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THE KNOT:

A TALE OF POLAND.

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

CHAPTER XVII.

The prayers were not ended when some boys who had been on the watch, rushed into the church, crying out: "The Russians are coming!—here they are just at hand!"

Upon this, all arose from their knees with an affrighted air, yet no one attempted to fly. "My friends," said the vicar, "have courage, I beseech you. Here we must await them—they demand of us the abandonment of our faith, let us show them, then, by our firmness and fortitude, how deeply engraven it is on our hearts. Let us continue our prayers, and then commence a hymn, for God hears us and will bless our devotion to Him!"

Immediately the suspended prayers were resumed in a loud, clear voice, when the priest rapidly approached Raphael and said to him: "Retire now, I entreat you! You belong not to this parish—your example is not required here, and other duties summon you away."

"Nay, it may be necessary that I should remain to witness the sequel," replied Raphael, "suffer me, therefore, to keep my place!"

"No—no," returned the priest with emphasis, "you, too, have a pious task to perform, and I cannot consent that you should now throw away your life, where it cannot be of the least use to me or my people. Come, follow me!" Raphael could no longer resist, so he suffered the priest to draw him away through the sanctuary, and in obedience to the direction of his finger he crossed the cemetery into the fields. There was little time for parting salutations, and in a minute or two the pastor was again kneeling in the midst of his flock.

A few minutes passed away in fearful expectation, and then the loud roll of the Russian drums without the church, rose high above the voice of prayer within. Very soon after, a Russian priest made his appearance, accompanied by several officers and a magistrate, being all members of a commission established by the Emperor for the regulation of ecclesiastical affairs, while beyond in the porch was seen a line of glittering bayonets. The president of the ecclesiastical commission (he was a colonel in the imperial army) then advanced to the vicar, and pointing to the Russian priest he said in an imperious tone: "Sir, His Majesty has given you a successor, to whom you will instantly give up the keys of the church, and follow us to give an account of your conduct, for this is a strange way of executing the orders you have received. You are perfectly aware that you were commanded to close your church, and to abstain from all religious manifestations in this parish until your successor had arrived."

"My conscience, sir, forbade me to obey these orders," returned the vicar calmly, "and enjoined me moreover, to exercise the functions of my office till the last moment!"

"How?—do you mean to say that your conscience prompted you to disobey the Emperor?" demanded the interrogator, articulating every word with so strong an emphasis, as though he could not believe such a thing possible, "why, that is madness, still more than blasphemy! We shall speedily apply a remedy to your disease, my good man! For the present, give up the keys of the church, I tell you again, and consider yourself as a prisoner!"

"I cannot abandon the temple of the Lord to an enemy of his holy law!" replied the priest, raising his voice so as to encourage by his example his terrified people. "Violence and impy may profane this church, but never shall I acknowledge as my successor a man who brings hither only sacrilege and imposture!"

"Is it thus you receive the Emperor's commands?" thundered out the colonel, his face livid with rage.

"It is thus I acquit myself of my duty to God!"

"Carry off this reprobate," roared the colonel, "and scourge him till the blood runs from him in streams."

The soldiers quickly advanced to seize the vicar, who made a sign that he was willing to follow them; and then turning towards his people, who pressed around him with tears and lamentations: "My children!" said he, in a voice which touched every heart, "be firm and courageous on behalf of your faith, and never lose sight of the precept, 'Render unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's,' but unto God the things that are God's."

"Silence, sirrah!" cried the colonel sternly, "and march on the instant—we shall see who is master here! Remove him!"

No sooner had the priest been dragged from the church than the officer turned to the afflicted congregation, and made a haughty gesture commanding them to listen.

"Good people," said he, "they would abuse your credulity by preaching up revolt and disobe-

dience. You well know how great was your crime in taking up arms against your sovereign, and had reason to tremble for the punishment of your offence. Yet his gracious majesty, in the plenitude of his goodness, will not only overlook your rebellion, but wishes even to admit you amongst his most faithful subjects. Hence it is that we remove from you an infatuated priest whose seditious doctrines would draw down ruin upon you, and give you in his place one who enjoys the Emperor's confidence, and who will instruct you in your duties to that august sovereign. I expect your cheerful submission."

A mournful silence was the only reply, and the Russian priest stepped forward to say something for himself. "Dear children," said he, in smooth accents, "I am exceedingly happy to see you all assembled around me, as it affords me a precious opportunity to make known to you the sacred mission confided to me. Be not alarmed; I have no other code than the Gospel, and this I will expound to you in a manner that will, I am sure, give you entire satisfaction. By listening to my advice you shall never have cause to fear those chastisements and torments wherewith rebellion is punished. Of that you may rest assured, so we shall now proceed with a trifling ceremony which will terminate this first meeting. Each one as he leaves the church will sign this paper which I hold in my hand, and which relates solely to the magnanimous will of the Emperor. After that you will all be regarded as faithful and obedient subjects."

