

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

Conrad Damonoff gazed into his antagonist's face a few moments in silence. His face was ashen pale, and his whole frame quivered. Upon his forehead there was a livid spot where he had been struck, but the skin was not broken.

"Ruric Nevel," he said, in a hissing maddening tone, "you will hear from me. The mad spirit of a vengeance such as mine can not be trifled with."

And with this he turned away.

"Paul," said the gun-maker, turning to his boy, after the men had gone away, "not a word of this to my mother. Be sure."

CHAPTER III.
LOVE.

That night Ruric Nevel had strange fancies while waking, and strange dreams while sleeping. Long and deeply did he ponder upon the strange business which had called Count Conrad to his shop, and in no way, under no light, could he get any reason from it. Why he, a youth who had never spoken with the proud Duke, save once on common business, and who was so far down in the social scale, should have been thus called upon to give a virtual consent to the bestowal of Rosalind Valda's hand, was beyond his ken. He was but a poor artisan—she, a wealthy heiress and a scion of nobility—and she was under the legal guardianship of the Duke, whose word, so far as she was concerned, was law. And again—Conrad Damonoff was a Count, and reputed to be wealthy. To be sure, he was somewhat dissolute, but then a majority of his contemporaries were the same. Now, if this Count loved the lady Rosalind, and had asked for her hand, and the Duke was willing he should have it, why had this extraordinary proposal been sent to the poor gun-maker?

Ruric asked this question of himself a hundred times. He would begin and lay down all the premises in his mind, and then he would try to make the deduction; but no reasonable one could he arrive at. One thought clung about him like a dim specter at night, which hope would make an angel, and which fear would paint a demon. Could it be possible that Rosalind had told her love for him, and that the Duke would pay some deference to it? He tried to think so. Hope whispered that it might be so. But fear would force itself in, and speak in tones so loud that they could not be misunderstood. Finally the youth resolved upon the only reasonable course. He concluded to let the matter rest, so far as his own surmises were concerned, until he could see Rosalind—and that he was determined to do as soon as possible.

On the following morning, as he was preparing for breakfast, he saw Olga, the Duke's pass by, and strike off into the Borodino road. Now, thought he, is the time for the visit to Rosalind; and as soon as he had eaten his breakfast he prepared for the visit. He dressed well, and no man in Moscow had a nobler look when the dust of toil was removed from his brow and carb.

"Paul," he said, entering the shop where the boy was at work, "I may be back at noon. At any rate, such is my intention; and if either of those men call who were here yesterday, you may tell them so."

"But," returned the lad, "if they ask me any questions?"

"Answer them as you think best."

"And if they should ask me if you would fight?"

"Tell them that I hold my life as too dear to sell to such as they."

"But surely, my master, the Count will challenge you."

"I think he will. And," added Ruric, as an entire new thought came to his mind, "mayhap he came here to create a quarrel to that end. By my soul, I think he did."

"I am sure of it," said Paul.

A moment Ruric's frame quivered with suppressed passion; then he said:

"Let them come—and if they come—tell them, or him, that I am their very humble servant in all things reasonable."

Paul promised, and then the gun-maker turned away. In the hall he threw on his heavy fur pelisse, and having reached the nearest hostelry he took a horse and sledge and started off for the Kremlin, within which the duke resided.

Within one of the sumptuously furnished apartments of the palace of the Duke of Tula, sat Rosalind Valda. She was a beautiful girl, molded in perfect form, with the full flush of health and vigor, and possessing a face of peculiar sweetness and intelligence. She was only nineteen years of age, and she had been ten years an orphan. Her hair was of a golden hue, and the sunlight loved to dwell amid the clustering curls. Her eyes, which were of a deep, liquid blue, sparkled brightly when she was happy; and when she smiled the lovely dimples of her cheeks held the smile even after it had faded from her lips. There was nothing of the aristocrat in her look—nothing proud, nothing haughty; but gentleness and love were the true ele-

ments of her soul, and she could only be happy when she knew that she was truly loved. She liked respect, but she spurned that respect which only aims at outward show, while the heart may be reeking with vilest sensualism.

