

THE THREE MASKED MEN.

YONDER'S the village, Barin," says my driver, pointing to a few spots of light that twinkled along the darkening sky-line; and we'll be there in another quarter of an hour, if it please heaven. Lucky for us that it's not winter time, or we'd have the 'gray coats' (wolves) at our heels before we got in.

"Are there many of them about here in winter?" asked I.

"Many of them? A great deal too many. Why, it was only last winter," he goes on, with a genuinely Russian love of frightening himself and other people, "that a sledge came into the village, which had been attacked by wolves close to where we are now, on a dark windy evening just like this one; and they gobbled up the driver and horses, and everything but the sledge itself—and that was a good deal scratched."

"But if they ate up the horses, how did the sledge get to the village?"

"Ah, Barin!" answers the old rogue with a chuckle, "that's not my affair."

Our day's work has been a long and hard one, as may be seen by the smoking flanks and quivering nostrils of our horses, and the country through which we have passed is not such as one loves to linger over.

It is, therefore, not without a feeling of natural relief that I turn my back upon the great waste that darkens slowly around us, and watch the lights of the village coming nearer and nearer, till at length we scurry into the single street which it possesses, (almost deserted at this hour, through fear of the "Domovoi,") and halt in front of a long, low, substantial-looking cottage—the abode of the "starosta," or head man of the village, with whom we propose to take up our quarters for the night. There is no lack of hospitality about the Russian peasant; and almost before my driver can explain who we are, I find myself seized by both hands and dragged into the house, my dusty coat and boots pulled off, and myself seated in the place of honor beside the immense stove, with a brimming tumbler of tea in front of me; while the driver, a little further off, lights his pipe with a complacent air, as if he took to himself some credit for my being there at all.

While sipping my tea and munching the black bread wherewith my host's wife, a stout, fresh-looking woman of five and thirty, supplies me ad libitum, I glance around the room, which is merely an enlarged and ornamented copy of what I have seen in every hamlet on my road.—The heavy cross beams of the roof, the rough hewn chairs and tables, the huge tea-urn, the gilt edged picture of a saint in the far corner with a small lamp burning before it—the enormous stove, on the broad flat top of which my entertainers all want to sleep in winter—the broad clumsy bed with its patch-work coverlet, are all there. And there, too, on the opposite side of the room, is the huge painted chest, barred and banded with iron, which is the Russian peasant's pride and glory in which he keeps his Sunday clothes, and whatever valuable he may possess, and upon the painting and decorating of which he often expends a sum which it must have cost him many a hard day's work, and many a supperless night to raise.

But even in their first hasty survey of the surroundings, my eyes have time to remark one object, which is the very last that one would expect to find under the roof of a Russian peasant, whose sole weapon is usually the short ax with which he chops his firewood, puts together his furniture, builds his log hut, and occasionally splits the head of his wife or father. Just opposite where I sit, hanging upon a nail in the wall, is a large pistol, evidently unused for a considerable time, to judge by the rust which covers it. Our friend the starosta, following the direction of my glance, gives a significant chuckle.

"There's something to look at, Barin," says he, nodding in the direction of the weapon.—"You don't often see those toys in our shops, do you?"

"Well, indeed, brother, it's hardly the sort of thing one would expect to see so far from the town. Do you keep it to shoot the 'takarans' (cockroaches) with?"

My host gives a hoarse bellowing laugh, at this not very brilliant joke, echoed by the shriller treble of his wife; and crossing the room takes down the pistol from its perch and lays it on the table. Some letters branded into the stock catch my eye, and holding it up to the light, I read, "April 14, 1869." I look inquiringly at my entertainer for the answer to this enigma.

"I wrote that," says he, with the air of Coriolanus. "Alone I did it. I can write, and read, too, or I shouldn't be starosta now. Ah! the first time I wrote my own name, I felt as grand as Iliu Muronetz!"

The worthy starosta's enthusiasm somewhat tries my gravity, though I had already seen the same thing once and again during my travels in the interior. The Russian peasant's reverence for the power of "talking by making marks in a book," is almost superstitious; and recollect being considerably amused at overhearing a rough-hewn fellow, with whom I lodged in one of the remotest villages, after reciting, to an attentive circle, my feats in walking, running,

climbing and leaping, wind up with: "And he knows how to write!"

