

CHAPTER XXVII.

"It is true," Krapatkin repeated, "I thought Shadwell is at large and will have heard of my plight, may-be he will desire to return tit for tat and release me as I released him; well, I am grateful!"

"It is a good thing I had a knife," I laughed, "for they have bound thee as though thou wert possessed of a bull's strength!"

"As for that I am no lambkin," he replied; "there are four at least of them that limp since the binding began, one, I think, has limped into the next world; we had a good fight. Tell me quickly, before these fellows return, are the dog-keepers on our side? Nay, they must surely be so or I should have been cast into the pit immediately without the drinking interval, which, I guess, is thy scheme?"

"They are our men, both; I have promised them both, on thy behalf, a good gratuity."

"Lord, they shall be welcome to it; I shall have then but two to settle with."

"What, must thou fight again?" I laughed. "Go, rather, in peace, before the men return."

"Nay, my friend, why, how meanly thou must think of me! To leave two such rascals at large in this over-villained world when they may easily be despatched to another! I deal not so meanly by my fellow-men. Get thee back to the ice-blocks in case either fellow, having seen thee, should afterwards escape; I will wager my head to a silver coin that he will not, but it is useless to run risks which go towards no good end."

"Stay," Krapatkin added, "I will lie down, and place thou the sledge over me as it lay when the fellow threw it down with me, I have a mind to startle my friend before he dies."

I agreed to do as Krapatkin desired, the more gladly because I was never one to love the needless shedding of blood, and I cherished a secret hope that while my grim boyar struggled to his feet from under the hand-sledge his victims might escape into the darkness and go free; for, after all, these men were but instruments of a higher will, brutal agents of a more brutal power. By the time Krapatkin lay once more beneath his overturned sledge I heard the footsteps and the raised voices of the men;

a glint of lantern light fell upon the snow without, and the dogs within their kennel lifted up their voices in a chorus of hungry, piteous baying.

Hurriedly I lowered myself into my icy hiding-place, and that none too soon, for I was scarcely in when the men kicked the door of the cellar open and entered. I heard Kiril utter an exclamation; of course he had not expected to see the boyar still lying as he had been left. He afterwards explained to me that he supposed I must have fallen asleep before the victim was brought and had thus allowed my own plot to fall to the ground.

"What ails thee, man?" asked one of the soldiers; his voice betrayed that he had dealt freely with Kiril's spirit-flask. "Art thou sorry for this fellow's fate? Why, look you, think of it thus: he is a boyar, second to the Tsar; both are devils and oppressors of honest men."

Kiril laughed very loud, doubtless to awaken me from my sleep, good man!

"Shall we unbind him?" he said, "if he is the devil-man you say, it will be grand to see him fight with the dogs!"

"Unbind him? You speak like a fool, my friend! Let this fellow have but a little finger

free and he will contrive to throttle you with it. He is, as I say, like a wild beast for strength and ferocity. We will throw him in, sledge and all. You should have seen him struggle when we bound him, twelve of us and all on the top of him, mark you, and yet we barely had our will of him; now, you devil-man," he continued, "your time has come." He thrust his toe under the sledge and gripped the rim in his hands. "Help to turn him over, brothers, he's as heavy as a bull!"

Then I heard a great scuffle, the opening of a door, the quick rush of feet upon the snow without, groans, exclamations, the thud of falling bodies, and all to the accompaniment of such an uproar from the dogs as though they were aware that even now they were being cheated of a hideous feast. A minute later came Krapatkin's voice:—

"Come forth, my friend," he said aloud, "the fight is over, and well over."

I heard afterwards from Kiril, who stayed to see it while Stepan fled in ungovernable terror, that when Krapatkin rose suddenly from the tangle of cut cords that lay about him and over the sledge, the soldiers dropped back as though they had been struck by the falling sickness.

Krapatkin threw himself instantly upon him who was nearer the door, and having taken the rascal's sword plunged it into the body of the wretched man, and withdrawing the weapon thrust it heart deep into the carcase of the second fellow, who knelt and gasped by the overturned sledge. Kiril's foot was at the very door in case the boyar should, being blood hot, forget that here was a friend and not a third enemy; but Krapatkin after a glance at him threw his sword upon the ground and hailed me, as afore mentioned. The place reeked of blood like a charnel-house as I came up from my sanctuary, and Kiril was already dragging the bodies forth.

"It was a good play," said Krapatkin; "thou shouldst have seen the faces of the fellows, Shadwell, when the fiend arose, clad in my poor body, to confront them. Assuredly they thought it was the devil himself, for they said so, first one and then the other."

"Bah!" I said, "let us go forth into the air, I stifle here."

