

## *The Intruders*

In 1801, in a forest of dark pines somewhere on the eastern slopes of the great mountains between Europe and Russia, a man stood one winter night watching and listening, as though he waited for some animal of the woods to come within the range of his rifle. Mikhael Ivanoff peered into the night. But the creature for whom he was looking was a human enemy.

The forest lands of Mikhael, the Prince of Ivanoff were deep and wide, and they were well stocked with game. Just now, Ivanoff stood on remarkable piece of land at the edge of his property. The narrow strip of woodland that lay on its outskirts was not remarkable for the game animals it contained or for the shooting it afforded, but it was the most jealously guarded of all its owner's territory. A famous lawsuit, in the days of his grandfather, had taken this land from the possession of a neighboring family of landowners -- the House of Medved. And the losing family -- those famously proud Medveds -- had never accepted the judgment of the Courts; they stubbornly persisted in regarding the land as their own. A long series of poaching incidents had embittered the relationships between the families for three generations. But there was more to this conflict than met the eye.

The neighbor-feud had grown into a personal one since Mikhael Ivanoff had come to be head of his family. If there was one man in the world whom he detested and wished ill it was Gregory Medved, the head of the opposing family and a tireless game-snatcher and raider of the disputed border-forest. The feud might, perhaps, have died down or been compromised if the personal ill-will of the two men had not stood in the way. As boys, they had thirsted for one another's blood; as men each prayed that bad things might happen on the other, and, no doubt, as grandfathers they would go to their graves hating each other.

On this windy late-November night, Mikhael had banded together his forest workers to watch the dark woods and keep a lookout for the prowling thieves from Gregory Medved's family, whom he suspected of intruding from across the land boundary. It was a wild night. The deer -- animals that usually kept in the sheltered brush during a storm -- were running like driven things tonight. There was movement and unrest among creatures that usually slept through the cold dark hours. Assuredly, there was a disturbing element in the forest, and Mikhael Ivanoff could guess from where it came. *Not the wind, he thought, but that damned Gregory Medved disturbs my forest. I sense it. I sense him. If that*

*devil shows himself, I will send him back to the Hell that spawned him.*

He began to look around for intruders. He strayed away by himself from the watchers whom he had placed in ambush on the top of the hill, and wandered far down the steep slopes amid the wild tangle of undergrowth, peering through the trees and listening through the wind for sight and sound of enemies. If only on this wild night, in this dark, lone spot, he might come across Gregory Medved. *Man to man, with none to witness, we would face each other, and he would die.* Then it happened: as he stepped round the trunk of a huge pine, he came face to face with the man he sought.

The two enemies stood staring at one another for a long silent moment. Each had a rifle in his hand; each had hate in his heart and murder in his mind. The chance had come to give full play to the passions of a lifetime. But no man who has been brought up in civilization can easily shoot down his neighbor in cold blood without a moment's pause. Each man hesitated for just a moment before moving for an act of violence. And before the moment of hesitation had given way to action, a deed of Nature's own violence overwhelmed them both. The storm shrieked like an

enraged witch and the unearthly noise had been answered by a splitting crash over their heads. Before they could leap aside, a falling tree had thundered down on them like a murderous giant.

Mikhael Ivanoff found himself stretched on the ground, one arm numb beneath him and the other held almost as helplessly in a tight tangle of forked branches, while both legs were pinned beneath the fallen mass of tree. His heavy hunting boots had saved his feet from being crushed, but if his fractures were not as serious as they might have been, it was at least evident that he could not move from his present position till someone came to release him. The descending branches had slashed the skin of his face, and he had to wink away some drops of blood from his eyelashes before he could take in a general view of the disaster that covered him. At his side, so near that, under ordinary circumstances, he could almost have touched him, lay Gregory Medved, alive and struggling, but obviously as helplessly pinned down as himself. All round them lay a thickly strewn wreckage of splintered branches and broken twigs.

Relief at being alive and anger at his situation brought a strange combination of “Thank you, God!”s and “Damn you Medved!”s to Ivanoff’s lips. Gregory Medved, who was nearly

blinded with the blood which trickled across his eyes, stopped his struggling for a moment to listen, and then gave a short, snarling laugh.

"So you're not killed, as you ought to be, but you're caught, anyway," he cried; "caught fast. What a joke, Mikhael Ivanoff trapped in his own forest -- the forest he stole from the Medved family, *my* family. There's real justice for you!" And he laughed again, mockingly and savagely.

"I'm caught in my own forest-land," replied Ivanoff, "and my forest is not friendly to those who would trouble me. When my men come to release us, you'll wish, perhaps, that you were in a better plight than to be caught poaching on a neighbor's land, damnation come upon you!"

Gregory was silent for a moment; then he answered quietly. "Are you sure, Ivanoff, that your men will find much to release? I have men, too, in the forest tonight, close behind me, and THEY will be here first and do the releasing. When they drag me out from under these damned branches, it won't need much clumsiness on their part to roll this mass of tree-trunk right over on the top of you, cut you into a million pieces, and leave the scraps for the

vultures to enjoy. *Your* men will find a few scraps of you on the ground -- ground rightfully belonging to the house of Medved. For decency's sake I shall send my condolences to your family. But privately, I will laugh."

"Pig! My men had orders to follow in ten minutes time," said Mikhael fiercely, "seven of which must have gone by already, and when they get me out, I will remember your threat. Since you will have met your death for poaching on my lands, I don't think I can decently send any message of condolence to your family."

"Good," snarled Gregory, "good. We fight this quarrel out to the death, you and I and our forest workers, with no cursed intruders to come between us. Death and damnation to you, Mikhael Ivanoff!"

"The same to you, Gregory Medved. Dog! Thief!"

