

## RURIC NEVEL.

## A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

## CHAPTER XIII.—Continued.

And once more the mishapen priest was in the street, and the duke was alone. "Ah, my lord," muttered the pliant tool to himself, as he walked thoughtfully along, "you may be a little too confident of your own power. I have known such things in Russia."

## CHAPTER XIV.

## THE MYSTIC TRIBUNAL.

Away back of the old cathedral of Moscow, and in a narrow, dark court which was overlooked by the towers of the giant edifice, stood a curiously constructed stone building, which, though not connected bodily with the cathedral, yet seemed to belong to it. It was low and broad, with a flat, tiled roof, and without a visible window. Within one of the apartments of this building—an apartment away down in the bowels of the earth, where the light of day never came—were seated six men. The room was of fair size, and the floor, the walls, and the ceiling were of dark stone. Wooden benches were arranged about the place; and there were some other articles of furniture there too—strange contrivances they were, and fashioned after various shapes and patterns. But of that anon. The place was lighted by a large hanging lamp, which had just power enough to make the room gloomy and dismal. The six men sat about a table, on which were a book and sword; and the most prominent man there was Valdimir the Monk!

And Valdimir alone exposed his face. All the rest wore black masks, their robes being of the same melancholy hue. They sat there silent as death, Valdimir gazing down upon the table, and the other five gazing fixedly upon him. They were stout men all of them, and they bore themselves towards Valdimir as bears a servant to his acknowledged master.

"The hour is waxing late," said Valdimir, at length looking up from the table. His voice sounded in that place like the echo of a tomb. It was low and hollow, and the others started as they heard it.

"There's time yet to spare, master," replied one who sat next the monk.

"I trust we shall not be disappointed," said Valdimir, at the expiration of a few moments more.

To this no answer was returned. At length there came a dull echo from overhead, and the six drillers started up to listen. The sound grew louder, and soon it sent down into that dismal chamber the notes of coming footsteps. In a few moments more the heavy iron door creaked upon its hinges, and three men entered, and soon behind them came three more. Those who came in advance were two of them leading the third as a prisoner. And so it was with those behind. The iron door creaked again, and when the heavy bolts had been shoved into their sockets, the two prisoners were led forward.

"Master," spoke one of the new-comers, "we have brought the prisoners—two of them—as you commanded."

"It is well," said Valdimir. "Let them be brought before us!"

As the two men are brought where the light can strike upon their faces we see the two guides who conducted Ruric Nevel to his place of confinement. One of them was he who met Ruric in the street, and the other is the one who guided him into the old bath-house with the lantern in his hand. They shuddered fearfully as they gazed around upon the dismal scene, and their looks plainly showed that they knew not why they had been brought thither.

"Lesko Totma!" pronounced Valdimir. The first of the prisoners—he who had met Ruric in the street—started as he heard that name, and tried to speak.

"Are you the man?" asked the monk, looking into his face.

"Yes, holy father," the wretch tremblingly replied.

"Then stand you here in front of me."

The fellow was moved up in front of the table, and surprise and fear seemed to be struggling for the mastery over him, for he recognized now the strange monk about whom he had probably heard so much.

"Lesko Totma," said Valdimir, lowly and slowly, "you have been seen much in the company of a humpbacked priest named Savotano. You know such a priest do you not?"

The man hesitated. He gazed furtively about him, and trembled more than before.

"Answer me!"

"Yes, sir, I know him."

"And now, sir, be sure that you answer me directly and truly. Do you know a young gun-maker, named Ruric Nevel?"

The fellow started with a perceptible quake as this question was asked, but he seemed to have been prepared for it, for his answer was direct.

"No, sir; I do not."

"Ha—beware! Think well before you speak."

"If you mean the man who fought the duel with the Count Damonoff, then I have heard of him; but I do not know that I ever saw him."

"Then you are sure of this?"

"Of course I am."

"Frederic Viska!"

The second prisoner now came forward. He was a few years younger than his companion, though somewhat larger, and evidently more bold. Totma was conducted out of the apartment as Viska came forward.

"You, too, have been in the company of this priest, Savotano, have you not?" the monk asked.

"I know him," the fellow replied, with a slight touch of defiance in his tone. He had not surely looked about him to see those strange contrivances by which he was surrounded, or he would not have ventured such a tone.