"That was the day I got this pistol," pursues my Amphitryon; "and good service he did me that day. If it hadn't been for him, I should have lost a good handful of money, and mayhap my life into the bargain!"

"Ah! how did that happen?" asked I. "This is just the time for a good story; suppose you tell me all about it before I turn in."

Nothing loth, my host knocks the sides out of his pipe, re-charges it, and clearing his throat vigorously, begins as follows: "You must know, then, Barin, that I had a cousin, Vasilii Masloff by name, who instead of sticking to the village, as I did, was all for getting away to one of the great towns, thinking to push his way there, and pick up money as you would gather mushrooms in the wood. And, sure enough one day he went off to Moscow; and, after a time, I got word that he managed to find work in one of the big German shops on the Konznetki Most, (he was a famous hand at wood-carving and such like,) and that he was getting on pretty well; for as our proverb says, "Heaven helps the hopeful man," and Vasilii was always one to stand on his own feet. And after that I had no news of him for a long time, and was beginning to forget all about him, when all of a sudden, there comes to me one day a big package of bank notes, and a letter with them, saying that Vasilii was dead, (may he gain the kingdom of Heaven!) and had left me all the money he had saved—some two thousand roubles or so, (about £200,) which was a great windfall to a poor fellow like me."

"You should just have seen him that day, Barin," chimes in, laughing, the lady of the house, who has just finished her preparations for my further accommodation. "When he opened the packet, and saw the notes, he stared about him like a dog that's lost his master; and all the rest of the day he went about as if he didn't know where he was."

"Well, you needn't laugh at me, Vasilissa," retorts her husband, with a broad grin; "you kept on counting the notes yourself for an hour or more, and never counted 'em right after all!" And the two laugh in lusty chorus. "You may be sure Barin," he continues turning to me, that I wasn't long in inviting my friends to come and rejoice with me over the good luck that God had sent; and by seven in the evening I had all ready for 'em—the tea-urn boiling, the black bread and bacon laid out, a dish of salted cucumbers, and a half-gallon of 'vodka' (corn-brandy) into the bargain. Just as I'd finished laying out the table, (my wife had gone out to buy some sausage) there come a knock at the door. Thinks I: 'There are my guests come already; and I went to let 'em in. But when I opened the door, (heaven preserve us!) what should I see but three men in black masks, and the foremost of 'em with a pistol in his hand—this very same pistol that's lying on the table now."

"Oh! that pistol's a trophy taken from the enemy, then," remarked I. "This begins to get interesting. Go on, pray."

"I'm not going to say I wasn't frightened," pursues the starosta. "I was frightened, and very badly frightened, too, I can tell you. But before I could say a word, the foremost blackguard claps his hand on my shoulder and says to me, in a voice that sounded as if it came down from a chimney, 'Hand over that money you got this morning; quick, or I will send you where you won't come back again; and I heard the pistol click as he cocked it. Well, as you know, 'When needs must, there's no time for brewing beer,' so I went to the big chest yonder, and out with the bank notes; but in handing them out I managed to tuck two or three of them into my sleeve. The rogue counted them twice over, and shook his head."

"This won't do," says he, catching me by the collar, 'We know exactly how much you got this morning, and we mean to have it all; so, out with what you've hidden, or it'll be the worse for you."

"Then all at once a thought came into my head, just as if somebody had whispered it to me; and I shook the bank notes out of my sleeve on to the floor, so that they all flew this way and that way. The rogue, fearing, no doubt, that some of them might get lost, pounced upon them to pick 'em up, putting down his pistol, just as I thought he would. But the minute he loosed hold of it I snatched it up and shot him dead on the spot."

My driver gives a hoarse, chuckling laugh of intense enjoyment; while the starosta paused for a moment, in order to heighten the effect of his last sentence, handles the captured pistol with a belligerent air.

"Well done," put in I; "you tricked him very nicely. But what did the other two fellows do? Ran away, I suppose?"

