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"No, my mistress, I am sure they would not."

"But it is very late."

"Hark! There are bells."

The widow heard them, and with a wildly fluttering heart she sank into a chair.

"They have stopped in front of the house," uttered Paul, whose ears were bent.

"Go—go—open—"

Paul started. The widow heard the door opened, and she heard voices in the hall. In a moment more the inner door was opened, and she looked up. She saw a manly form—he heard the magic word—Mother—trembling upon the air. With one low cry of joy she started to her feet, and in the next moment she was clasped to the bosom of her son.

"Did I not tell you I'd bring him back to you?" cried Valdimir, rubbing his hands with joy.

"Oh, God bless you sir!" the widow murmured, gazing through her tears into the monk's face.

"So, so," returned the strange man. "The blessing of an honest soul is reward enough for one night, so I'll take myself off for the present."

"No, no," cried Ruric. "You'll remain here till morning."

But the monk could not be prevailed upon so to do. He had business to attend to, and he could not stop; and he hurried away as quickly as possible to avoid the thanks that were showered upon him.

After Valdimir was gone, Ruric sat down and related to his mother all that had occurred since that day on which he left her to go and see the count. She trembled fearfully as he related the diabolical attempts that had been made upon him; and when he had concluded, she sat for a few moments like one in a painful trance.

"And do you think," she said at length, while a cold shudder ran through her frame, "that the Duke of Tula was the cause of all this?"

"I am sure of it, my mother."

"Then you are not safe yet."

"But I shall see the Emperor."

"I have seen him, my son."

"Ah—and what said he?"

"Why—he said if we could find out who had done you harm he would punish them. Then I asked him—suppose it was a duke; and he said in that case he should have to look into the matter. Oh, I fear he would not dare to punish the powerful Olga."

"Perhaps not; and yet, my mother, I give him credit for better things. Yes," the youth continued, in a sad tone, "there is one for whom I care more than self, and who is now within the wicked duke's power. Oh, she is his beyond any power of the Emperor!"

"Not absolutely beyond his power, is she?" the mother asked.

"Why—of course Peter has the power to set aside any wardship, but 'twould not be policy for him to interfere in the domestic affairs of his powerful nobles. I feel sure that his heart would bid him interfere; but his judgment would oppose it. You have seen Rosalind?"

"Yes."

"And was she unhappy when she knew that I was missing?"

The widow had it in her mind to tell of the scene which had transpired upon the duke's coming into the maiden's presence when she was there, but she thought a second time ere she spoke; and then she concluded not to speak of it at present, for she knew 'twould only serve to give her son additional pain, without bestowing any benefit.

"By heavens!" uttered Ruric, at the end of a troubled reverie, at the same time clasping his hands vehemently together; "was ever man so surrounded by impenetrable mystery before! This monk is surely a good man. He has served me well, and I am sure he would serve me more if opportunity offered. But who is he? Have you found out anything concerning him?"

"I have not, my son."

"But is it not strange?"

"It is."

And so they conversed until their drooping lids would no longer remain apart, and then, having first rendered up their thanks to God, and asked his help for the future, they retired to their respective places of rest. Ruric had strange dreams, and for the life of him could not tell whether they were good or bad. Once he dreamed that he was a duke himself, and that he had a wife whose face he had never seen. She would not raise her veil until the ceremony was performed. Then she removed the obstruction, and Ruric started on beholding the face of Valdimir the monk! And then Valdimir seemed to say: "All this I have done for thee. Do you like it?" And Ruric dared not object because Valdimir had done so much for him.

And now, while Ruric awakes from his dreams and wonders what they meant, let us look in and see what is going on in the ducal palace.

