

is little, and speaks not, mark you, of any sentiment deeper than the mere admiration of manly qualities."

"That shall be a matter between her and myself, my friend," said the boyar. "Think not I shall permit interference in my affairs."

"So long as no man takes advantage of my kinswoman," said I, "there shall be no interference from me; but let her be coerced by man or devil, even to the subverting of the least of her desires, and that devil or that man shall be called to account at my sword's point."

"So be it," said Krapatkin. "These are words that a man may understand!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE Tsar Ivan maintained in his employ a band of men whom he named Oprichinniki, or "the privileged." These fellows were nicknamed sweepers, their coat of arms being a broom and their duties to sweep away his enemies. These men were usually employed upon the dirty work of his Grace; when there was a boyar to be removed or an offender's family to be destroyed these rascals were appointed to the work, and unless the condemned were wealthy enough to pay for their escape and disappearance from the Cæsar's sight and memory they were soon ended. Thieves and rascals were these men, traitors to their employer, pitiless towards their victims, the very scum and outcasts of Moscow's population. Half a dozen of these fellows were, it appears, sent on the morning following my escape in order to examine me in my cell anent the crime which I had committed—namely, the slaying of one of his Grace's hounds in despite of his Grace's own and special warning to do the brutes no injury.

Finding me flown and the Strelitz who should have guarded my locked door dead and robbed of his keys, the Oprichinniki returned to the Cæsar, full of their startling news.

Who would have thought—not I indeed for one—that the escape of so humble and insignificant a personage as myself should have so roused the rage of a great Cæsar? Yet I have been told that rarely has his Grace been seen in so tiger-like a mood as when his “sweepers” brought him the news—namely, that my prison was empty and I flown.

The unfortunate man who spoke for the rest was struck dead on the spot, the rest informed that until they should have discovered and punished with death the traitor who had brought about my flight their lives, every one of them, were in the balance.

Then the Tsar summoned his boyars, all that were in Moscow, to his great council chamber and there harangued them. If, within twenty-four hours, the guilty persons were not discovered and brought before him to answer for the crime of conspiring to release a prisoner of the Tsar and in the Tsar’s own house, each boyar should be fined in the sum of a thousand roubles, to be paid forthwith into the Cæsar’s

treasury. At this there fell a silence upon the assembly, for many of the boyars were poor enough and possessed not a quarter of the sum now demanded of them, and these knew well that if they paid not the fine with promptness, their goods would soon be forfeit, their serf-retainers taken from them, and themselves left in Heaven knows what plight at the mercy of his Grace’s “sweepers,” who would spare neither threat nor ill-usage to screw from their victims a little more for their own pouches.

Some boyar, more bold than the rest, cried out: “Tsar, what have the boyars done? This is some treacherous hound of a Strelitz who has taken money from the prisoner, murdered his companion, and released the criminal.”

“Ay, ay! so it is!” one or two voices replied.

“He who accuses shall be himself accused,” cried Ivan. “Take the boyar who spoke, Oprichinniki—it is Boris Vyazemsky—lead him to the knout-room; be sure that he tells all he knows.”

“I know nothing, Tsar,” protested Vyazemsky, but the sweepers had forced him from the chamber before he could say more than this.

A scornful laugh from the midst of a group of boyars suddenly startled all present. “The

Cæsar would enrich himself this day from our pockets, boyars," said a voice aloud; "but he shall be disappointed; not a kopek shall you pay, my brothers; if the Tsar is poor, poor he must remain."

The Tsar's face became convulsed with rage, and his hand played with the dubina it held, as though longing to strike. His keen eyes peered and sought among the boyars; his tongue damped his lips more than once before they would speak.

"Stand forth, Krapatkin," he cried hoarsely, finding his voice at last. "I would to God the Siberian khans had cut thee in pieces. Must thou for ever come to my house to beard me before my boyars?"

"I speak only truth, Ivan Vassilitch; thou shalt not fill thy coffers this day; thou must lie down at night as poor as morning found thee!"

Krapatkin laughed again. The boyars round him shuddered, for there was not one that would have stood surety for the life of this rash fellow, that the Tsar would suffer him to live for another instant.

Krapatkin stood forth boldly and gave no sign of timidity. The two fierce men faced one another, both standing, the Tsar on the

step of his great chair, Krapatkin before him and rather beneath him.

There was silence, while all present waited to see the Cæsar's deadly staff rise and fall, but though his fingers moved nervously upon the shaft, the weapon remained unraised.