Both men spoke with the bitterness of possible defeat before them, for each knew that it might be long before his men would seek him out or find him. It was a bare matter of chance which party of allies would arrive first on the scene.

The two of them had given up the useless struggle to free them-selves from the mass of wood holding them down. Mikhael limited his efforts to bringing one partially free arm near enough to his outer coat pocket to draw out his wine flask. Even when he had accomplished that operation, it was some time before he could manage to unscrew the stopper or get any of the liquid down his throat. But what a Heaven-sent drink it was! The wine was like silk as it flowed into his pain-racked body. It eased the pain and warmed the blood as night closed in on the chill air of November. The drink was so soothing, warming, and reviving to the wounded man that he could not help sighing in relief. His enemy looked at him with concealed envy.

Mikhael Ivanoff looked back at Gregory Medved with something like a throb of pity. His enemy lay there, grimacing, and just keeping the groans of pain and weariness from crossing his lips.

Then, against his better judgment, some words just came out of Ivanoff's mouth: "Medved. Could you reach this flask if I threw it over to you?" There is good wine in it, and we might as well be as comfortable as we can. I'll be killing you soon enough. Let us drink, even if tonight one of us dies."

"No, I can scarcely see anything; there is so much blood caked round my eyes," said Gregory, "and in any case I don't drink wine with an enemy."

"Damn you," Ivanoff said. "Take it anyway. I dare you." And then he threw the wine over to Medved.

Gregory Medved laughed a bitter laugh, managed to find the flask, and drank a drink, sighing in relief as the silken liquid eased his pain. Toasting his enemy, he threw back the flask. Then he raised the same hand that had toasted in an obscene gesture at the man who had always been his enemy.

Mikhael couldn't help but laugh as he gestured back at Gregory. "I hope that when we're go to hell, the devil doesn't make me look at your ugly face."

"That's what my mother said when she saw my face on the day I was born," Gregory replied.

Both men laughed the way men laugh as the end draws near. Then they became silent and lay listening to the angry screeching

of the wind.

An idea was slowly forming in Mikhael's brain, an idea that gained strength every time that he looked across at the man who was fighting so grimly and bravely against pain and exhaustion. *Two men at death's door see the world with the same eyes*, he thought. *This Gregory faces death like a true man. He's a man -- a man like me.* And in a moment Mikhael was feeling the old fierce hatred dying down -- just a bit. *Is it too late to end a hatred?* he thought.

Then he spoke. "Medved," he said, "do as you please if your men come first. It was a fair deal. But as for me, I like your bravery. I'm changing my mind. If my men are the first to come you shall be the first to be helped, as though you were my guest. That'll show you how I respect a man who can look death in the face and grin. We have quarreled like devils all our lives over this stupid strip of forest, where the trees can't even stand upright in the howling wind. Lying here tonight, thinking, I've come to think we've been lifelong fools; there are better things in life than getting the better of a boundary dispute. Neighbor, if you will help me to bury the old quarrel, I -- I will ask you to be my friend."

Gregory Medved was silent for so long that Mikhael Ivanoff thought, perhaps, he had fainted with the pain of his injuries. Then he spoke slowly.

“It’s too late, isn’t it? The family feud is too old to allow for peace.”

“Is it too late?” replied Mikhael?

Gregory spoke: "Funny to think, though. How the whole region would stare and talk if we rode into the market-square together. No one living can remember seeing a Medved and an Ivanoff talking to one another in friendship. And what peace there would be among the forest folk if we ended our feud tonight. And if we choose to make peace among our people there is none other to interfere, no intruders from outside. So maybe it’s really not too late”

Mikhael continued the thought of his new friend: “ You would come as a guest beneath my roof, and I would come and feast on some holiday at your castle . . . I would never fire a shot on your land, except when you invited me as a guest; and you should come and hunt with me down in the marshes where the

wild birds are. In all the countryside there are none that could stop it if we willed to make peace. I never thought to do other than hate you all my life, but I think I have changed my mind about some things, this last half-hour. I will be your comrade."

For a space of time, both men were silent, turning over in their minds the wonderful changes that this dramatic reconciliation would bring about. In the cold, gloomy forest, with the wind shrieking like a crazed witch through the naked branches, they lay and waited for the help that might at last bring release to both. And each prayed a private prayer that his men might be the first to arrive, so that he might be the first to show honorable attention to the enemy who had become a friend.

Presently, as the wind dropped for a moment, Mikhael Ivanoff broke silence. "It's not too late to end this feud. Let's shout together for help," he said. Our voices together will carry farther."

"We can try," said Gregory. "Together, then. Maybe you're right. Maybe it's not too late."

The two raised their voices in a prolonged hunting call.

"Together again," said Mikhael a few minutes later, after listening in vain for an answering yell.

"I heard nothing but the wind," said Gregory hoarsely.

There was silence again for some minutes, and then Mikhael Ivanoff gave a joyful cry. "I can see figures coming through the woods. They are following in the way I came down the hillside."

Both men raised their voices in as loud a shout as they could muster.

"They hear us! They've stopped. Now they see us. They're running down the hill towards us," cried Mikhael.

"How many of them are there?" asked Gregory.

"I can't see distinctly," said Mikhael; "nine or ten,"

"Then they are yours," said Gregory; "I had only seven out with me."

"They are making all the speed they can, brave lads," said Mikhael gladly.

"Are they your men?" asked Gregory. "Are they your men?" he repeated impatiently as Mikhael did not answer.

"No!" said Mikhael Ivanoff with a laugh -- the idiotic chattering laugh of a man made insane with hideous fear.

"Who are they?" asked Gregory quickly, straining his eyes to see .

"Wolves! They are wolves!"

As the hungry pack moved in on them, both men realized that it was all too late.