arose the vision of that fighting pair, the blood, and the broken, crushed face of the man who succumbed.

“‘Come now,’ said the count; ‘what do you think of it?’

“‘I think it’s inconceivable,’ I answered. ‘How can you deliberately plot the life of a man in this way?’

“‘Tush,’ he answered. ‘Remember, we live in an uncivilized country, and this is not looked upon as too gross. Understand me, I do not make this wager with everyone. I only take those whom I consider as good physically as myself, or better. I take the same chances they do. They have the opportunity to become wealthy at one stroke’—he made a quick downward motion with his arm, much as a hatchet-man swings his bolo, and laughed melodramatically—‘while I have nothing to gain by combat except the brief thrill. You have had ample opportunity, by this time, to know that the dull hours here are by far the most prevalent.’

“He gave me a long glance that took me in from head to foot, meas-

ured me slowly with his eyes, and continued:

“‘From the day you landed here you have interested me immensely. I have come to believe, in the days that you have been with me, that you are of my mettle, and so I have chosen you for my next combat. Do you accept the challenge?’

“‘Suavely, smoothly, graciously he said this, as though he were offering me the chance of an audience at the Kremlin, yet his eyes glistened eagerly as he waited for my reply.

“‘I certainly do not,’ I said, ‘and the sooner you put this out of your head the better it will be for the health of your visitors and for your own mind’s contentment.’

“‘My mind is content enough,’ he replied, and then: ‘Ha, a fine one you are to make suggestions! Remember, I am master here, and my word is law. If you do not accept I shall have you shot like a dog before you ever reach the shore. You shall never leave alive, I assure you!’

“The man was mad; loneliness had made him so. And despite his madness I could not help admiring him. He at least was sport enough to risk his life to satisfy his whim. I had to decide quickly. There was no way out. My tongue clove to my palate as I said:

“‘Very well; I accept!’

“Irlamanoff gloated; he told me not to be uneasy.

“‘We’ll draw up the will the next time a ship comes in, and meanwhile—shall we go hunting tomorrow?’

“My look of horror at this casual suggestion must have left an impression, for he continued:

“‘Do you find this so extraordinary, my friend? Just because we shall be enemies sometime in the future, that is no reason why we can’t be friends now. I intend to be a good host to you, and I have planned your stay here. No treach-

ery with the guns, now—understand? I have too much to lose.’

“I gave him a level glance and said: ‘You have my word; I have never broken that and I do not intend to break it now.’”

“THE next few weeks would have been among the happiest in my life had not the shadow of our impending duel hung over me. I half wished the time would come, for I had become almost crazed from going through that house with that crazy man, looking apprehensively at the skulls, and seeing visions of my own skull adorning some part of the house. Where would Irlamanoff place it? I often wondered. The mantelpiece was already filled to capacity. Perhaps he would toss it away. At least that would be a better fate than to have it in the room there, where he could point it out and display the gashes, the broken teeth, the shattered jaw-bone or whatever injury the skull would receive in the combat.

“About two months later we saw a sail on the horizon. The natives built a smudge fire to attract attention to the island. A fierce eagerness swept over the count. I had never seen him so jubilant before. His eyes glistened, he rolled them up and around, raised his eyebrows and scanned the waters to see whether the captain of the vessel had seen our signal. The ship changed its course and came toward us.

“Irlamanoff became obsessed with joy. He danced a bit on the green before the bungalow, threw a kiss at the approaching vessel, and cried:

“‘Ah, my friend, at last—the great adventure! We go it tomorrow! Let us enter and draw the will.’”

“I followed him sullenly. He asked me to sit in the library while he brought the necessary papers. I slumped into a chair and stared at the skulls. By tomorrow night there

would either be another skull stuck somewhere about the room, or——

“I did not have time to finish the thought. Irlamanoff returned and drew his chair close to mine. ‘So, now we can work,’ he said.

“The will was not a lengthy document. It was written in French and its contents were clear: the bungalow to the native chief, the silver to his followers, the trinkets to the Irlamanoffs in Russia. The count’s jewels and British bonds were to go to his conqueror.

“Vaguely I answered the questions he put to me regarding the details; I told him again and again that I did not want this fight, that the whole thing was repulsive to me, that I would box him or wrestle him or do anything else to give him that thrill. He looked at me and made a grimace and said:

“‘Do you think that such a mild form of sport as a boxing-match would satisfy my craving for the eccentric? Man, you must be crazy! I have spilled blood before—I want to spill it again! I know what I want, so please don’t try to suggest such foolishness to me. Remember, I am willing to risk my life for this sport, and the winner will be rewarded handsomely. If I win, I lose, for I do not desire to live here longer; if I die, I win, because death will be a release. If my opponent wins, he becomes wealthy beyond his most extravagant dreams. If he loses, he gets nothing but what he would have received anyway had he not reached this island. Now then, when do you want the combat? The ship’s crew will not be here before tomorrow, and I shan’t let them come up here until we have settled our score. My natives will entertain them in the meanwhile. What do you say—tomorrow at 6?’”

