

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER I.

"But have you never seen him before?" Ruric asked, in an earnest, eager tone. "I cannot tell, my son. His face most surely calls up some strange emotions in my mind, but I think I never saw him before."

"And yet he seems familiar to me," the son resumed. "Those eyes I surely have seen before, but to save my soul I cannot remember when nor where."

And so Ruric pondered, but to no avail. After he had retired to his bed he lay awake and thought of the strange face; and all through the night his dreams were but startling visions of the Black Monk.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE PROCEEDING.

When Ruric came down in the morning he found the monk already there, and breakfast nearly ready. But little was said during the meal time, for the monk seemed busy with thoughts of his own, and Ruric was too much engaged in studying the strange man's features, and pondering upon the various doubts and surmises that had entered his mind. After the meal was over the monk accompanied the gun-maker to his shop, and there he spent some time in examining the quaint articles of machinery that were used in the manufacture of arms.

Ruric was engaged in finishing a pair of pistols, and for some minutes the monk had stood silently by his side watching his movements. At length the youth stopped in his work and laid the pistol down.

"Excuse me, good father," he said, rather nervously, at the same time gazing his visitor in the face; "but I must ask you a question. Where have I seen you before?"

"How should I know?" the monk returned, with a smile.

"Why," resumed Ruric, with some hesitancy, "I knew not but that you might enlighten me. I have surely seen you somewhere."

"And are there not hundreds whom you have seen in this great city—aye, thousands—whom you might recognize as you recognize me?"

"Ah—it may be so; but not like this. There may be a thousand faces I would recollect to have seen, but not one of them would excite even a passing emotion in my soul. But your face calls up some powerful emotion—some startling memory of the past—which bothers me. Who are you, good father? What are you? Where have we met before? Was it in Spain?"

"No," said Valdimir, with a shake of the head. And then with a more serious shade upon his face, he added: "Let this pass now. I will not deny to you that there may be some grounds for your strange fancies; but I assure you most sacredly that until last night I never came in direct companionship with you before—at any rate not to my knowledge. You have acted the good Samaritan towards me, and I hope I may at some time return the favor."

"No, no," quickly responded the youth; "if you return it then it will be a favor no more. I have only done for you what every man should do to his neighbor, and so far from needing thanks for my services I would rather give them for the occasion, for I know of no source of joy so pure and pleasurable as that feeling in the soul which tells us we have done a good act."

The dark monk reached forth and took the youthful artisan's hand, and with more than ordinary emotion he said:

"You touch the heart-strings of the soul with a noble hand, my son, and if any deed of kindness can give me joy it will be a deed for you. We may meet again, and until then I can only say, God bless and prosper thee."

With these words the monk turned away and ere Ruric could command presence of mind enough to follow him he had gone from the house. The youth wished to say something, but amid the varied emotions that went leaping through his mind he could gather no connected thoughts.

After the monk was gone Ruric returned to his bench and resumed his work. He asked his boy if he had ever seen the strange man before, but Paul only shook his head, and answered dubiously.

"What do you mean?" the gun-maker asked, gazing the boy in the face. "Do you think you have seen him before?"

"I cannot tell, my master. I may have seen him before, and I may not. But surely you would not suppose that my memory would serve you better than your own."

Ruric was not fully assured by this answer. He gazed into Paul's face, and he fancied he detected some show of intelligence there which had not been spoken. But he resolved to ask no more questions at present. He had asked enough, he thought, upon such a subject, and he made up his mind to bother himself no more about it, feeling sure that if his boy knew anything which would be for his master's interest to know it would be communicated in due season. So he applied himself anew to his work, and at

noon the pistols were finished.

Towards the middle of the afternoon, just as Ruric had finished tempering some parts of a gun-lock, the back door of his shop was opened, and two men entered. They were young men, dressed in costly furs, and both of them stout and good-looking. The gun-maker recognized them as the Count Conrad Damonoff and his friend Stephen Urzen.

"I think I speak with Ruric Nevel?" said the Count, moving forward.

"You do," returned Ruric, not at all surprised by the visit, since people of all classes were in the habit of calling at his place to order arms.

The Count turned a shade paler than before, and his nether lip trembled; but Ruric thought that might be the result of coming from the cold into a warm place. However, he was soon undeceived, for the Count's next remark was significant:

"You are acquainted with the Lady Rosalind Valdai?" he said.

