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"THE KNOT."

A TALE OF POLAND.

(Translated from the French by Mrs. J. Sadlier.)

CHAPTER X.

It was about six o'clock on the following morning when the Count ordered the retreat of the last division of his little garrison. Before they set out, he caused them to light up again the line of fires on the esplanade, so as to make the Russians believe that the castle was still occupied, for the shades of night still enveloped the scene, and precluded any close inspection. There was every hope that the Polish garrison might reach in safety the shelter of the forests, for independent of all but impossibility of overtaking a retreating force which is determined not to fight, the Poles, being on their native ground, could choose a position which would enable them to resist the attack of even a much larger body than that with which they had to deal. After some time the Count and his party came up to their advanced guard, and they all marched on together for some hours in the direction of Grodno, from which they were but ten or twelve leagues distant, but the inequality of the ground rendered the journey much more tedious. At the first halt which took place at eleven o'clock, the Count was informed the Russians had entered the castle, but manifested no intention of following the fugitives towards the woods. On the contrary they seemed determined to make the castle their head-quarters, whence they might watch and command the surrounding country.

"Since they do not think of pursuing us," said the Count to his friends, "we may as well make an encampment here in the woods. I am not without hopes that we shall soon be sufficiently numerous to march forth with floating banners, but if, contrary to my hopes and expectations, we are not speedily reinforced, then each will be at liberty to return home, or if he likes it better, he may try to make his way through the Russian lines to our gallant brethren of Warsaw."

They then set about making their encampment; the Count, his family, and the few gentlemen who had followed his fortunes, took up their abode in the hut of a forester, while the mass of the troop, consisting entirely of peasants who were well inured to hardship, hastily threw up some sheds formed of the branches of trees, which they covered with clay, so as to shelter them from the inclemency of the weather. Day after day emissaries were despatched through all the country round, with the hope of obtaining reinforcements, but at evening they returned wearied and exhausted, bringing ever the same discouraging answers; as usual, the Russian authorities were ever on the watch and left no means untried that might break down the patriotic spirit of the people. The insurrection of Warsaw was now known throughout all the provinces which had formed the kingdom of Poland, and the intelligence was everywhere greeted with stern and threatening exultation. From Ukraine to Courland the dismembered and fettered nation seemed but to await the signal to start up in arms. The Russian government, however, had resolved not to be again taken by surprise, and commenced its new series of operations by forcing under its banners almost every Pole who could carry arms, and this in order to draw off the strength of that portion of ancient Poland which though nominally subject to the Czar, seemed ever willing to seize the opportunity to weaken and even cast off his yoke. All Lithuanian officers suspected of patriotism were removed into Russian regiments, so that, having under their thumb all those who might have acted as leaders of the rebellion, it became easy to control the people, deprived of those who would concert and arrange their plans. The police, too, redoubled its activity and watchfulness; in virtue of a general ukase the gymnasia were thrown open; while the frequent denunciations and investigations which took place struck terror to every heart. Every remnant of ancient franchise was revoked; new imposts were added to the accustomed taxes; martial law was proclaimed and the people were only too well pleased to get rid of their arms by giving them up.

So it was that the utter desertion of which Count Bialewski had to complain, was but too well excused by these terrible proceedings of the government. When after having waited three whole weeks, he saw that he had nothing to depend on but the handful of brave men by whom he was surrounded, he was forced to acknowledge that he had been too precipitate, and that the nation was not yet prepared for a simultaneous movement. Yet painful as was this conviction, it had not power to discourage him, for he was one of those men who are fired by the presence of danger, and who, once entered on a perilous career, must go on—on either to death or victory. Constrained to abandon for the present the war of arms, he turned his attention, to the other means which might be tried to promote the ultimate success of the cause. Even this task

was one of exceeding danger at a time when the fear of the Russian government weighed like a mill-stone on men's minds, but the Count shrank not from the danger, nor feared to surmount the obstacles.