"You may say that," replies the narrator, with a broader grin than ever; "they were gone almost before I could turn round. Well, when I found myself safe again, and the field clear, I felt so dazed that I almost thought I should have fainted; but I knew that there was more to be done yet, so I dipped my hand in a pan of water, to clear it abt, locked up the house put the key in my pocket, and away as hard as I could go to the 'kvartalni,' (dis-

trict police inspector.) But when I got there, he was not at home. They said he had gone out more than an hour before, and hadn't come back yet, so there was nothing for it but to go on to the next station, across the river yonder, and tell the kvartalni there. The minute he heard what had happened, he claps on his coat, calls three or four of his men, and away we all went back to my hut where we found the dead fellow lying on the floor just as I had left him. The kvartalni's men pulled off his mask; and who should this be but the police inspector I had been looking for! And the other two robbers, as I found out afterward, were the village postmaster and the priest. And now, Barin here's your place ready for you; and may heaven send you a good night's rest!"

A Masonic Story.

"Was Uncle Paul a Mason?" Iko asked of Mrs. Partington, as he stood looking at the rigid profile of the ancient corporal of the Bloody Eleventh that hung on the wall. "No he was a veteran sergeant naturally, though he took in gardening afterward, and raised the most wonderful squashes. They always took the primer at the horticultural fair."

"I mean, was he a Freemason?" continued Iko.

"Oh dear! no," replied she, "and I am glad of it; for they are a great deal too free in throwin' their plasterin' around, which is very mortifying, and takes the color out of things so; and when they whitewash the kitchen, didn't they make free with the bolny bud rum, which they mistook for a cordial? and I wish to gracious it had been a 'metec, to have taught 'em a lesson to be a little less free next time."

"But Freemasons," said Iko a little petulantly, "ain't masons; I mean the fellows that built the temple."

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "them? Well dear, I have heard of a good many things they did, and then I have heard of a good many things they didn't; and so between 'em both, I don't believe neither. It is a great mystery!" she whispered, and if they did kill Morgan, they ought to have done it, if they agreed to, though 'twas a bad thing for him. But I never believed the story told of a crowbar, which is preposterous; and as for the gridiron—thereby hangs a tale; and the Lord knows what they do in their secret ceremonies when they get on one another's clothes by mistake, and cut up all sorts of capers—to say nothing of the ridiculous aprons which makes them look so queer."

"The interest of Iko had ceased, and he turned his attention to amointing the cat with an application of soft soap."

A Strange Story.

About five years ago a youth, apparently fifteen or sixteen years of age, called at the publishing house of John E. Potter, & Co., in Philadelphia, and offered a manuscript story for publication. Mr. Potter the head of the firm, who happened to be in at the time, smiled at the idea of one so youthful aspiring to appear in literature as the author of a book, but finally, at the urgent request of the boy, consented to keep the manuscript a few days and look it over. When he done so he was convinced that the story while evincing a lack of polished education on the part of the boyish author, possessed considerable merit as an excellent novel, some of the scenes being described with wonderful power, and, after consulting with the other members of the house, decided to publish it. When the youth called a few days afterward he told him of his conclusion, and it was agreed that the author should receive a royalty of ten cents a copy on all sold. The story was duly published in book form under the title of "White Rocks," and since that time one hundred and seventy thousand copies have been sold. But what is singular about it is that the youthful author has never been seen or heard of since, and there is now due him the sum of \$17,000 as copyright on his story.—Boston Times, 28th.

Some Discourt.

One pleasant morning some two or three years ago, says the Hartford Times, a party of gentlemen were standing on the steps of the Tremont House, in Boston, enjoying their cigars, when they noticed a country looking chap riding a slim, mangy horse up and down the street in front of the hotel, apparently trying to attract the attention of the group. One of them says: "I'll bet that fellow has a horse for sale. We'll see." Presently along he came, showing his beast, and was accosted with "I say, is that animal for sale."

"Well—y-a-a-s,—I might be induced to part with him; but he is a mighty likely critter." "Is he sound?" "Sound as a bullet." "Can he trot?" "Trot! Well he can. I've can just mock a trotter." "How fast can he go?" "How fast? Well, he can go in four minutes; and he would go faster if he could. He'd love-ter!" "What is your price for him?" "Five hundred."