"Let the dogs have this trash, friend," said Krapatkin; "hark how they cry for food."

"Not so, Kiril," I cried angrily, "see that a priest buries them," and the boyar, after a fierce

glance at me, for at all times he bore ill to be crossed, added: "Well, have thy will!"

Then we two retired to Kiril's hut, for Krapatkin would drink and eat before we went, for he had well-nigh starved all day. Here we found in plenty black bread and the white Muscovish spirit distilled from grain, and as he ate and drank he conversed with me, showing but little of the grace and softness of gratitude for the boon of life and freedom which I had conferred upon him, but rather the jealousy of the rival lover; for it appeared that his thoughts even now dwelt upon his desire to secure my kinswoman for his bride and to carry her quickly away from Moscow to his country seat.

"Moscow is not safe to-day," said he; "I have never before seen the Tsar so given over to his passions, though, Heaven knows, I have confronted him in all moods. My escape now will set the finishing touch to his madness. You shall see that it will be so. There will be a hundred new names to add to his list of victims, for whose souls—having destroyed their bodies—he will pray in the churches. I will see that this Amy Romalyn's is not one of them."

"See thy own is not even yet included in the list," said I. "I think he will not touch Amy, but he will pursue thee as the devil strives for the soul of a man."

"He shall not touch Amy because I shall remove her into safety," said the boyar, and at these words I flashed out.

"See now, Krapatkin," cried I. "Doubtless thou hast thought me up to this time a mild man, and in truth I am not by nature a quarrelsome one. Yet if thou do aught with Amy, against her will, using either violence or any treatment such as were unbecoming to her honour and innocence, I will follow thee until I have found thee, even to the ends of the earth, and having found thee I will teach thee that in me at least there exists one who is able to call even a Krapatkin to account."

"It may very well be," replied the boyar, retaining his coolness, "that we shall yet come to loggerheads over this wench. I am not to be frightened by threats, my friend. Doubtless there would be a fine fight, for though thou hast reach I have the strength of an ox and am no novice with the rapier. The rest may be left. She is not, I think, averse to me. There will be no occasion for such matters as you fear

—violence and so forth. I will persuade her to leave Moscow, if persuaded she will be, which I dare to expect."

"And if she refuse?"

"If she refuse, we both remain in Moscow, to be hunted by the Tsar. It would not be easy to remove a woman from the terem by force; moreover, in these matters I have never found persuasion fail."

"Well," said I, "go thy own way, boyar, but remember that I shall hold thee to account. In the end, thou mayest find I am to be reckoned with."

"With all my heart, so be it, though, be sure, the thought of thee shall not in any case deter me by an inch from my desires, if they happen to fall foul of thy own. Is thy say said? If so, I will depart."

Later in the day, as I afterwards learned, this bold boyar actually visited the Tsar's palace, and the Tsar refusing to see him, as was indeed to be expected, sent him an insolent message. Thence he went to the terem in order to persuade Amy, if he could, to escape with him to his estate at Slatky Ozer, twenty leagues distant from Moscow. This suggestion Amy, to his displeasure, refused—not without anger, I would

wager—neither could he induce her by any word or promise to listen to his offers of protection.

And from the terem the unfortunate man went straight to his sudden doom; for in the great arched gateway of the Kremlin, as he passed through it, he was ambushed, by the Tsar's orders, by a dozen of the Oprichinniki and run through the body before he knew that he was attacked. So died one who was worthy of a better fate than to have lived in such a land and under such a Tsar; a great boyar and a brave man, the bravest of men indeed and the most reckless, and who, but for the excessive independence and boldness of his nature, might have lived to be a Cæsar a dozen years later when a less worthy boyar than he—Boris Godunof—stepped into the place vacated by the last scion of the effete dynasty of Rurik, which then ended in the person of Ivan's unmanly son Feodor and the child Dmitry.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE news of Krapatkin's death reached the terem early on the following day. It came as a shock to Amy, who went mournfully enough, for she had liked and admired this boyar chiefly for his fearless bearing towards the fierce Tsar, his master, though of love for him she had none. As for the rest of the women, her companions, they took but small interest in the tragedy, since it did not affect themselves, none of them being among the admired of the great boyar.

Maria Nagoy affected much pity for her rival. "Amy Romalyn is unlucky in her lovers," she said; "there is the long one, who is under a cloud and likely to follow Krapatkin into deeper gloom; then this great dead boyar himself; and lastly the Tsar, who, I think, will have none of her."

"That is yet to be seen," said Olga Shishkin. "Shall I tell thee what I think of this matter, Maria?"

"Oh, if thou wilt, speak; let those listen who