"Whatever else we may be, we are and will remain Catholics, with God's assistance!" returned the Poles with one voice.

"No exclamations there—be silent!" cried the colonel as drawing his sword, he accompanied the Russian priest to the door. A guard of soldiers quickly appeared and led the people one after the other to the presence of the commissioners. The first who was brought up refused to sign the paper, saying, "I am, and will be a Catholic."

"But, my friend, you cannot as such be a faithful subject of the Emperor!"

"Remember," added the colonel, "that your life is at stake."

"I do remember," said the peasant with a resolute air—"I know that I have but once to die!"

"Yes, but there are many ways of dying," interposed the priest, who yearned for the honor of a conversion, "and why would you knowingly expose yourself to the most rigorous torments?"

"Suffering and dying for God's sake, I shall be well repaid in eternity!"

"Enough!" cried the colonel, "to the knot with this wretch!"

The sentence was forthwith executed, yet the victim endured his sufferings without a single complaint. Whilst the first was undergoing the torture several others were examined, but nothing could be made of them, and they were successively given up to the fury of the executioners.—In order to spare the recital of these atrocities, all too sadly attested by history, let it suffice to say that the entire parish, men, women, and children, were that day mangled and torn with the whip.

Then the priest himself, in a phrenzy of wrath, was seen to lay hold on the knot, and since he could not seduce the people from their faith, he lashed them with vengeful fury till their blood streamed on the pavement. About a hundred of the principal inhabitants were loaded with chains and conveyed to the nearest jail, where, however, they could not be received, as it was already filled with victims from other parishes. They were then huddled together in damp, cold hovels, like so many beasts of burden. A short time after, having been again cruelly punished, they were all restored to liberty, as the authorities found it impossible to give even the smallest allowance of food to the vast multitudes who filled their dungeons.

Meanwhile, Raphael had entered on his perilous journey through Russia proper, and in proportion as he moved farther away from those provinces which had been the theatre of the late revolution, he found the country more tranquil and less disturbed. Being furnished with a regular passport he journeyed along without any annoyance, as every one took him for a harmless traveller, and none dreamed of suspecting him of having any other object in view than that which he professed to have. Yet as he drew near the goal of his pilgrimage he found that a thousand dark presenciments sprang up to disturb his mind. Calculating on the data in his possession he knew that Rosa and her father must have been already three months or thereabouts in their dreary exile. Even if Rosa had recovered from the effects of her cruel punishment, was there any reason to hope that she could live under the privations, and the sufferings, and the ignominy to be endured in that desolate region? She who had been brought up in the enjoyment of all life's luxuries—she who had been loved and served as a superior being, and whose years had passed away calmly and beautifully, how could she survive the fearful blows which had been so relent-

lessly inflicted—exposed to the coarse rude jests of the brutal Russian soldiery, and perhaps kept constantly at hard and painful labor? What an ice-bolt shot through Raphael's heart as he shudderingly asked himself—"and does she yet live?" There was every probability that she had sunk under the load of her misfortunes, and as this thought pressed closer and closer upon him, Raphael shrank with timid apprehension from the certainty which he might soon expect.

He reached Tobolsk towards the end of March, and notwithstanding all his impatience to commence his search he deemed it necessary to lull suspicion by employing himself for some time in his commercial avocations. Yet in secret he made every inquiry that might facilitate his great enterprise.

CHAPTER XVII.

On their arrival at Tobolsk, Bialewski and his daughter were confined for some time in the common prison, at the disposal of the Governor, who was to make known to them the final intentions of the Emperor; and for fifteen days they were treated with all the severity of Russian imprisonment. The worst of all was that the father and daughter had been placed in separate cells, so that they could hold no sort of communication with each other. This last stroke overwhelmed the Count with sorrow and apprehension, since he could no longer see his child, nor protect her from the merciless insults to which she was exposed. A mortal anguish preyed upon his heart, and life itself must have given way beneath the overpowering pressure had not a change occurred in the order of things, just when it was least expected. One day a message appeared to summon him before the Governor who received him with a show of politeness, and said:

"I have to inform you of the decision of the Emperor with respect to you, and I also expect your daughter here, as she is henceforth to be associated in your fate."

"Oh my God!" exclaimed the Count, unable to restrain his joy; "on this condition I willingly accept whatever else I may have to bear."

"Yes, truly, it is a very great favor which our gracious sovereign has conferred upon you, and he wishes thereby to let you see that his generous heart can feel even for rebellious subjects.—Nevertheless, you have committed a grievous offence against his imperial authority, and you are about to learn your final punishment. But here comes your daughter."

