

VALDIMIR THE MONK.

BY SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

It was fairly dark now, as Valdimir could see by raising the curtain and looking out. He had no idea it was late. Time had passed without his notice. He moved to the side of the bed and took the invalid's hand.

"I must go now," he said, "but if you are willing, I will come again."

"You will come," uttered Conrad, in reply, returning the grasp of the hand with all his feeble power. "Oh, you must come often now. I hope I shall live. Perhaps I shall. If I do, I shall owe my life to you. And God knows—for the feeling is even now firm in my soul—that I will always remember how you saved me—and I will never think, never, of the sad blow you struck me. Come—come to me when you can, for now—no—no—as God lives I speak the truth—now I love you!"

"God bless and keep you," murmured Ruric, in a husky, tremulous voice; and with these words, coming from the very depths of his soul, he turned away and left the room. He heard the voice of the count as he moved toward the open door, and thanked God 'twas a blessing which fell upon his ears.

Ah, those who know not what true forgiveness is, know not the holiest emotion of earth!

Ruric had left his sledge at a neighboring inn, and as soon as he gained the street he bent his steps that way. He had gone half the distance from the residence of the count to the inn, and was just upon the point of crossing the street, when he heard his name pronounced by some one behind him. He stopped and looked around, and saw a man approaching him.

It was too dark to distinguish faces plainly, yet Ruric was not long in concluding that the man who had thus hailed him was a stranger. He was a medium-sized man, and so closely enveloped in his bonnet and pelisse that his form and features would have been hidden even had it been lighter than it was.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the youth as the man came up.

two tracks being visible from the gate to the house.

"Ah—yes—you said—what?"

"I said this place didn't seem to be used much," the youth repeated, though he was sure the fellow heard the first time.

"Ah, yes—the usual entrance is the other way, by the sledge path."

"And where is that?" Ruric asked, not being able to see any such path.

"Oh—it's around on the other side."

By this time they had reached the door of the house, which our hero could now see had an old, dilapidated appearance, and the guide plied the iron knocker with zeal. Ere long a man made his appearance with a lantern in his hand.

"Ah—the gun-maker come!" the latter asked.

"Yes," returned the guide.

CHAPTER XII.

Rosalind Valdimir and Zenobia were together in their sitting-room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when we saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobia, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck, and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope. Surely God will not suffer such an unholly work to be done."

"Ah, Zenobia," returned the fair maiden, in a fluttering, melancholy tone, "where can I look for hope?"

"I say, in God. You have told me we must look to Him, and I have believed you. Have you not always been good to God?"

"I have been as good as I knew how though I have sinned."

"How sinned? Oh, my mistress, if you have sinned, then who is pure? Tell me."

"We all sin, Zenobia. It is our nature."

"So I have often heard, but I hardly think you have sinned. What have you done which you know to be wrong?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Then how have you sinned?"

"Ah, Zenobia, we all do things which we ought not to do; but yet I mean to do as near right as I can."

"Then leave the rest with God. Oh, when poor mortals do as near right as lies in their power, surely they may leave the rest without fear. And now, if God is just, as you tell me, why should He allow the wicked duke to triumph over you? What justice would there be in that—when you are all goodness, and he is sin itself?"

Rosalind was puzzled. She had tried to teach her attendant to love and honor God, and she had so far succeeded that Zenobia understood all the principles of Christianity, and embraced them gladly and joyfully; but now how should she make this point understood? How should she reconcile, in this apparent injustice with God's universal mercy and justice?

"Can you not tell me?" the young girl asked again.

"Why should God allow such a thing? You say He is all-powerful, and can do what He wills."

"Zenobia," returned the maiden, after pondering for a while, "you do not look at the subject in a proper light. God does not operate by petty, individual decisions, as an inferior does. He sees that certain laws are necessary for the good of mankind—and not a single law of all his code is there but is very good. Last night your head ached, and you suffered; and of course you had violated some natural law. It was your own fault. And so this suffering which is now come upon me is the result of a violation of one of God's laws."

"Ah," cried Zenobia, eagerly, "but you are the one who suffers, while another violates the law. In my case I did both, and do not complain."

The thought she would have uttered was terrible.

"Go on," whispered Valdimir, bending his head low down so as to catch her very thoughts if they left her lips. "What would you say?"

"Oh, I ought not—and yet I know his soul is capable even of that." Thus much the fair countess murmured to herself; and then she gazed up and spoke to the strange man before her.

"Do you suspect my guardian?"

"Do you suspect him?" the monk returned.

"Oh, I know not what to think!"

"But listen," resumed Valdimir, earnestly. "I would know all that you know, and then perhaps I can assist you. Fear not, for as true as God lives I mean to save Ruric if I can; and if I can but gain a clue to him now, I can surely save you both. Trust me, for I possess a wondrous power for the good of those who trust me. Now, what end could the duke have in view in concocting the duel? It was the death of Damonoff, and the undivided possession of Drozden. Now, answer me. What does he aim at now?"

In spite of all doubts Rosalind found herself trusting the monk. There was an air of conscious truth and power in his look and tone that won upon her.

"Good father," she returned, after a few moments' thought, "the duke has sworn by the most fearful oath that he will have me for his wife!"

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