"We must not be discouraged," he observed, "notwithstanding these grievous disappointments. It is hard, I will own, to forgive the criminal weakness, which has left us thus deserted, but we know that it is not the heart which is at fault, it is only that our people are terrified by the dreadful state of the country. We are then bound to overlook their falling away, and must only endeavor to reanimate their broken spirits and incite them to make an unanimous effort. And now we must separate, placing our swords in our scabbards until we can use them with profit to country. You know that our victorious brethren declared their intention of taking refuge in Lithuania, let us then be prepared to receive them as brothers, and to aid them in their gallant struggles for liberty."

These words were heard in mournful silence, for, notwithstanding all the hardships of the season, and of their unsheltered state, that sturdy band of patriots could not brook the thought of laying down their arms. "Yet, it must be done, my brave and worthy friends," said the Count, kindly, but console yourselves with the thought that I give you but a temporary dismissal. In the meantime you will do all you can to hasten the moment when we shall meet again under the waving flag of Poland. First of all, you will spread the report, when you reach your homes, that I have gone into Poland proper, in order to reach Warsaw, if possible. This false report will abate the ardor of pursuit, and will thus give me time and opportunity to work out my views for our common deliverance from slavery."

As each in his own heart was convinced that at present their remaining together was worse than useless, they at length consented to depart, and taking leave of the Count and his family, with the greatest respect, they disposed themselves in small knots, so as to elude suspicion in returning to their deserted homesteads. The Count was thus left alone with his children (of whom Raphael was of course one) and a few faithful vassals of his house. Many of the worthy peasants, however, had voluntarily promised to bring constant intelligence as to the movements of the enemy. The forester, in whose house the Count and his family were lodged, was an old soldier, who had served under the Count in many a campaign, and who would have been willing, at any moment, to lay down his life for his former captain, and this devoted follower made it his chief study to supply the family with the choicest game, and also to carry on the communication with the various agents of the Count. Whilst awaiting the time, then, whence the false rumor of his flight should have lulled the Russians, into forgetfulness of him, the Count busied himself in making arrangements for a campaign, not military, but diplomatic.

"The extreme severity with which the Russians have crushed this revolt," said he, "will certainly produce a speedy re-action, which it is for us to anticipate by representing to our friends that they have nothing to lose, and much to gain, by having recourse to arms. Ground down, as we are, beneath the iron despotism of Russia, a single victory might bring us some relief. Nevertheless, I am well aware of the discouragement arising from the late fruitless attempt which our enemies have not failed to turn into ridicule. This, then, imposes on us the necessity of developing our plans, and enlarging the basis of our operations, so that by the multiplicity of our efforts we may disconcert the enemy and give confidence to our friends. I am now about to lay before you my new projects, and request your candid opinion of their merits. One of us must go immediately to Grodno and to Wilna, in order to confer with the committee already organized in each of these important cities, in order to ascertain their probable resources, and still more how they stand towards the national cause;—then after learning their decision as to the proper time for taking up arms, the delicate must go on into Samogitia, where he will be sure to find the truest sympathy and a cordial welcome. If you had no objection, my dear Raphael, to such a mission I should be most happy to entrust it to your prudence and good sense."

"I gladly accept the mission," replied Raphael. The Count, having completed his arrangements, Raphael started on his important errand. On his arrival near Grodno, he discovered a numerous encampment close without the walls. The fact was that the authorities having by some means obtained a knowledge of Count Bialewski's plans, and understanding that the first attack was to be made on Grodno, had concentrated to that point all the disposable forces within a circle of twenty-five leagues. Raphael saw at a glance that it would, therefore, be as useless as it was perilous, to endeavor to open a communication with the Poles in that city, for even should he succeed in making his way within the

walls, what effect would his representations have on a people so subdued and spiritless, kept down by such an army as lay within and around their city? Without losing any more time in hesitation, he at once resolved to set out for Wilna, which lay about thirty leagues distant. As no recent attempt had been made, and that Wilna was far removed from the neighborhood of Count Bialewski's domains, which at that moment attracted all the attention of the government, Raphael had hopes that he could there obtain admission and be enabled to confer with the national committee. These calculations encouraged him to proceed, and at the end of two or three days he found himself on the heights which overlook Wilna. But now, how to get through the gates, for, if he announced himself as a traveller, he should necessarily undergo a rigorous examination which was almost sure to end in his sudden execution.