It was early morning, and the Duke of Tula was once more in his own private apartment. He had not slept well, for he too, had had dreams, and they were troublesome ones. They hung about him even now, and they filled his mind with dark and gloomy forebodings. He paced to and fro across the apartment, sometimes

stopping and bowing his head, and then starting on again with new clouds upon his brow. Thus he walked and pondered until he was aroused by a stealthy footfall close by the door. He stopped and listened. He knew the step. 'Twas the one he had been waiting for. He moved to the door and opened it, and the humpbacked priest, Savotano, entered the apartment.

"By St. Paul, Savotano, I feared you would never come," the duke uttered, as his workman closed the door behind him.

"I would have come sooner if I could, my lord; but even now it is early morning. The sun is hardly above the city walls."

"Well—it is early, I know; but I have not slept well."

"I have not slept at all, my lord."

"No. Savotano, you look worn and weary. But you have been at work."

"Aye—I have."

"And you have come to tell me the result of that work. Does it move you so to do such work? I thought you were used to it."

The priest gazed into his master's face, but he did not speak.

"Bah!" uttered Olga contemptuously. "What is the killing of a man? But tell me—did you conceal the body so that no one will find it?"

It was some moments before Savotano spoke. His frame trembled, and his hands worked nervously together. But at length he said, in a hesitating tone:

"He is not dead, my lord."

"Not dead yet? But you promised me he should be."

"I know—but we could not do it."

"Bah! I gave ye credit for more firmness. Not kill a man? What is there so terrible in that?"

"You misunderstood me, my lord. We did all we could towards killing him, but he escaped us."

"Hold!" cried the duke, starting forward and grasping the priest by the shoulder. "You do not mean that Ruric Nevel has escaped you."

"He has, my lord."

"But not entirely! You do not mean that he has fairly gone from out your hands?"

"He has, my lord. But listen—"

"Listen, thou bungler? By the saints, what story can ye tell to make that smooth and reasonable? You had him in your power, and you should have kept him."

"But, my lord, the devil himself is working for that man. We went last night to kill the fellow, and I waited all of two hours for Totma and Viska, but the rascals did not come, and I engaged others."

"And did they prove treacherous?" cried Olga, in sudden passion.

"No, my lord—they did their best, but they were interrupted by that accursed black monk, who came backed by some dozen men."

"What! Do you mean that Valdimir came there?"

"Yes."

"And with a band of armed men?"

"Yes."

"Then, by the gods, there's treachery somewhere?"

"I know not what to think, my lord," returned Savotano, in an uneasy, perplexed tone. "The only men who are absent are Lesko Totma and Frederic Viska; and they are surely our best men."

"But you see plainly that there must have been treachery!" exclaimed the duke passionately. "Oh, how I would like to know the man! And did this monk carry off the gun-maker?"

"He did. And he captured four of our men. I escaped without being seen."

"That is fortunate—"

"I mean that the monk did not see me—nor did any of his followers. But the gun-maker saw me."

"And do you think he mistrusted you had any hand in the matter of his imprisonment?"

"I should judge so," returned the priest with a peculiar twinge of vengeance about the lips. "The villain knocked me down."

"Ha?"

"Aye—the moment he saw me."

"But do you think he knows anything about it?"

"No. I do not think he does. He can only suspect."

"Then we'll be prepared for him if your own men are to be depended upon. But leave that to me. I'll fix that matter with the Emperor. I'll see him this very day, and be sure he shall have a story that can destroy all evidence which these fellows can hatch up."

"But I must flee, my lord."

"Not yet, Savotano. I must have your help within a very short time. By the true God I swear, that the Countess Rosalind Valda shall be my wife within the present week. I'll place the seal of fact upon that matter at once. Fear not, for I know my influence over the Emperor will shield you from all harm. Why, Peter would sooner lose his right hand than lose me."

"Then most surely I will remain, my lord, for I much wish to perform that ceremony for you. But who is this black monk—this Valdimir?"

The duke started across the floor, and for some moments he continued pacing to and fro. When he stopped he brought his hands together with an energetic movement, and looking the priest sternly in the face, he said:

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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