Just then Rosa entered, and was instantly folded in her father's arms; she, too, had feared that they were to meet no more on earth, and now when she saw him again—when his protecting arm once more encircled her, she wept like a child in the excess of her joy, until even the Governor was touched by the sight of such pure and devoted affection.

"Madame!" said he, "this happiness at least may still be yours, and I would it were in my power to restore to you in like manner all that you have lost."

"Oh, sir!" returned Rosa, with a grateful smile, "we can willingly sacrifice to our country that rank and fortune which we have lost—we only desire to be left together in our exile."

"You shall have that consolation, then," resumed the Governor, who could not help admiring the lofty courage, and calm resignation of one so young and apparently so delicate. "So now, my lord the Count! I shall at once let you know the orders which I have received. His Majesty, in consideration of your former rank, will dispense with your labor and that of your daughter, in the mines with the other criminals. You shall be in some sort restored to liberty, and may live as would a colonist. Still, as your estates are confiscated to the crown, you must earn your bread 'with the sweat of your brow'—for I am positively forbidden to render you any pecuniary assistance. In fact, his Majesty considers that he stretches his indulgence too far when he does not send you to the mines. So now you can choose your dwelling either in Tobolsk or within the circuit of a league beyond it. You will, however, bear in mind that I am never to lose sight of you or your movements."

The Count bowed in silence, and withdrew with his daughter. He was, then, free, and his child was restored to him—favors of which he had not had the slightest expectation. Alas! he was soon undeceived as to the fancied clemency of the Czar. True he was free in Tobolsk, but in a state of the most complete destitution.—With much difficulty he discovered, beyond the gates of the city, a small hut which might serve to shelter himself and his daughter from the rigor of the climate. The next thing was to seek some employment which would furnish some of the necessities of life, but this was no easy task for one who had fallen under the Emperor's displeasure. So great was the fear of displeasing the authorities that it extinguished all sense of pity for the sufferings of the unhappy exiles.—On the other hand the Count, already advanced in years, knew not what work to apply for: and yet he had not a moment to lose, for already the

beautiful face of his beloved child grew pale and thin for want of food. He went from house to house offering to give lessons, and to take charge of the education of children, but his services were everywhere rejected. Weak and exhausted, he was obliged to return to his miserable shed, where Rosa met him with a smile of ineffable sweetness, and said in a voice subdued to calmness:

"I have been just thinking, my dear father, that perhaps I might be more successful than you have been in awakening the compassion of these people. Will you permit me to make the attempt?—something tells me that I shall have good success."

"What! you, my child! expose yourself to the jibes and insults of these hard-hearted citizens? No! never can I consent to such a thing."

"My father," replied Rosa, with celestial sweetness, "we must humble ourselves to the lowest, and courageously adore the holy will of God. Be assured that he will draw us from this abyss of wretchedness, provided we show ourselves worthy of his mercy by our unflinching resignation. Give me only an hour or two, and you shall see that I will bring you good news."

Rosa then presented herself at the doors of several houses, one after the other, as no one would venture to employ an exile, with no greater success than her father. Yet some relief must be obtained in order to preserve life, and to save her father from the racking torment of seeing her whom he loved better than himself suffering the pangs of hunger. Conquering by a heroic effort, the grievous repugnance wherewith she could not but regard begging, she resolutely held out her hand and solicited alms, in a low trembling voice, for she feared that they who had refused to employ her would not give any gratuitous aid. But this time they did not refuse, for it would have been next to impossible to see such a sight without being moved to compassion; besides, some pieces of money given in secret could not compromise any one. Having thus obtained a small sum, Rosa returned to her father with an assured smile, carefully concealing the means by which it had been acquired.—Day by day she went out, under pretence of seeking employment, though the fact was that the noble girl, finding that employment would not be given her, went from door to door begging that bread which was to save her father's life and her own. Assuredly she would have preferred death a thousand times, but she thought of her father, and she thought of her God, who had not, when on earth, "a spot whereon to lay his head," and she drew from the remembrance a sort of strength which enabled her to persevere. But such humility and resignation were not to go unrewarded. Having presented herself one day at the office of a rich merchant who was also a banker, she began as she always did, by asking some employment for herself or her father. The banker much interested by the noble bearing of the young supplicant, asked "in what way she or her father could make themselves useful?"

"My father, sir," said Rosa modestly, "can undertake the situation of clerk or accountant, and for myself, I would give lessons to young ladies in music and French, with other branches of education."

The merchant seemed to reflect for some minutes, then making a sign for Rosa to await his return, he went out. In a short time he reappeared with his wife and two young girls. Having interrogated the young stranger, this gentleman and his wife quickly discovered that she was well able to perform what she undertook, and they requested her to bring her father to them. Next day both father and daughter were engaged—the Count as office-clerk, and Rosa as governess to the young ladies. It is true the remuneration was miserably small, for the merchant had not failed to take advantage of their necessitous condition; but they, who were only too much rejoiced to obtain any little certainty, thankfully accepted the offered conditions. In order not to compromise himself or his family, the banker stipulated that the father and daughter should not live in his house, so every evening they repaired to their wretched hovel, each concealing from the other the privations and the hardships which they had to endure.