"If I could only inform some one of our friends in the city that I am here," said Raphael to his guide, "I am sure they would find means to elude the vigilance of the police, or come here and meet me where I am."

"If that be all, my lord," said the guide, "I can manage it easily. You see those carts laden with grain and provisions which are going towards the city?—well! I can easily follow them, and by scraping up an acquaintance with their drivers, I can pass for a peasant of this neighborhood, and go in without the smallest trouble. Only give me your instructions and the proper address of your friend or friends, so that I may not excite curiosity by my wandering about making inquiries, and leave the rest to me."

"I thank you, my worthy fellow!" said Raphael, "your idea is excellent, and we cannot do better than put it at once into execution."

Raphael was well acquainted with every locality in Wilna for he had studied several years in the University there, and he gave his guide the most minute directions how to find the house of a famous lawyer named Sapielna. He then repeated to him several times what he wished him to say to the advocate, for he dared not give him a letter lest it might compromise his safety if, unluckily, he was stopped by the police. The guide, who was a shrewd, intelligent man, having received his instructions, set out with a light heart, and as light a step, for the city. His plan succeeded to admiration, he being taken, as he had expected, for a peasant going in with one of the market carts, and he reached without any accident the house of the lawyer, with whom he demanded to speak in a great hurry, as if he had some important law-suit to lay before him.—Being introduced to the presence of the advocate, and having ascertained that they were alone together, he proceeded to open his negotiation, or at least to deliver his message, whereupon the man of law appeared very much embarrassed, and, to say truly, more than a little frightened. It was truly a most imprudent attempt; the police being so very much on the alert that there was no possibility of concealing anything from them—and then, a man once suspected, was a dead man. Moreover, to attempt any sort of insurrection at such a time, was really calculated to ruin the cause—beyond a doubt it was.

"And now, my good friend! what do you want me to do?—I say, what would you have me do?" demanded Mr. Sapielna, in a tremulous agitation which spoke but meanly for his courage.

"In the first place, sir," returned the guide coolly, "I would have you extricate my master from his perilous condition, and then you will find him a gallant young nobleman able and willing to explain the whole matter which a poor, ignorant man like me is not fit to do."

The look which accompanied these words made the lawyer blush, and recalled to his mind the necessity of keeping up that character for patriotism which he had obtained by his fiery harangues in the national committee. He forthwith launched out into a long harangue, proving himself an uncompromising patriot, and wound up by saying that he would go at once and confer with some patriotic friends, and return as soon as possible with their joint resolutions. Before he set out he left orders that the messenger should be well entertained. The truth was that Mr. Sapielna was at bottom a true patriot, and had long served his country to the best of his ability by his eloquence at the bar. In defending the political offences of the time he shrank not from denouncing openly the barbarous policy of Russia, and so far he was worthy of all praise; but when the question turned on an appeal to appeal to arms, it must be acknowledged that worthy Master Sapielna was troubled with the besetting weakness of Demosthenes. His intentions were good, notwithstanding, and he failed not to go in search of a certain member of the committee, a Dr. Neroski, who was well known to be of a determined and energetic character, and to him he communicated the nature of his embarrassment. The doctor at once decided that Count Bialewski's agent must be admitted, no matter at what

risk to themselves, whereupon many plans were proposed and rejected as impracticable, when, at length, the intrepid Neroski hit upon a bright expedient.

