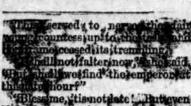
SYLVANUS COBB, JR.



"Blessime, tis not lete ... lintingen if weld on the see him tonight we can do it in the morning. A Wolshall find plenty in the imperial palace who will shelter us till then!"

The girls were now ready, and sall that remained was to start on their strange, mission. With noiseless stepsethey left the apartment where they had dressed and proceeded alongithe corridor to the great staircase. Zenobie knew there would be less danger there than to go down the other way among the servants. Having descended these stairs, they came to the great hall which opened one way into the saloons. They took the former course and were soon in the court. The only trouble now was in passing the porter's lodge at the gate, for they knew the great gate was not open, and to gain the street they must pass through the room where the porter always staid. Zenobie went ahead and looked in. The porter sat by the fire

playing with his dog.
"My mistress," whispered the girl
as she came back, "old John is in the lodge, and we need have no fear. He is a simple, good natured fellow, and I am sure I can get by him. Do you go in advance; cover up your face; don't look at him, and be sure you don't tremble. Leave it all to me. Remember, now, you have"-

"Fear not, Zenobie. Go on." So on they went, and when they reached the lodge Rosalind went in first and stood by the wicket, while Zenobie followed and opened the door that looked into the porter's

"Good John," she uttered in anxious tones, "come and open the wicket for me, quick. My good mistress is very ill, and Tilda and I are going for the doctor. Come; be quick." "But why don't some of the men go?" asked John as he started up

and forced his dog back. "Because 'twould take them longer to do the errand than 'twill us. But don't detain us. We shan't be

long."
The honest porter had orders not to allow the countess to pass out, but he thought not of that now. He had known the gentle girl from a child, and so well did he love her that he might not have stopped her even had he known she was then waiting to pass out. At all events, he could not refuse the present request, so he came out and opened the wicket without further ques-

tion, and the girls passed through.
"Now, now," uttered Zenobic in
nervous haste, "we are clear of the palace. Here is the street. Our

walk is not long." Rosalind answered not; but, drawing her robe more closely about her to keep out the cold, biting wind, she hastened along by the side of peror, but that is easily managed." her companion. Hope was now alive within her. She turned one glance behind her, and she could see the light which she had left burning in her chamber. It seemed at that moment to be the flery eye of a demon gazing after her, and instinctively she quickened her pace.

Twice during the day did the Duke of Tula call at the imperial palace without being able to find the emperor, but in the evening he was more fortunate. The emperor was in, and Olga was admitted at once

to his presence.

"Well, my lord duke," said Peter as Olga approached, "what business calls you from home at this hour?" "Business of importance, sire-

business of less moment to me than to the state."

"Ah! Proceed." Only two attendants were with the emperor, one of whom was Dewhere only privileged ones were ever

allowed to come. "Sire," commenced the duke, "you remember the gunmaker who was before you not long since?"

"Ah, yes the one who atook my away all the grief of her opened Greek's sword from him?" "The same, sire. Have you heard

from him since?" "By my soul, Olga, I had well nigh forgotten the fellow. Yes, yes; I remember him well now. He was a right stout knave."

"Aye, and a dangerous one, too, sire—a dangerous man," said the duke, with a dubious shake of his

"Ah! What has he done?" "Why, he has been engaged in various robberies to my certain knowledge, and only a few evenings since he knocked down one off our holy priests and robbed him of all he had. He is at the head of a numerous band of desperadoes."
"Is it possible?"

"I know it, sire." "By St. Paul, I should not have believed this!"

"Nor would I have believed it, sire, had I not received proofs not to be questioned. I, as is my duty, have long been anxious to ferret out this gang of robbers""But I never heard of them, Ol-

ga," interrupted Peter.