Rosalind sat there, in the apartment which was hers for her own private use, and she was sad and thoughtful. One fair hand supported her pure brow, while with the other she twisted the ends of the silken sash that confined her heavy robe. Thus she sat when the door of her apartment was opened, and a young girl entered. This new-comer was a small, fair creature, bright and quick, with that raven hair, and those large, dark eyes of dreamy light which bespeak the child of Moslem blood. Her name was Zenobie, and she was now about sixteen years of age. Rosalind's father had picked her up on the battlefield from which the Turks had fled, and being unable to find any claimant he had brought her home, then almost an infant. And now she was Rosalind's attendant and companion. She loved her kind and gentle mistress, and would have laid down life itself in the service.

"How now, Zenobie?" asked Rosalind, as she noticed the girl hesitate.

"There is a gentleman below who would see you," the girl replied.

"Tell him I can not see him," said Rosalind, trembling.

"But this is Ruric Nevel, my mistress."

"Ruric!" uttered the fair maiden, starting up, while the rich blood mounted to her brow and temples. "Oh, I am glad he has come. My prayers are surely answered. Lead him hither, Zenobie."

The girl departed, and ere long afterwards Ruric entered the apartment. He walked quickly to where Rosalind had arisen to her feet, and taking one of her hands in both his own he pressed it to his lips. He had had a well-formed speech upon his lips when he entered the room, but 'twas gone now. He could only gaze into the lovely face before him and murmur the name that sounded so sweetly to his ears. But the emotions of his soul became calm at length, and then he spoke with more freedom.

"Lady," he said, after he had taken a seat, "you will pardon me for this visit when you know its cause. And you will pardon me, too, if I speak plainly what I have to speak."

"Surely, sir—"

"Oh—call me Ruric. Let us at least not forget the friendship of childhood."

"Then I am not a lady," said Rosalind smiling.

"No, Rosalind."

"Ah, Ruric."

"As we were in childhood," whispered the youth.

"In all but years," returned Rosalind, in the same low tone.

"And I may wear the same image in my heart?"

"I cannot cast it from mine if I would."

"The image of childhood, dear Rosalind?"

"Aye—save that it has grown to manhood, dear Ruric."

What more could he ask for love? He had not aimed at this confession so soon. But he put it not from him now. He gazed a moment into the fair maiden's kindling eye, and as he saw the love-lit tear gathering there and the happy smile working its way about the rosy lips, and away in the joyous dimples, he opened his arms and clasped the fondly loved one to his bosom.

"Oh, I am not deceived in this," he murmured. "Speak, dearest one."

"I can not forget the love of the happy time ago," the noble girl replied, gazing up through her happy tears. "Oh, how many and many an hour have I prayed to God that those days might return, and that the one true heart of earth I loved might be mine once more. Ruric, why should I hide the truth, or why set it aside? To me thou art all in all. I have no one else to love, and none to love me else, save the noble girl who brought you hither. I can tell you no more."

Happy Ruric! Happy at that moment—forgetting all else but the love that gleamed out upon him then, he clasped the cherished object ardently to his bosom.

But the moments flew on, and at length his mind came to the subject of his visit.

"Rosalind," he said, holding one of her fair hands in his grasp "you know the Count Conrad Damonoff?"

"Aye," returned the maiden, with a shudder. "He is here very often, and he has forced himself upon my companionship when, if he had sense, he must have known I liked it not."

"He is a suitor for your hand, is he not?"

"He was; but he is not now."

"Not now?" repeated Ruric, with surprise. "What mean you?"

"Why—simply that he has asked the Duke for my hand, and that he was answered in the negative."

"Did you hear the Duke answer him?"

"No; but so the Duke assured me he had done. But what mean you?"

"I will tell you. Yesterday the Count came to my dwelling, accompanied by Stephen Urin. He had a paper drawn up by the Duke's own hand, in which I was named to say—or rather, by which the writer said—that he disclaimed all pretensions to your hand, and that he wished not to marry you—that he freely gave you up, in doing so, to the Duke, in the sphere of his own social circle some companion

when he wished. And this I was asked to sign."