“‘As you wish,’ I answered.

“‘Good,’ he replied. ‘I shall have one of the men wake you. Now for a little *souper*, eh?’”

“He told his natives to bring the meal into the library. I ate sparingly, envying the man who could make such a hearty meal of it with possible death facing him. He also drank heavily. We talked long into the evening, but at last I excused myself and said I wanted to go to sleep. He was quite drunk by this time. He lurched from his chair, clutched me by the shoulder, and exclaimed:

“‘One minute, one minute! You must have a nightcap before you retire—a nightcap such as you have never had in your life!’

“He reached for a bottle, staggered to the mantelpiece, lifted the receptacle from its center, poured the contents of the bottle into it, held it toward me and said:

“‘Drink to your success of tomorrow! Drink it out of the skull of a late adversary of mine! Drink, drink!’

“He tendered the vessel to me mockingly. In anger I dashed it out of his hand. The wine spilled on the floor, the cup rolled to the other end of the room. The sound it made as it bounded over the hardwood was much like a death rattle. I shuddered.

“My host calmly filled two glasses, handed one of them to me, and said, ‘Ah, well, my friend, tonight we part—companions; tomorrow we meet as—enemies. Tonight—ah, tonight I am just a little drunk, but tomorrow you shall see me active. I shall be at my post, and, fool,’ with a warning good-night, ‘see that you be at yours!’

“I took the glass, looked at him with level eyes, and toasted: ‘To the best man, then; be on your guard, Irlamanoff!’

“The count lurched from the room, repeating over and over again: ‘Never mind; I shall, I shall!’

“And his demoniac laughter echoed through the halls.

“I followed slowly, disgusted with

the whole business and in particular with the beast who was my host. Though I tossed about on my bed for more than an hour, I yet fell into a sound sleep at the end. I did not waken until a native tugged at my pajama sleeve.

“‘Come,’ he said softly, ‘the Master is ready.’ With a groan I rose to my feet and ran my fingers through my hair. In imagination I already touched the skull that, in a short time, would adorn this monster’s chambers, bashed and broken.

“‘By God, the thing was unjust! The man was crazy, I knew, yet I felt that in order to protect myself I would have to kill him. Would I? Perhaps there was some way out. God knows I didn’t want this quarrel.

“‘The native must have guessed my thoughts, for he smiled and pointed out of the window. Only too clearly I saw, ambushed in the reeds at the end of the clearing, another native with a bandolier of cartridges slung around his naked body and a Springfield rifle across his knees.

“‘We would follow the Master like sheep,’ my native said. ‘It is no use. But if you should win, *Tuan*—’

“He did not finish the sentence. We heard the moving of furniture in the library. I walked out of the room.

“I WAS the first of the combatants to enter the long, low room. I noticed that the table had been cleared away, as had the rest of the furniture. Even the rugs had been carried out. The floor was slippery, and here and there one could see dark stains—like a dance floor, I thought, where a dance of death was about to be begun. But the stains attracted my attention.

“The native saw me, sidled up to me, and whispered: ‘They were made by your predecessors. We could never quite rub out the blots.’



"In disgust I turned away and walked to the window. In the harbor I could see the ship; it was an American whaler. Natives in their canoes were going out toward it, greeting the sailors cheerfully, waving brightly colored scarfs and sashes. They were to know nothing, possibly, of this combat, I thought sadly. Perhaps there would be someone else on board that ship who would be a prey to the blood-lust of the count.

"A door opened.

"'Ah, there you are,' a voice called out.

"It was my antagonist. I turned to meet him face to face. He was again dressed in white. His imperial and his mustaches were waxed like those of a dandy. He looked the picture of health, and yet—I thought I detected deep lines under his eyes. I wondered whether the wine of the night before had had its effect.

"'Voilà, my friend,' he said; 'now for the final preparations.'

"He clapped his hands. A servant brought something in a box. The count commanded me to take off my shoes and socks. I did so, and a native came over and rubbed the soles of my feet with rosin. He later did the same with Irlamanoff.

"While this was going on, the far alcove of the room had slowly filled itself with several natives. One of them carried a crude drum, another a shepherd's pipe, a third a pair of cymbals. The last man bore a large wooden box made of a resonant wood; in one hand he carried two clappers. Irlamanoff viewed them with evident satisfaction.

"'You will watch the encounter,' he told the leader in French, 'and you will play accordingly.'

"I stared at the count in astonishment. Blood-music? That's what it evidently was to be, for Irlamanoff never gave them another thought. He turned to me and asked:

"'Are we ready?'