"Ah, sire, because I gave direct did not at first know me. Once in tion that you should not be troubled awhile I made my page assume the with the affair. But I have them garb and be seen in it about the now. It is only fast evening that I city, and thus all thought of susget a clew upon them. We found peeting me was cut off. I have been them in an oid building near the at the work, Olga, and I have found river here in the Kremlin, and this out all I sought. It was mere accisame Ruric Nevel was with them. dent that first throw me in the way But he made his escape."

"I do remember me now that the by accident, too, that I overheard fellow had a bold bearing and a the Count Damonoff and his confearless look," said the emperor half panion discussing the subject of to himself, "and if such a man turns their mission to the gunmaker's

hend the fellow at once."

dear duke."

several hiding places." "Well, then you might do the

work with more advantage." and disposed of without further trouble to you, sire."

"No, no. I wish to see him," returned the emperor. "I will give They have made a full confession, you the necessary order, and you and I now know all your villainies. may bring him here."

Peter then turned to his secretary and bade him fill an order for Ruric Nevel's arrest. The stout master at arms looked on with a trouthe business at all, and the expression of his countenance would seem to indicate that he did not believe all that the duke had said.

However, the order was soon made out and in the duke's posses

"Remember," said Peter, "you will bring him before me."

"You shall be obeyed, sire." If the emperor did not notice the strange, dark look of the duke as he turned away, the Greek did, and he fancied, too, that he knew what it meant. But he said nothing

Olga bowed low as he clutched the order, and, having once more promimperial presence. As he passed out through the wide court he walked classly and thoughtfully and with his head bowed. But soon be started up, his hands came together with an emphatic movement, and he moved on more quickly. He had gained the street and approached a small court within which stood a thouse of entertainment, where he stopped. In a few moments more a manicame out from the inn, and as soon as he had satisfied himself that theenewcomer was the duke he spoke.

"Olga, is't you?"
"Yes."

It needed but assingle glance in the dim starlight to recognize the form of the humplacked priest. He walked quickly to where the duke stood, and the two moved off together.

"Now what luck?" Savotano asked as the gained the street conce more.

"Good—as good as I could even hope," returned the duke. "I have the power for arresting the gunmaker.

"And for executing him?" "It amounts to the same. I am ordered to bring him before the em-

Here the duke, stopped and gazed about him, and then, bending his head so that no word could possibly pass beyond his companion's ears, he continued:

"You can call upon three of your best men, and I can furnish two from among my own servants. Early in the morning, by the time the sun is up, they must be at the gunmaker's dwelling. They must make him angry—of course he will resist—and then kill him. It is very simple—very. They can easily dispatch him thus, and then we have only to tell thus, and then we have only to tell the emperor that he resisted the imand bade them secure the duke and

the foul priest. Rosalind Valdai gazed upon the transformed man until the strange truth worked its way to her struggling mind, and then she turned once more to Ruric. She gazed up into his face, and she saw the holy smile which rested there. The joymetrius the Greek, and the place of | ful truth came to her now, and, with audience was in one of the private, one long, low cry of frantic hope apartments near the bedchamber, and bliss, she sank upon her noble lover's bosom. She could not speak. She could only cling closely and more close to her loved protector, and, with her head pillowed close by the heart that beat for her, she wept

> soul. "Olga," spoke the emperor after the nobleman had been firmly bound, "your race of iniquity is

"No, no, sire!" the duke cried in humble, supplicating tones. "Say not so! In this single thing I may have been wrong, but let my mad, consuming love be some palliation for my offense. Oh, you will not crush me with public shame for this! You will not cast from you

one who loves you well!" "Oh, miserable man," uttered Peter, with a look of utter contempt upon the base wretch, "add not per-jury to your already accumulated crimes! Hark ye, some months since I knew there was conspiracy in my capital, and I'knew there was much of evil, too, which was never reported to me. I resolved to ferret it out, and to that end I meant to mingle among my people without their knowing me. So I had that robe made and so stuffed and wadded that I could even hide my chin in the seeming fat. I assumed the garb, and my own master at arms

of this young gunmaker, and it was villain there must be danger in it." shop. Of course I followed that "Aye, sire, you speak truly, and scheme up, and I should have now, with your order, I can appresent the shop of course I followed that