"I am," returned Ruric, now beginning to wonder.

"Well, sir," returned Damonoff, with much haughtiness, "perhaps my business can be quickly and satisfactorily settled. It is my desire to make the Lady Rosalind my wife."

Ruric Nevel started at these words, and he clasped his hands to hide their tremulousness. But he was not long debating upon an answer.

"And why have you come to me with this information, sir?" he asked.

"You should know that already. Do you not love the lady?"

"Upon my soul, Sir Count, you ask me a strange question. What right have you to question me upon such a theme?"

"The right that every man has to pave the way for his own rights," replied Damonoff sharply. "But if you choose not to answer, let it pass. I know you do love the lady. And now I ask you to renounce all claims to her hand."

"By St. Paul, Sir Count, your tongue runs into strange moods of speech. I renounce all claims to Rosalind Valdai's hand—Was't so you meant?"

"Aye, sir—precisely so."

"Perhaps you will inform me what claims I may have upon the lady," Ruric returned, with some tremulousness in his tone, for the very subject was one that moved him deeply.

"Perhaps you shall not say that I did not make myself fully understood, and hence I will explain." The Count spoke this as speaks a man who feels that he is doing a very condescending thing, and in the same tone he proceeded: "The Lady Rosalind is of noble parentage and very wealthy. My own station and wealth are equal with hers. My station, at all events. She may possess the undivided right to more property than I do. But that matters not. I love her, and must have her for my wife. I have been to see the noble Duke, her guardian, and he objects not to my suit. But he informed me that there was one impediment, and that was her love for you. He knows full well—as I know, and as all must know—that she should never become your wife; but yet he is anxious not to interfere too much against her inclinations. So a simple denial from you, to the effect that you can never claim her hand, is all that is necessary. You understand me, I trust. We seek this only for the fair lady's own good. Of course, you must be aware that the Duke would never consent to her union with you; and yet he would wish to have your denial to show to Rosalind when he announces his decision. I have a paper here all drawn up, and all that will be necessary is simply your signature. Here—it is only a plain, simple avowal on your part that you have no hopes nor thoughts of seeking the hand of the lady in marriage."

As the Count spoke he drew a paper from the bosom of his marten doublet, and having opened it he handed it towards the gun-maker. But Ruric took it not. He drew back and gazed the visitor sternly in the face.

"Sir Count," he uttered, in a tone of full noble indignation, "what do you suppose I am? Do you mean to tell me that Olga, Duke of Tula, has commissioned you to obtain such a renunciation of me?"

"Stephen," spoke the Count, turning to his companion, "you heard the instructions the Duke gave me this morning?"

"Aye," returned Urzen, directing his speech to Ruric. "I did hear; and you have stated the case plainly."

"I may be as much surprised as your self," resumed the Count, haughtily, "at this strange taste of the Duke. Why he should seek this signal from you I can only imagine upon his desire to call up no regrets in the bosom of his fair ward. He knows that she was once intimate with you, and that she now feels a warm friendship for you. For her sake he would have this signal from you."

"But how for her sake?" asked Ruric.

"Why," returned Damonoff, do you not see? Rosalind, in the simplicity of her heart, may think that you—a—that you might claim her love; and out of pure principle grant it to you simply because you were the first claimant."

"But I never claimed her love," said Ruric, warmly. "If she loves me, she loves me to her own heart. With the noble Duke I never spoke but once, and then he came here for me to temper his sword. If you would marry with the lady, do so; and if you seek help in your work, seek it from those who have power in the matter."

"You mistake, sir," uttered the Count, hotly. "I seek not power now. I only seek a simple word from one who may have some influence—even as a beggar, having saved the life of a king, may, through royal gratitude, wield an influence. Will you sign the paper?"

Now all this seemed very strange to Ruric, and he knew that there was something behind the curtain which he was not permitted to know. He knew the proud and stubborn Duke well enough to know that he never would have sent such a message as this but for some design more than had yet appeared. In short, he could not understand the matter at all. It looked dark and complex, and its face was in direct conflict with the nature of the man from whom it now appeared to have emanated. Ruric pondered upon this a few moments, and he made up his mind that he would on no account yield an atom to the strange demand thus made upon him.

"Sir Count," he said calmly and surely, "you have plainly stated your proposition and I will as plainly answer. I cannot sign the paper."

"Ha!" gasped Damonoff, in quick passion. "Do you refuse?"