"Well, I don't want a horse, but I'll give five dollars for him." "Stranger—he's yourn. But that's a blazin' discount."

The latest name for red hair is Candaidauga color; Candaidauga being, as every New York traveler knows, a little beyond Auburn.

ENIGMA DEPARTMENT.

A Poetical Riddle.

The following is generally conceded to be the best riddle in the English language:

'Twas whispered in Heaven, 'twas muttered in hell, And Echo caught faintly the sound as it fell; On the confines of earth 'twas permitted to rest, And the depths of the ocean its presence confessed; 'Twill be found in the sphere when it is riven asunder, Be seen in the lightning and heard in the thunder; 'Twas allotted to man with his earliest breath, Attends at his birth, and awaits him in death; It presides o'er his happiness, honor and health, Is the prop of his house and the end of his wealth; Without it the sailor, the seaman, may roam, But woe is the wretch who expels it from home; In the whispers of conscience its voice will be found, Nor 'e'en in the whirlwind of passion be drawn- ed; 'Twill not soften the heart, and though deaf to the ear, 'Twill make it acutely and instantly hear; But in shade let it rest, like a delicate flower, Or breathe on it softly—it dies in an hour.

A Geographical Enigma.

To two-ninths of Baltimore, add one-sixth of St. Petersburg, two-fifths of Xenia, three-tenths of Washington and three-tenths of Gloucester, and you have a town in this State. What town will that make?

Answer to Problem in last week's Times.—Let A. carry one shoe a mile, then give it to B. who may carry it through. Let C. carry one, two miles and then give it to A. who may carry it through. Each will then have carried his shoe two miles.

Answer to cross-word enigma in last week's Times.—"Frank Mortimer and Co."

The first correct answer received to the cross-word enigma was from Charles G. Seifort, of Shermansdale. He also thinks that Willow trees should be planted on the outside of the church, and we think he is right.

An error occurred in the above enigma; in the eleventh line it reads "wain" but should read "main."

Those Feet.

THE late Elder John Smith, of Kentucky, who died recently at an advanced age, was one of the most eccentric wits South of the Ohio river, and a true gentleman. He was familiarly known throughout Kentucky and the West by the sobriquet of "Raccoon Smith." While still in the Baptist ministry, and attending one of the annual meetings of the body, a tall, lank, green specimen of humanity presented himself before the Association as a candidate for the ministry. He was not regarded as being entirely of sound mind, and labored under the hallucination that he was especially "called to preach," and kept constantly importuning the association to grant him the necessary license. In addition to his partially unbalanced mind, young Weeks was the possessor of as huge and ungainly a pair of feet as ever trod shoe leather. Tired of his importunities, and not being disposed to grant the license, the Association handed him over to Smith, with instructions to make an end of the case, and between them took place the following conversation:

Smith—"So, Brother Weeks, you think you have a special call to preach?"

Weeks—"Yes, the Lord has called me to the work, but the Association refuses the license."

Smith—"How do you know that you are called?"

Weeks—"Know it? I feel it in my heart of hearts. I want my license."

Smith—"Do you believe the bible, Brother Weeks?"

Weeks—"Certainly I do, every word of it."

Smith—"Well, if I can prove by the bible that you are not called to preach, will you be satisfied to drop the matter not further importune the Association for a license?"

Brother Weeks assented to this, and "Raccoon Smith" deliberately opened the New Testament at Romans, x, 15, and in a grave tone read:

"How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace," etc; then glancing at Weeks' large feet, remarked:

"You see, Brother Weeks, that the feet of the preacher are beautiful; you, sir, have the most monstrous ugly feet of any man in the State of Kentucky; therefore, by this Bible, it is clear that you have not been especially called."

As Smith finished his remarks, the entire Association went off in a paroxysm of laughter, and Weeks, really concluding that he had not been "called," bolted from the meeting house, and never afterward annoyed the Association for license."

A gentleman whose custom it was to entertain very often a circle of friends, observed that one of them was eating something before grace was asked and determined to cure him. Upon the repetition of the offence, he said: "For what we are about to receive, and for what James Taylor has already received, the Lord make us truly thankful."

A half orphan, whose mother is given to chastising him, altogether dissents from the idea that benevolence is typified by the widow's smite.

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