"I nodded.

"I noticed that his voice had lost the smoothness which it carried when he formerly addressed himself to me. Now he was all steel; the syllables came from his throat with the rattling quickness of the bullets of an automatic rifle. Quickly he strode to the mantelpiece, picked up both candlesticks, and came toward me. I took one of them, he the other; then we both went to opposite corners of the room. Only the orchestra remained; all the other servants had left.

"'Now,' he said.

"Slowly the drum began to beat with a weird, stifling cadence as we advanced toward each other. This sound never varied throughout the encounter. The man with the pipe followed the count's movements, raising the pitch of his instrument higher and higher as the count neared. Every move I made was mocked and caricatured by the man with the hollow box. The cymbals had as yet not sounded.

"Irlamanoff walked slowly toward me, twirling his weapon as though it might have been a tennis racket, catching it and then again spinning it. To the strident tones of the pipe, we came within six feet of each other near the center of the room, and then began to pirouette—that is the only word I can use to describe our wary motions. The drum beat on and on: . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . . thug . . .

"**R**OUND and round we turned, eyes upon eyes, our hands slowly turning the candlesticks. Suddenly he lunged and struck. The pipe gave a high, shrill note and then stopped. I ducked, caught his wrist on my elbow, and the candlestick descended on the thick of my shoulder. The man with the box aped the movements: clack, clack, clack,

clack-clack, clack, clack-clack, clack, clack, clack.

"Outside of a bruise I was not damaged. I began to watch my antagonist more warily. We circled round and round, always looking for an opening, yet seemingly getting nowhere. Perspiration began to ooze out of our brows; we were exceedingly tense. The tom, tom, tom of the drum through it all irritated me; it gave me a headache and dried my throat. With one hand I motioned the man to stop, but he disregarded me. The count began to laugh.

"Even as he laughed he struck, but this time I eluded him by dashing backward several feet. He was tricked by my feint; his piece described a wide circle, and he nearly fell down. But in an instant he was on his feet again, circled, and fastened those dark eyes intensely upon me. The pipe, which had been playing a high, crying tone all this time, lowered its pitch and began to play a few lugubrious notes. He circled; I followed warily. My back was turned toward the window and his face came full into the light. I could see that his eyes were blood-shot, and this fact filled me with a calm to which I undoubtedly owe my life. 'This man may be quick,' I thought, 'but he is no match for me.' He was still feeling the effects of the wine and I determined to give him enough time to play himself out and then force his surrender.

"So I kept on the defensive, watching him intently. My arm began to feel a trifle numb where he had hit me. For the third time he struck, and this time we clashed. With a shriek the cymbals dashed together as our weapons met, the drum boomed, the hollow box crackled, and the pipe shrilled its way into the highest register and stayed there. The candlesticks crashed time and time again, yet neither of us could get a direct hit. It was ex-

cellent parrying. Once I came close enough to him to strip a piece of skin from his jaw—and I thought the pipe would shiver to bits in its agony—but outside of that he was unscathed. Still we clinched instead of breaking away. We clubbed at each other's ribs or held each other's fighting arms at bay. The man at the box beat a savage rat-tat-tat on his instrument as the candlesticks thudded on our sides. I dared not let go until I knew that I could retreat to the safety of distance. Irlamanoff knew that too, and held to me as long as he could.

"But finally I broke and got away safely. The racket in the corner died down to a sob; only the drum kept up its steady beating. Thus we encountered and broke time and time again, leaving the fray with bruised muscles or cracked ribs. But suddenly he determined to make his great attack, for he lunged. This time I did not elude him. Though I caught his upraised hand with my left, I had not the power to stay the blow. The candlestick struck me over the eye—just where you see this scar. Simultaneously the cymbals clashed. I was blinded by blood and stunned by the shock. I lost my head and lashed about freely with my leaping candlestick. The music, if I can call it that, struck up again, weird and sensuous, lascivious and sadistic in its interpretation. Irlamanoff gave several short grunts that told me my blows had found their target. I went to close in on him, but before I could get a firm grip he writhed like a cat and wrenched himself loose.

"We were both beside ourselves by this time. The music lashed us on to a bestial fury. I was ready to kill; he had been ready for a long time. But he stayed away from my right arm and again circled. By and by my head became clearer, though I felt weak from loss of blood. I could hardly use my left arm defensively

because I constantly had to brush the blood out of my eyes.

"Irlamanoff determined upon a last attack. Catlike he came nearer and nearer. At first I did not notice him, but the pipe, which he had in the room in order to blare his triumph, this time served to warn me of his attack. Subconsciously, through the struggle, I had noted the soaring notes as we came close to each other, and the low, macabre tones when we were distant. Now the pipe played high and shrill. As I looked he leaped. I saw, through the bloody mist that almost incapacitated me, the glint of the stick in the sun.