"Most flatly."

For a few moments the Count gazed into Ruric's face as though he doubted the evidence of his own senses.

"It is the Duke's command," he said at length.

"The Duke of Tula holds no power of command over me," was the gun-maker's calm reply.

"Beware! Once more, I say—sign this paper!"

"You but waste your breath, Sir Count, in speaking thus. You have my answer."

"By heavens, Ruric Nevel, you'll sign this!" the Count cried madly.

"Never, sir."

"But look ye, sirrah: Here is my whole future of life based upon my hopes of union with this fair girl. Her guardian bids me get this paper of you ere I can have her hand. And now do you think I'll give it up so easily? By the saints of heaven, I'll have your name to this, or I'll have your life!"

"Now your tongue runs away with you, Sir Count. I have given you my answer. Be sure that only one man on earth can prevail upon me to place my name upon that paper."

"And who is he?"

"I mean the Emperor."

"But you will sign it!" hissed Damonoff, turning pale with rage. "Here it is—sign! If you would live—sign!"

"Perhaps he cannot write," suggested Urzen, contemptuously.

"Then he may make his mark," rejoined the Count, in the same contemptuous tone.

"It might not require much more urging to induce me to make my mark in a manner not at all agreeable to you, sir," the youth returned, with his teeth now set, and the dark veins upon his brow starting more plainly out. "You have come upon my premises, and you have sought your purpose. You now have your answer, and for your own sake—for my sake—I beg you to leave me."

"Not until your name is upon this paper!" cried Damonoff, shaking the missive furiously and crumpling it in his hand.

"Are you mad, Sir Count? Do you think me a fool?"

"Aye—a consummate one."

"Then," returned Ruric, with a curl of utter contempt upon his finely-chiseled lip, "you need have no further dealings with me. There is my door, sir."

For some moments Conrad Damonoff seemed unable to speak from very anger. He had surely some deep, anxious purpose in obtaining Ruric's name to that paper; and to be thus thwarted by a common artisan was maddening to one who based all his force of character upon his title.

"Sign!" he hissed.

"Fool!" uttered Ruric, unable longer to contain himself in view of such stupid persistence. "Do you seek a quarrel with me?"

"Seek—I seek what I will have. Will you sign?"

"Once more—No!"

"Then, by heavens, you shall know what it is to thwart such as me! How's that?"

As these words passed from the Count's lips in a low, hissing whisper, he aimed a blow with his fist at Ruric's head. The gun-maker had not dreamed of such a dastard act, and he was not prepared for it. Yet he dodged it sufficiently to escape the mark upon his face, receiving the blow lightly upon the side of his head. But he stopped not to consider now. As the Count drew back Ruric dealt him a blow upon the brow that felled him to the floor like a dead ox.

"Beware, Stephen Urzen!" he whispered to the Count's companion as that individual made a movement as though he would come forward. "I am not myself now, and you are safest where you are."

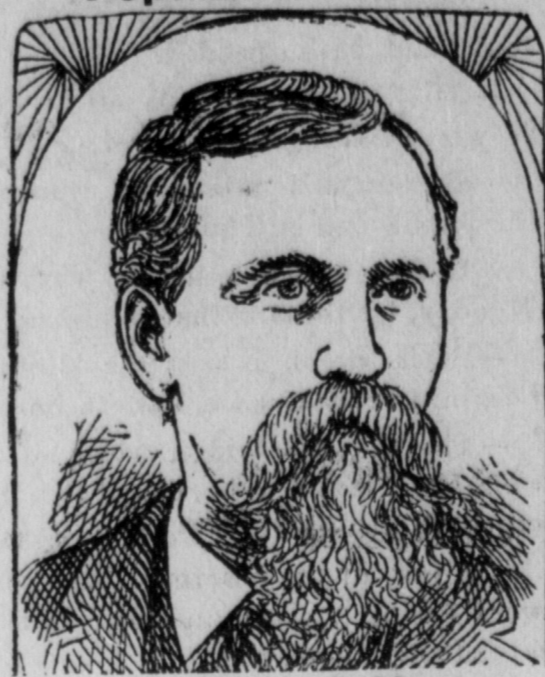
The man thus addressed viewed the gun-maker a few moments, and he seemed to conclude that he had better avoid a personal encounter, for his fists relaxed, and he moved to the side of his fallen friend and assisted him to his feet.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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