from your grasp ere this had I not "I can send and have it done, my been desirous of arriving at another point first. Perhaps you know that "But your officers may not find the Princess Sophia and the Minishim. I know where he is and can ter Gallitzin have planned a grand have him taken at once. He has overturn of my throne? Ah! You tremble! And now, my noble duke," the emperor continued in a deeper tone, "I have learned of your own "Aye, and I can have him tried guilt in that affair. Oh, you do love me, do you? But I know you now. Two of your tools are in my hands. They are named Totma and Viska.

I know what you have planned against this noble countess and against her noble lover. I know what you planned against the Count Damonoff, and I know, too, what bled countenance, and his glances you have planned against your emtoward the duke were anything but peror. Not a word, sir! You are loving. He did not seem to relish the Duke of Tula no more. A more worthy man wears the ducal coronet from this hour. Ruric Nevel shall assume the station you have disgraced, and I know he will ennoble it once more."

As Peter ceased speaking he way ed his hand to his officers, and they bore the prisoners from the room. The priest said not a word, but Olga cursed loudly and bitterly.

When the dark villains had gone, Peter stepped forward and took Rosalind's hand. There was a tear in his eye, and his nether lip trembled.

"Fair cousin," he said in a low, soft tone, "I could not promise thee that thou shouldst not wed with the Duke of Tula, for I had even then ised obedience, he hurried from the planned that you should do that thing. But it will not be very hard, will it?"

The countess gazed up, and a murmur of thanks was upon her lips, but the gushing flood started forth anew, and she could only look the joyful blessings she could not speak. Peter imprinted a kiss upon her pure brow and then gave her hand to Rurie, and as he did so he said, with a warm smile:

"You must be her guardian hereafter, and should you tire of the duty your emperor will be ever ready to grant her the asylum she needs.

A week had passed away from the time of the strange scene just recorded. The former duke, Olga, had been convicted of treason and was now on his way to the eternal wilds of Siberia. But let me say here he never reached the land of his banishment. His proud heart broke on the road, and he died, unknown and uncared for, in a peasant's cot among the rugged mountains of Uralia. He had begged of the officer who guided him not to tell his station, and the peasants supposed they were burying a com-mon traveler when they laid away the mortal remains of Olga in the cold grave they had prepared.

Savotano, the humpbacked priest, was executed as a common murderer, while his companions in crime were punished as their various dogrees of guilt demanded.

And now comes the closing scene. Within the largest apartment of the ducal palace were assembled a brilliant company, and the emperor himself was master of the ceremo-

Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker of Moscow, knelt at the emperor's feet, and Peter drew his sword and laid the glittering blade upon Ruric's shoulders, and as he did so he said:

"Arise, Sir Rurie, duke of Tula, and receive thy just titles and bonded instruments!

The youth arose, pale and trembling with the strange excitement of the moment, and then the emperor handed him a broad parchment roll, with its heavy seals and vignette bearing the arms of the dukedom.

"Now," cried Peter, whose brow was flushed with the joy he himself was making, "let the rest of the work go on. Come, holy father, we need your help to perform the rest of the ceremony."
Ruric was pale no longer. As he

felt the warm hand of Rosalind trembling within his own the rich blood mounted to his brow and temples, and in his dark eyes the strange love light danced like reflected sunbeams.

The word was spoken—the bond of union was made and, after all, Rosalind Valdai had become Duchess of Tula. The widowed mother was the first to bless them, and the emperor came next. Then came Paul and Zenobie, hand in hand.

"Aha!" spoke the happy duchess as she caught the new light of Zenobie's eye and then turned to the glowing face of Paul. "You are playing at the game of love." "You will not object," whispered the fatr girl, hiding her face upon

the bosom of her mistress. "No, no, Zenobie." "And you, my master," spoke Paul, gazing eagerly into Rurie's

face, "you will not say nay." [TO BE CONTINUED.]





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