"I brought my own stick against this bit of sunny brightness—all that I could see in my dazed condition; heard the clash of metal upon metal; saw his piece go spinning against a wall and then drop to the floor.

"The count was holding his hand. I noticed that his right arm was fearfully bent, and knew that I had broken it.

" 'Ahhhh,' he said several times, 'ahhhh, what have you done?' And then: 'Oh, my God!'

"With a wrench and a groan he flung out his arms and waited for me. His face was livid, sweat rolled from his brow, and his arm had already begun to assume an ugly color.

" 'Come,' he said finally. 'Why do you not come?' I stood stock-still, the candlestick in one hand. I was so glad the struggle was over that I could find no words. Again he pleaded:

" 'You have won; finish me.' He said it listlessly, yet it was more than a request; it was a sob, a prayer, a plea for release from his unhappy existence. He wanted to be rid of it, yet wanted that one great adventure in his life to come at this moment—and I could not give it to him.

"I threw aside my piece, walked up to him, and said, 'We've had

enough of this nonsense. Let's clean up.'

"He tottered toward me, a look of unbelief on his face. 'What,' he queried, 'you're not going to bean me?' I almost smiled at this quaint Oxford remnant.

" 'No, of course not.'

"He looked at me, saw that I meant it, and sank to the floor in a huddled heap. The orchestra, which had been quiet for the last few minutes, filed slowly out of the room. Irlamanoff began to sob.

"I made a move toward the door, but he beckoned for me to sit down. I went to the window and there saw the sailors in the main street far below and thanked God that I would soon be with them. All the while I looked, the man beside me sobbed, quietly, brokenly. His wrist was now quite swollen, as was the arm above it. This must have given him considerable pain.

"At last he spoke: 'You have won the wager. All I have is yours.'

" 'Thanks,' I said tartly, 'I don't want any of your goods. All I want is a promise from you.'

" 'A promise?'

" 'Yes; I want you to promise me that never again will you put another living soul in needless jeopardy.'

" 'That's easy,' he said with a forlorn laugh; 'now that I have nothing I will not be able to make this sort of wager.'

" 'The place is still yours, so are the jewels and the consols; I don't want them,' I said. 'But I do want that promise.'

"He gave it, and I suggested that we have breakfast after we cleaned our wounds. I helped him up, and as I did so, my eye fell on the skulls.

" 'One thing more,' I said as we were leaving the room. He followed my gaze and understood even before I made the suggestion. 'I want you to destroy those skulls; they'll leave a bad impression on you!'

“‘I never want to see them again after this,’ he said, and called a servant, who quietly removed them. The mantelpiece looked curiously blank.

The natives helped us to wash, dressed our wounds, bandaged them, and then served breakfast to us on the veranda. The sight of that ship, which was so soon to take me back to New Bedford, almost made me cry. The whole thing seemed like a nightmare.

“**I** ATE a hearty breakfast, though the count ate hardly anything. Following the meal we had a drink together, and then I rose.

“‘I shall return with this ship, as you know,’ I said. I gripped his left hand—for his right was in bandages—and continued, ‘And I know you will not break your promise to me.’

“He gave his word and then added, ‘But you must take something from me.’

“‘I shall be glad to take only my liberty,’ I replied, and strode off the veranda toward the path that would lead me to the shore.

“I reached my crew and shook hands happily with the sailors from the other ship. It proved to be the bark *Morning Star*, just up from a whaling voyage, and its hold was loaded to the gunwales with the precious oil. The long-boat had already left with one load of men and was now coming back for the second. Of course my men would not leave until

I had been taken along. I was plied with questions concerning my mishap, but I refused to talk about it.

“Just before the long-boat put out for the ship we heard a shrill cry from the top of the hill, and a moment later saw a figure in white run down the path. In a trice Irlama-noff—for it was he—came to the clearing at the beach and ran toward us. I had to marvel at his strength, for I knew the pain he was in, knew exactly where I had struck him half an hour before, and knew that I felt so stiff from the encounter that I could move only laboredly.

“‘Please accept this as a keepsake,’ he muttered, and thrust a flat box into my hand. Then he waved good-bye and walked slowly toward the village.

“On board ship, when I was finally left alone in my cabin, I had occasion to look into the box. There they were, this very rope of pearls which I gave my Sarah for her wedding. When I returned to America I placed them in a safe deposit vault in Boston, and I have kept them there ever since.”

“And that’s where they’re going right after this wedding,” Sarah had exclaimed.

“Why?” her father asked.

“Because pearls mean tears, and I shall be reminded of your ghastly story every time I wear them and shall probably cry about it whenever I think of it.”

“I’m sorry, then, that I told you about them,” her father said.