"I shall ride out," he said, "in my gig, as tho' to visit a patient in the country, and I shall take with me one of my students, who often accompanies me on my professional visits. I can then go to the place where this young nobleman is staying, and can leave my young man in his place while I take him back in my gig, and when once we have him in the city, the devil is in it, or we can manage to conceal him."

Sapielna the more readily approved of this project, as he had nothing to do in it, and a few hours after he learned from Raphael himself that it had succeeded as well as heart could wish.

CHAPTER XI.

But being in Wilna was not the whole, for to act there to any advantage required the utmost precaution and the most unceasing watchfulness, together with considerable loss of time. The meetings of the national committee were extremely rare, as its members very naturally feared to draw down upon them the attention of a government whose punishments were as severe as its power was unlimited by law or equity. For this reason it became next to impossible to effect a general assembly. At one time a meeting on which great expectations had been founded was suddenly countermanded, because a new proclamation just then appeared, threatening with banishment to Siberia all who were found engaged in any secret confederation; sometimes they were not sufficiently numerous to venture upon any decisive resolution, at other times, their correspondence was intercepted, so that there was always some fatal drawback. At length the more active members did succeed in bringing together the requisite number, but the time of meeting passed away in idle discussion, and produced no good. The committee was divided into several parties, all violently opposed to each other, and bent rather on carrying out their own peculiar views than advancing the general good. Raphael had thus passed two whole months in the capital of Lithuania, without having been able to obtain any satisfactory result; and yet he had done everything that man could do, under the circumstances, being fully aware of the vast importance of bringing so considerable a city as Wilna to some public manifestation. And nothing would have been easier (had the leaders been unanimous and energetic) with the whole vast population ready and willing to cast off the Russian yoke, and having a nucleus of fiery energy, and devoted patriotism, in the students of the University, who desired nothing more, as they afterwards proved, than to fight and to die for their country. And when Raphael saw all this, he failed not to speak his mind to his friends of the committee.

"It is your irresolution," said he to Sapielna, "that hangs like a clog on the movements of the people; and your excessive caution it is which freezes up the lifespings of patriotism. In the University—in the streets, impatience of restraint is visible on every face—everywhere you are asked secretly for arms, and yet you coldly answer, 'Wait a little—wait a little—be prudent and all will go well!'"

The lawyer was not slow in replying, and sought for the hundredth time to convince Raphael that the city could do nothing until the surrounding country had risen. "Consider," said he, and not without reason, "that all the forces of the district are concentrated within our walls, and that to enable us to act efficiently, a diversion must actually be made without, in order to draw off some of the garrison."

"Well, then, my dear friend! I have nothing further to do amongst you, and as my protracted stay here could do no possible good, I must move on into Samogitia, where by all accounts, we learn that the work goes bravely on, and there I may and can be of some service. And perhaps we may pay you a neighborly visit some of these days, when we shall appear before your walls with the signal of independence!"

"Surely you will not think of leaving us?" cried the worthy advocate warmly, though in his heart he rejoiced in the anticipation of being released from his importunities—"why, the truth is, your presence is so useful to us here that we can do nothing without you. And besides, how can we reconcile ourselves to your setting out alone on such a journey, where the roads are everywhere scattered with Russian soldiers?—No, my young friend! have a little more patience—only wait a short time, and you will see what we can do."