"And you have been some in his company?"

"Perhaps so."

"Very well. And now do you not also know Ruric Nevel?"

"I have seen him, too, sir."

"And now—can you tell me where he is at this present time?"

"No," was the answer, short and quick.

"Beware! If you have any regard for your own welfare you will answer me truly. Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I tell you I know nothing about him—nothing at all."

"And of this you are sure?"

"Who are you that assume to question me thus? I know you not."

Viska spoke this in a tone of virtuous indignation, probably thinking that that turn might serve him.

"We will let you into the secret by and by," the monk returned, with a peculiar shake of the head. "But I will ask you once more: Do you know where Nevel is?"

"No!"

"You need not speak quite so loud. We hear easily."

"Then don't ask me impertinent questions," retorted the prisoner.

Valdimir started half-way up, and his fists were clenched; but the quick flush passed from his face, and he sat back again.

"Look ye," he said, as soon as he was sure his anger would not manifest itself, "were I not sure that you know what I ask I would not question you thus. And now, once more, I ask you: Will you give me some clue to the whereabouts of Ruric Nevel?"

"I'll answer you once more. I know nothing about him. You must not think that this dark place, and you men all dressed in black, can fright me into telling a lie as it might a child."

"At this point Valdimir turned to one of his men—one of those who helped bring the prisoners in—and said:

"You know this to be the man?"

"Yes, my master."

"And you have seen him in private confab with the humpbacked priest?"

"I have."

"And the other things you told me are true?"

"They are, master."

"Then let down those interpreters."

At this command two of the attendants moved to the back side of the room, where they unhooked a stout chain from the wall and as they allowed it to slide through their hands a curious piece of machinery descended directly in front of the table. It consisted of a stout bar of iron, which was suspended midway, upon the chain, and there rested parallel with the ceiling. Upon each end of this bar were straps of iron, armed with springs and screws. At a motion from the monk the prisoner was led back till he stood directly beneath the bar, and then his arms were seized and raised up. He struggled some and cursed more, but he was soon overcome. The iron bands were passed around his wrists, and connected with these were two small cups which were slipped over the thumbs. After these had been firmly secured the chain was tightened, and the fellow's hands were raised far above his head. There were two results produced by tightening the chain. It not only tended to draw the thumbs back upon the wrists but it also twisted the thumb, the two cups being armed with file-like teeth within, and closing tightly upon the flesh.

"Now, sir," spoke Valdimir, lowly and deeply, "I am going to ask these questions again, and you will do well to answer them truly. Will you tell me where Ruric Nevel is?"

"I don't know."

"Will you tell me where you saw him last?"

"I haven't seen him since he fought the duel with Damonoff."

"Beware!"

"I have not."

"Mark me; I have had you watched, and I know that you have seen Nevel within these three days. This I know, so I have no hesitation in the course I am about to pursue. Once more—Where is Ruric Nevel?"

The man hesitated now; but his answer was still the same. He would not tell.

Valdimir made a motion to the two men who stood by the wall, and they gave a pull upon the chain.

"Oh—God!" gasped the prisoner, as the painful twist and wrench came upon his thumbs.

"Will you answer?"

"How can I? How can I?"

"By speaking what you know."

"I know nothing."

Another signal was made to the men at the chain, and they pulled again. Another groan from the prisoner, but no other response.

Another signal—and another pull.

"Mercy!" shrieked the poor wretch, quivering with pain.

"Will you answer?"

"I don't know."

"Then we must try again."

"No, no,—oh, God, no more!"

"But you must answer."

"I don't know."

"Then you must have forgotten, and such treacherous memories need starting up."

As Valdimir thus spoke he waved his hand again.

"Oh! God have mercy! Oh—o—o! Save me! Save me!"

"Save yourself."

The wretch was in torment now without ceasing. Nearly the whole of his weight bore upon his wrists and thumbs, and the latter were drawn over almost to the wrist. But he would not answer. He had a deeper fear than this. He feared to break the horrid oaths by which he was bound to the scheming priest.

One more pull upon the chain and the man's feet were clear of the floor. His whole weight now bore upon his thumbs, and he groaned in the agony of torture. He bore it a few moments, but his coward soul could bear no more.

"Oh, God! Down! down! Let me down!"

