

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

"Never, Ruric."

"If he asks you for your hand to bestow upon any of his friends, you will tell him—"

"That my heart is not mine to give, and that my hand cannot go without it."

"Oh—bless you, Rosali d—bless you! God keep and guard you ever."

There was one warm, ardent pressure of lip to lip, and then Ruric Nevel turned away, and was soon in the open court. Here he entered his sledge, and then drove to the barracks in the Khatagorod, where he inquired for Alaric Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard. The officer was quickly found, and as he met Ruric his salutation was warm and cordial. He was a young man, not over five-and-twenty, and one of the finest-looking soldiers in the guard.

"Alaric," said the gun-maker, after the first friendly salutations had passed, "I may have a meeting with Conrad, Count Damonoff. He has sought a quarrel—insulted me most grossly—aimed a blow at my head—and I knocked him down. You can judge as well as I what the result must be."

"Most surely he will challenge you," cried the officer, excitedly.

"So I think," resumed Ruric, calmly.

"And now, will you serve me in the event?"

"With pleasure."

"I may refer his messenger to you?"

"Yes—surely. And how shall I act?"

"Knock him down again under the same provocation."

"I understand. You wish to retract nothing?"

"No. Listen; I will tell you all since I seek your aid."

And thereupon Ruric related all that had occurred at the time of the Count's visit to his shop.

"Good!" uttered Alaric, as the gun-maker finished. "He must challenge you, and then you'll punish him. He's too proud now. He can handle some of his lilytops who associate with him; and perhaps he thinks he can do the same when he comes out among the harder men. But never mind—I will be punctual and faithful."

Ruric reached home just as his mother was placing the board for dinner. He often went away on business, and she thought not of asking him any questions.

CHAPTER IV.

THE CHALLENGE.

In the afternoon Ruric retired to his shop, where he went at work upon a gun which had been ordered some days before. As yet he had said nothing to Paul concerning the affair of the day before since his return from the Kremlin. He asked him now, however, if any one had called.

"Only the monk," returned Paul, without seeming to consider that there was anything very important in the visit.

"Do you mean the black monk—Valdimir?" asked the young man, starting.

"Yes, my master. He called here about the middle of the forenoon. He wanted one of the small daggers with the pearl hilt."

"And did you let him have one?"

"Certainly. He paid me four ducats for it, and would have paid more had I been willing to take it."

"And did he make any conversation?"

"Yes. He asked me why the Count Damonoff came here yesterday."

"Ha—How did he know of their visit?"

"He was waiting at the inn for a sledge when he overheard the Count and his companion conversing upon the subject."

"And did he ask you any questions touching the particulars?"

"Yes—many."

"And how answered you?"

"I told him the whole story, from beginning to end. I found that he knew something of their purpose from what he accidentally overheard, and rather than have him go away full of surmises, I told him all."

"Of the message, too?"

"Yes, my master. I told him all that happened, from the showing of the paper which the Duke had drawn up, to the departure of the angry man."

"And what did the monk say?" Ruric asked, very earnestly.

"Why—he said he knew the Count, and that he was a proud, reckless fellow, and worth but little to society. That was all. He did not seem to care much about it any way; only he said he should have done just as you did, and that every law of justice would bear you out. He had more curiosity than interest, though I am sure all his sympathies are with you."

"Very well," returned Ruric. "It can matter but little what the monk thinks about it, though I would rather have him know the truth if he must know anything, for I would not be misunderstood."

"He understands it all now my master; and I trust you are not offended at the liberty I took in telling him."

"Not at all, Paul—not at all."

Here the conversation dropped, and the work was resumed in silence. It was past

three o'clock when Ruric's mother came and informed him that a gentleman in the house would speak with him.

"Is it Stephen Urzin?" asked the youth. His mother said it was.

"Then bid him come out here."

Claudia retired, and in a few moments more the gentleman made his appearance.

"Ruric Nevel," he said, bowing very stiffly and haughtily, "I bring a message from the Count Damonoff."

"Very well sir," returned the gun-maker proudly, "I am ready to receive it."