"This poor, pitiful language, which brought no blush to the face of the patriot-lawyer, so entirely was he governed by his fears, was just what was wanting to determine Raphael; and he lost no time in quitting the city, which he effected by the aid of his good friend, Neroski, who gave vent to many a curse against the cowardly vacillation of his brethren of the committee.—Followed always by his Lithuanian guide, Ra-

phael plunged into Samogitia, a province of ancient Poland, situated to the north of Russia, and bordering on Lithuania. This region, being thickly interspersed with immense forests and lofty mountains, was admirably adapted for a struggle with the foreign enemy; and whether it was that this circumstance had inspired the natives with greater courage, or that the discontent was still more deep, and more general, it is certain that Raphael found everywhere as he passed along, all the elements of a vigorous insurrection. A number of the peasantry, in order to escape being pressed into the imperial service, had elected a chief, and taken up arms, but on being pursued by the Russian brigade, they had fled into the forest. Here, then, there was no difficulty in raising the people; one of the principal men of Rosenia (the chief town of Samogitia) who was foremost in welcoming the envoy of Count Bialewski, had already made large purchases of arms and ammunition. The peasants and the domestics of the castles had been armed with scythes, sickles, and axes, while the stables of the nobility and gentry were thrown open to any one who could manage a horse. There being a total want of artillery, they had contrived a species of cannon, made of the trunk of a tree, felled out, and bound with massive bands of iron, and these they mounted on wheels and axles of coaches.

On the 25th of March, the first attack was made; the Samogitian hands disarmed the Russian guards of the canal of Wndawa; on the following day the garrison of Rosenia was expelled, and then the people for miles around rose up in open insurrection. Yet the first regular battle attempted by the leaders of the people was anything but fortunate in its results, for the raw, undisciplined forces which they commanded were unable to resist the steady and murderous fire kept up by two thousand well-disciplined soldiers, and the consequence was that they fled in all directions. Not that they were discouraged, but they turned to what they were best fit for—guerrilla warfare, by which they hoped to harass and exhaust their enemies while profiting by the peculiar features of their country. And in fact, in a very short time after this defeat, these hardy warriors did obtain a brilliant victory, having driven a Russian colonel with his regiment to take shelter in the Russian territory; and they also took possession of the little port of Pologna, by means of which they hoped to receive those supplies of arms and ammunition of which they stood in need.

But in order to follow up this spirited attempt of the Samogitians, it was absolutely necessary that a similar effort should be made in Lithuania, and to attain that object Raphael bent all his energies. The inhabitants of the district of Troki gave the example by seizing their chief town, and subsequently, when emboldened by increased strength they took possession of Ozmiana and Wilkomier, whereupon tramping on all that dared to oppose them, they boldly marched on Wilna to aid its inhabitants in their struggle. But alas! these latter, still paralysed by terror, dared not support this generous effort, for the Russian authorities had emphatically declared that on the first appearance of insurrection within the walls, they would withdraw the garrison, and open a cannonade on the city. Meanwhile the insurrection spread far and wide through Lithuania, and might have been attended with greater success had there been a centre of unity, or any concentration of strength. But there was no systematic mode of action, nothing done in concert. Thus it was that every little town, nay, village, was the head-quarters of a petty revolution having its own chief, its own army, and in truth, struggling manfully with the foe; and thus it was that the Russians were everywhere attacked, harassed, but rarely defeated, thanks to their strong and perfect discipline; yet they were made to suffer very severely, and to see their ranks day after day becoming thinner. Just then it was, too, that the cholera, that terrible epidemic appeared amongst the troops, and aided the vengeful arms of the long-oppressed Poles. Raphael, seeing that the end of his mission was fully accomplished, thought seriously of rejoining the Count, from whom, to his grievous anxiety, he had received no tidings since his departure.—Passing quickly through Lithuania, and avoiding the vicinity of the towns wherein the Russians had concentrated their forces, he soon reached the boundary of his own domains, and resolved to pay a passing visit to his venerable parent.—His own castle was but five or six leagues from that of the Count, and here, as everywhere else, he found the people all armed and divided into battalions, as his vassals well knew that such was the wish of their absent lord. Raphael's grandmother had not quitted her castle, and had moreover, retained around her only her women and a few faithful servants, having sent all her people to enrol themselves under the national flag. This venerable lady was, as we have before said, a model of every feminine virtue. In her devotion to the cause of freedom she had actually given up everything that she could spare that