"But answer. Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I—I—don't—"

"Hill, thou false-hearted villain!" shouted Valdimir, in a voice of thunder.

"This is the last of this torture; but when we take you from here we can put you into a state compared with which the pain you now experience is real joy! Each particular limb shall be wrenched all out of shape, and your very eyes shall start out like—"

"Down! down! Oh, great God, down!"

"Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I'll tell you—I'll tell you if you spare me!"

"Tell me first!"

There was a moment more of hesitation—one single moment—and then the miserable wretch gave up.

"He's in the old bath-house."

"Ha! Where?"

"In the old bath near the river—on the Tula pass—in one of the vaults!"

"Very well. Let him down."

The chain was slacked up, and Frederic Viska was once more upon his feet. He trembled yet, for there was pain in his arms.

"Now carry him out," ordered Valdimir, "and bring the other one in."

In a few moments more Lesko Totma was before the strange tribunal. He trembled fearfully, for he had been where he could hear his companion's groans without hearing what he said.

"Lesko Totma," spoke the monk, in a low, deep tone, "we have given you time for thought, and mayhap you have your memory brightened by this time. Now, where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I don't know."

"Ah—you still forget, eh?"

"I never knew."

"A most strange forgetfulness, I must confess. Let the interpreters be adjusted!"

"Oh—mercy! Don't murder me!"

But no notice was taken of his cries. The straps and conical cups were adjusted and the chain drawn tight. At the first turn of the self-acting screw the fellow shrieked. It was not so much with present pain as with the fear of what was to come. The very presage of the place, so dark and dismal, had more effect upon his mind than it had upon his companion.

At a second pull of the chain he groaned and begged for mercy. He had heard of this dark place, and he fancied that men who came there seldom went away alive.

"Hark ye, base wretch," the monk said, "if you do not tell me where the young gun-maker is, I'll have you torn limb from limb! Another pull, there!"

As the wrench came again the villain fairly shouted with pain.

"Oh, let me go! Let me go! I'll tell all!"

"Then tell. You leave not this place alive until you have told!"

"He is—oh, God! He is—in the old bath!"

"Where?"

"The duke's bath—on the Pass of Tula!"

"Whereabouts there?"

"In the lowest, furthest vault. Oh, spare!"

Valdimir waved his hand, and the quaking wretch was freed from his torture.

"Now, conduct them both to the dungeons, and lock them up. They must not run at large for the present. Let them be secure."

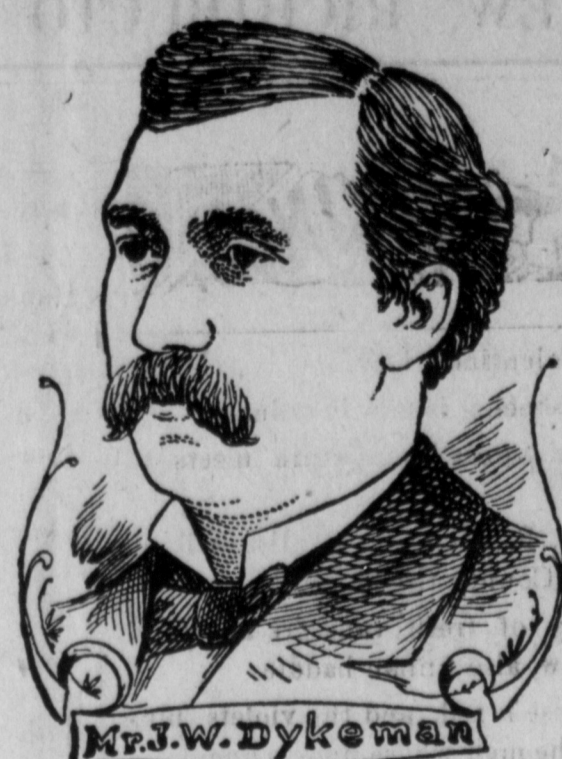
"No, no," cried Viska, who had been brought back, "you were to let me go if I told you."

"Not free, sir, said Valdimir.

"But you have no right to hold me thus. I am nearly dead with pain now where you have torn my hands in pieces. By the—"

"Silence, dog! My authority here is my power. My right is my might. I have you, and I will keep you. Were I to let you go I might not have the power to catch you again, as legal officers could. Lead them off, and then we'll turn our attention to the Duke's Bath!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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