"By the Count?"

"Yes—by the Duke's orders."

"Oh—it cannot be," uttered the fair girl, trembling.

"And he further assured me that the Duke had requested him to obtain my signature thereto, so that he might receive your hand without impediment."

"So that the Count might receive my hand?"

"Yes."

"But the Duke assured me only yesterday that I should be troubled no more with the Count. May there not be some mistake?"

"There can be no mistake on my part. The instrument was in the Duke's own hand."

"But you did not sign it."

"Ask me if I took my own life—if I made a curse for all I loved."

"It is strange," the maiden murmured, bowing her head a few moments. "And yet," she added, looking up into her companion's face, "I do not think the Duke would be treacherous?"

"He may be," answered Ruric. "He knows how lightly our noble emperor knows empty titles, and perhaps he fears if this matter came to the imperial ear, and you should claim the right to marry with whom you pleased, Peter would grant your prayer. Hence he wished to get my claim set aside so that he may have a clearer field in which to move. Do you know how the Duke's affairs stand at present?"

Rosalind thought awhile ere she answered; and then, while a startled expression came to her face she said:

"Ruric, I do remember now that between the Duke and young Damonoff there is some matter of dispute. There is some question of property."

"Ah," uttered the youth earnestly. "How is that?"

"Why—as near as I can understand it, there was a dispute between the Duke and the elder Damonoff concerning the ownership of Drotzen, the estate on the Don, in Kaluga; and since the father's death Conrad has maintained his family claim. You know the Duke and the old Count married sisters, and this estate belonged to them."

"And now," suggested Ruric, "may not the Duke mean to compromise this matter by giving your hand to the Count, and taking Drotzen in exchange?"

"Oh, I cannot think so," the maiden returned earnestly. "The Duke would not do that. He is kind to me, I am sure. He loves me as though I were his own child. I know he does, for in a thousand ways he has shown it. He is mindful of my comfort, and anticipates my every want. No, no; if he is deceiving any one he must be deceiving the Count."

Ruric started as the new suspicion flashed upon him. Had the Duke sent Damonoff upon that mission on purpose to get him into a quarrel. "By my soul," thought the youth to himself, "the Duke knows that I have taught the sword-play, and he knows that the Count would be no match for me. So he thinks in this subtle manner to make me an instrument for ridding him of a plague." But the youth was careful not to let Rosalind know of this. He knew she would be unhappy if she knew that a duel was likely to come off between himself and the Count.

After some minutes of comparative silence, Ruric touched upon a point which lay very near his heart.

"Rosalind," he said, taking both her hands in his own, "there is one point upon which we have never spoken; and I know you would have me speak plainly and candidly. You know my situation. My father and your father fought side by side, but my father fell, while yours returned to his home. For his eminent services your father received a title and a noble estate from the grateful Feodor, while my father was only forgotten. Hence our stations are now widely different. Yet I am not poor. No other man in the empire can compete with me in the manufacture of arms, and from my labor I derive a handsome income. You know it all. And now, if other obstacles were removed, would you give me your hand, and become mine for life?"

"Aye, Ruric," the noble girl answered, with beaming eyes and a joyful expression of countenance. "Were you reduced to the lowest estate of poverty, so long as your generous, pure soul was free, I should only be the more anxious to lift you up. Oh, my love knows only the heart whereon it is secured, and for my future of joy I ask only the truth of my husband's love."

"Bless you, dearest," Ruric murmured, clasping the fair being to his bosom. And for a long while Rosalind's head lay pillowed upon the shoulder of the man she so truly, fondly loved.

That was not the time for bringing forward doubts and fears. Ruric had many questions in his mind concerning the impediments that stood in the way of their union, but he kept them to himself now. At length he arose to take his departure, and he simply said, as he drew the maiden to his side:

"You will not allow the Duke to give your hand away."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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