Thereupon Urzin drew a sealed note from his pocket, and handed it to Ruric, who took it and broke the seal. He opened it, and read as follows:

"RURIC NEVEL.—An insult of the most aggravating nature has for the time leveled all distinctions of caste between us. Your blood alone can wash out the stain. I would not murder you outright, and in no other way but this can I reach you. My friend, the bearer of this, will make all arrangements. If you dare not meet me, say so, that all may know who is the coward."

"DAMONOFF."

When Ruric had read the missive he crushed it in his hand, and gazed its bearer some moments in the face without speaking.

"Will you answer?" asked Urzin. He spoke more softly than before, for he saw something in the gun-maker's face which he dared not provoke.

"Are you acquainted with Alaric Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard?"

"Yes, sir—I know him well."

"Then let me refer you to him. He will make all necessary arrangements, and I shall hold myself bound by his plans. I trust that is satisfactory."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you and I need have no more to say."

"Only on one point," said Urzin, with some little show of confusion. "You are the challenged party, and you will have the choice of weapons. The Count has not mentioned this—mind you, he has not; but I, as his friend, deem it no more than right to speak of it—I trust you will choose a gentleman's weapon. In the use of the pistol, or the gun, he is not versed."

"While you imagine I am," said Ruric with a contemptuous curl of the lip; for he knew that the man was lying. He could see by the fellow's very looks that Damonoff had commissioned him to broach this matter.

"Of course you are," returned Urzin.

"And the Count is most excellently versed in the use of the sword, is he not?"

"He is accounted a fair swordsman."

"Aye—so I thought. But it matters not to me. The thought had not entered my mind before, save that I supposed swords would be the only weapons thought of. However, Orsa will settle it with you. I have given him no directions at all, save to serve me as he thinks proper, and to act upon the understanding that if I have given offense to the Count, I would do the same again under provocation. You understand now?"

"I do, sir," returned Urzin, in a choking tone.

"Then wait a moment, and I will give you a message to Orsa."

Thus speaking Ruric went to his desk, and upon the bottom of the missive he had received from the Count he wrote:

"DEAR ALARIC—I send this to you by the same hand that bore it to me, and you are hereby empowered to act for me as you may deem proper. I shall be governed strictly by your arrangements."

"RURIC."

Having written this he showed it to Urzin, and asked him if he would bear it to the lieutenant. An affirmative reply was given, and then simply folding the note in the opposite way from the original fold, the gun-maker superscribed it anew to the lieutenant, and handed it to his visitor. Urzin took it, and with a stiff bow, but without speaking, he turned and left the place.

That evening, about eight o'clock, a sledge drove up to Ruric's door, and Alaric Orsa entered the house. He called the youth aside, and informed him that the arrangements had all been made.

"Damonoff is in a hurry," he said, "and we have appointed the meeting at ten o'clock to-morrow forenoon. It will take place at the bend of the river just beyond the Viska Hill."

"And the weapons?" asked Ruric.

"Swords," returned Orsa. "The Count will bring his own, and he gives you the privilege of selecting such an one as you choose."

"I thank you, Alaric, for your kindness thus far, and you may rest assured that I shall be prompt."

"Suppose I call here in the morning for you?" suggested the visitor.

"I should be pleased to have you do so."

"I will, then. I shall be along in good season with my sledge, and we shall both reach the ground together."

Thus it was arranged, and then Orsa took his leave.

When Ruric returned to his seat by the fireplace he noticed that his mother watched him narrowly, and with more than ordinary interest. He had once made up his mind that he would say nothing to his mother about the affair until it was over; but as the time was set, and the hour drew nigh, his mind wavered. When it was over where might he be? But he was cut short in his reflections by the voice of his parent.

"Ruric," she said, and her voice trembled while she spoke, "you will pardon me for prying into your affairs, but I cannot hide from myself that something of more than usual moment is the matter with you. Why are these men calling to and fro? And why are you so thoughtful and moody? You know a mother's feelings—and you will pardon a mother's anxiety."

"Surely, my mother," the youth returned, gazing up for a moment, and then letting his eyes droop again. At length he resumed—"I had made up my mind to tell you all ere you spoke."