Let us now return to Raphael, whom we left prosecuting his secret inquiries after the beloved exiles. Adroitly availing himself of his character of a travelling merchant, he took every opportunity of acquiring information. Little was to be learned in that way, however, for no one wished to speak on the subject of politics, or to hazard any remarks on the condition of any of the exiles. He then watched his opportunity to converse with some one of those unfortunate Poles who wandered in the streets homeless and homeless. Accordingly, having one day encountered a young man, apparently about twenty years of age, whose dark, animated countenance at once announced him as a son of Poland, Raphael contrived to bring him to his own lodgings. "My friend," said he, "are you a Pole?"

"Yes, that I am!" rejoined the other, "what would you of me?"

"Most probably you were sent here for being implicated in the last rebellion—am I right?"

"Rebellion!" repeated the youth with indignant emphasis, "I can never recognise as rebellion the generous efforts of an entire nation to shake off the dread yoke of foreign tyranny!"

"Nor can I," exclaimed Raphael, with an entire change of manner, and holding out his hand to the noble youth; "but in our present position it behoves us to understand the opinions of those to whom we speak, particularly if we would speak of political events, or persons therein concerned. I, too, am a Pole, and I wish to know if you can tell me where the Count Bialewski now is—for I am sure you are acquainted with his name?"

"What Pole is there who knows not that honored name?" returned the young man. "Yes, I can tell you something about him, and about his daughter, too, for they are both employed in a merchant's house here in this city, and I can show it to you in a day or two, when I have inquired of some of my comrades who have had occasion to see my lord the Count."

"By obtaining this information for me as soon as you possibly can, you will confer on me a very great favor. And now how can I serve you?"

"By giving me your esteem!"

"Oh! as to that I will go farther," said Raphael, "for my friendship shall be yours; but suffer me to offer you this purse—you may find its contents most useful here, and you will not, I hope, refuse it, for I offer it not as a gift, but as a debt due to a brother in distress."

"Since such are your sentiments, sir, I will accept your friendly offer, with the intention of sharing your donation with my companions in misfortune. And now farewell, sir, I must be off, lest so long an interview with an exile might bring suspicion on you."

Raphael was now completely relieved of his month-long burden of anxiety. Rosa and her father both lived, and in a few days he hoped to see them and speak with them. While musing on this delightful prospect, he never gave a thought to the many dangers and difficulties still to be met and surmounted before he could attain his end. But when the first fervor of his rejoicing had cooled down to sober reason, he could shut his eyes to these things as he had done.—Having once obtained an interview with the Count, and come to an understanding with him on what was to be done, it would be absolutely necessary to act with promptitude, so that the Russian police might have no time to thwart the execution of their plans. Raphael, therefore, lost not a moment in making those arrangements which might facilitate their proposed escape.—In the first place (as quitting Tobolsk was by no means difficult) it was to be considered whether they would bend their course so as to escape from the vast empire of Russia. At one time it had occurred to Raphael that he could avail himself still of his passport, and with Rosa as his wife, and to pass her Russian as a servant, they might go through the Russian dominions as easily and as securely as he had come when alone.—But this plan was scarcely a moment entertained, for the passport made no mention of wife or domestic, and besides, as the flight of the two exiles would be quickly spread abroad, there was but little chance of their not being detected.—And yet what other plan could be devised? The map of all the Russias was open before Raphael's eyes, and he considered it over and over, hoping to discover some surer way to elude the pursuit of the enemy. Following the line of the Ural mountains, the natural barrier between Siberia and Russia in Europe, he came out on those immense steppes which stretch from the shores of the Caspian to those of the Black Sea. This route would be at least one half shorter than that by which Raphael had reached Tobolsk, and that in itself was a great advantage. Moreover, it lay through regions entirely uninhabited, or peopled by Oriental tribes, who still retained their primitive mode of life, wandering about with their flocks from pasture to pasture. It also occurred to Raphael that, in order to keep up his character as a commercial traveller, it would be well to go as soon as possible to a celebrated fair which was held at Lebit, within a short distance of the Ural chain. That fair was attended by all the Asiatic tribes who acknowledged the dominion of the Czar, and by other nations of those regions who went to Lebit to dispose of the varied productions of their art or industry. Once there, it would be easy to make arrangements with one of those long caravans, under whose protection they might reach the Black Sea, and thence take shipping for Constantinople. Such, then, was the plan to which Raphael turned all his attention, as presenting more and greater chances of success than any other he could project.

His object now was to get rid of as much of his merchandise as would enable him to execute his plan. With this intention he repaired to the