"Speak," said Ivan; "condemn thyself; I might have known it would be no other."

"Yes, it was I that released the man," said Krapatkin, eye to eye with the Tsar, watching and ready, yet showing no fear.

"Why? there must be reasons for everything, even for thy treachery and foolishness."

"Is it treachery to save the Cæsar from a crime he would afterwards regret?" laughed Krapatkin. "This man is a guest at thy Court, and the kinsman of a great foreign Queen."

"Thou liest," said Ivan; "that is not thy reason. Speak quickly."

"This man preserved my life—the life of one of the Tsar's most faithful servants," continued Krapatkin, always with that mocking tone of his which might well aggravate a more peaceful man than Ivan. "Has the Tsar no more gratitude for one who has done him so great a service than to imprison and torture him? Is my life, then, of so little value to thee, Tsar, that——"

The Tsar interrupted with a thud of his great staff upon the floor.

"Enough of ribaldry; come, thy reason for this act of disobedience and contempt? I think thou darest not speak truth, Krapatkin."

"Will the Tsar have the truth?" the boyar laughed; "then he shall have it in full. This Englishman is kinsman to one who shall not be made to weep by Tsar or devil while Krapatkin breathes God's air."

"You lie, she does not weep," muttered the Tsar, his blazing eyes dilating with new fury; those who saw knew well that his self-control was at an end. "Beware, Krapatkin!" someone whispered.

But Krapatkin was in his most reckless mood, and cared no more for the rage of Cæsar than he would have listened at such a moment to the very thunders of Jove.

"The tyranny of the Tsar may still draw tears where all his favours have drawn no love," said the boyar, but almost before the words were free of his lips the heavy dubina had been raised and thrust.

Krapatkin was ready, and the blow, aimed at his chest, was eluded, only scratching his left shoulder but inflicting no wound. Quick as

thought the great boyar had wrenched the weapon from the Cæsar's hands, and stood an instant as though uncertain whether he would return the blow to the Tsar's bosom.

Every boyar held his breath; I doubt not that many hoped, if they dared, that Krapatkin would strike, for, indeed, the Cæsar had many deadly enemies present, to all of whom he had given good cause for their enmity.

But Krapatkin did not strike.

In an instant his mind was made up. Silently he took the stout staff, broke it in two pieces with his great hands, staring eye to eye with the Tsar the while, and cast it aside.

"Beware, Tsar!" he muttered hoarsely, "lest the day come when thou art as easily destroyed as I have now broken thy dubina. My blood is as red as thine."

"Boyars," cried the furious Tsar, "would you see the Cæsar offended and threatened by this traitor? Stand ye idle, fools? Will none take the Cæsar's side?"

At this half a dozen boyars, anxious to win the present favour of the Tsar, sprang upon Krapatkin, and, after a struggle, overpowered him, six men to one. They led him away laughing and calling the Tsar by shameful names.

Then the Tsar gazed slowly round upon the boyars, and having summoned his Oprichinniki bade the fellows take the names of all present excepting those six who had fallen upon Krapatkin.

"These curs who dared not fight for their master," he said, "shall be made to yelp. Let each boyar pay ten score of roubles, Oprichinniki, and if they find not the gold, ye shall obtain the value the best way ye can."

Then the Tsar stalked from the audience chamber, leaving a roomful of pale-faced boyars, who bargained and argued with the sweepers, cursed, wept, entreated, promised, threatened, and in the end paid, every man his fine.

"Better this than to lie where Krapatkin lies!" they told one another.

"He will feed the dogs in an hour!" said a pale boyar; "but he broke the Cæsar's dubina and defied the devil to his face, and to have seen that sight I am ready to pay my fine, ay, and glad of it!"

"For that which we have seen this day," said another, "I shall pray daily for Krapatkin's soul, though it cost me two fat candles a week at St. Cyril's ikon."

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHEN first I came forth from prison, released by Krapatkin, who had—though I knew it not—now taken my place in the same cell, I was much put to it to determine where to hide myself; for if the Tsar should consider my poor self worthy the trouble of a search, he would certainly have me sought for, and the end would be worse than the beginning.

To Muirhead's quarters, wherein I had had hospitable accommodation, I could not of course return; this would be to imperil my friend as well as myself, and to make him but a poor return for his kindness.

I could indeed leave Moscow altogether for a while, and hide myself in some village within a league or two of the city, or even in the forest if matters came to the worst, though that would be a most undesirable matter indeed, for it was now winter, which in Muscovy is a period of great cold and severity.

In the end I decided that I would go to my