There was something deep and significant in Ruric's tone, and his mother quickly caught the spark.

"What is it?" she tremblingly uttered, moving her chair nearer to her child's side.

"Listen," the young man said; and thereupon he detailed the circumstances attending the visit of the Count Damonoff to his shop. Then he told of his own visit to Rosalind, and its result; and then of the visit of Stephen Urzin.

"And now, my mother," he added, without waiting for any reply, "you know it all. You see how I am situated. Remember, our nation has reached its present point by successful war. The soul of the nation is built upon military honor, and since our noble Emperor has opened the way of advancement of the lowest of his subjects who are brave and true, the coward is looked upon with disgust upon all hands. Yet, my mother, I would have you speak."

For some moments Claudia Nevel was silent. But at length she said, while a tear glistened in her eye:

"I have given one loved being up to my country's good. Russia took my husband from me, and I could ill afford now to lose my son. Yet, rather than one stain should rest upon his name I would see him dead before me. Oh, Ruric, you know whether dishonor would rest upon you were you to refuse this challenge."

"I will speak plainly, my dear mother," returned the youth in a tremulous tone, for his parent's kindness had moved him.

"In my soul I should feel perfectly justified in refusing this meeting, for no principle of real honor is at stake. But were I to back out now from this, I should never meet another generous look in Moscow. Every one would point the finger of scorn towards me, and the word coward would ring always in my ears. It may be a false state of things—I feel that it really is so; but how can I help it? It is the curse of all great military epochs. Battle alone makes heroes, and so all must measure their honor by the force of their arms. The Count carries even now upon his brow the mark of my blow, and all will say he has a right to demand satisfaction; though I know that he provoked the quarrel on purpose. I cannot refuse him on the ground of station, for he is above me in that. I must meet him."

"Then," said the mother, in a low, calm tone, but with much effort, "you shall not feel that your mother would thwart your design. If your own good judgment says, go—then go. If they bring your body to me in the stern grasp of death, I shall pray for the soul that has gone, and shall hope to meet you in the home of the redeemed. If you come back to me alive I shall thank God that you are spared; but alas! the joy will be clouded with the thought of blood upon your hands, and the knowledge that my joy is another's grief."

"No, no, my mother," cried Ruric, quickly and earnestly. "I will not have a fellow-being's blood upon my hand if I can avoid it. Only to save my own life will I take his. He has done all this himself—all—all. The quarrel was his own, and the first blow was his. The challenge is his, and now is not the responsibility his also?"

"It is my son, so far as he alone is concerned. If you have a responsibility it must be to your own soul. But tell me—has not the Emperor made some new law touching this practice of duelling?"

"Yes—but only the challenger is responsible. The party challenged is held free from blame in the eyes of the law."

"Then I shall interpose no more objections," said the mother. She tried to speak hopefully, but she could not hide the fearful sadness of her heart. "Could fervent prayer avert the blow it should not fall; but I can only pray as one without power."

A long time after this was passed in silence. Both the mother and son seemed to have something upon their minds which they wished to say, but dared not. But the former at length overcame her reluctance.

"Ruric, my son," she said, keeping back the tears that struggled for utterance in their silent speech, "is there any little word you would leave?—any matter of moment?"

"No, no," the boy answered, speaking calmly by effort. "I am yours, and all is yours. But I shall not fall."

"Ah—be not too confident, my son. Let no such assurance lead you to forget your God. I have heard of this Count. It was he who slew Rutger; and Mom-jako, too, he slew in the duel. He is an expert swordsman, and surely means to kill you if he can."

"I am aware of that my mother. But do you not know that we are all prone to overlook our own powers when wondering upon the feats of others? I may be pardoned for assuring you that the only man who has ever yet overcome the Count at the sword-play was one of my own scholars. While in Spain I practised with some of the best swordsmen in the kingdom. But listen; I will send one word. For yourself I can tell you nothing which you do not know; but yet you may see Rosalind. If you do, tell her—but you know my soul. You can tell her as you please. But I shall not fall."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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