

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER XVIII.—Continued.

"My soul, proud duke, you shall know that anon. But listen: If you force this lady to that thing you do it at your peril! You had better seek the fabled potion of the gods, and drink and be a dog, than do that thing!"

"Hold a moment, monk!" cried the duke, now nearly blind with passion; "you go not hence alive!—What ho, there! Without, I say!—Zenobie, pull that bell-cord—quick!—Back, monk! you pass not here alive!—What ho! Without there!"

"Beware, Olga!" spoke the monk, as calmly as before, at the same time drawing a heavy pistol from his bosom and cocking it. "I would shoot you as I would a dog! Offer me one motion of impediment to my passage, and you die on the instant!"

Instinctively the duke moved to one side. There was something in the look and tone of the strange man that he dared not cope with then. The monk passed out, but as soon as he was gone the duke sprang to the bell-cord and pulled it till he broke it. In a few moments more the servants came rushing in.

"Out, dogs!" the mad man shouted, "and stop that monk from leaving the palace. Kill him on the spot where you find him if he dares to offer the least resistance! Kill him—you have my orders, and I am alone responsible!"

Thus speaking the duke rushed from the apartment to start up more of his household. First to the gate of the court he went, but the monk was not there, nor had he been there. Then he rushed to the postern, but that was locked, and the snow was untrdden before it. He returned to the hall, and one by one the servants came back from the search.

No monk could be found! At first Olga was tempted to believe that his servants deceived him; but he quickly set that thought aside, for he could see by their countenances that they were as much astonished as he. The search was renewed but the strange man was not to be found! There was some wonder, and—some uneasiness.

CHAPTER XIX.

CONCLUSION.

Pale as death sat the fair young countess in her dressing-room. She did not tremble now, for every nerve had become fixed in utter despair.

"Will you not change your dress, my mistress?" asked Zenobie, in a low, tremulous tone.

"No, no," the maiden replied; and her voice sounded strangely even in her own ear, it was so low and hollow; "why should I dress for the sacrifice? The dumb beast may suffer garlands about its neck before being led to the heathen altar; but alas! God has not given me a brute's ignorance to help me now. No, no, Zenobie, I will not dress for the bride."

"But the duke expects it."

"I care not. He can not ask me to do it. He may do all he wills, for I am helpless here, but he dare not ask."

"Oh, my dear mistress!" cried the faithful girl, throwing her arms about the neck of her mistress, and weeping as she did so, "would to God that I could bear this for you."

"I thank you all the same, my best of friends," the countess replied, gazing gratefully up into her attendant's face; "but it matters not much now. I shall not suffer long. My sorrow will soon cease."

Zenobie looked inquiringly up, but she did not speak. "God will soon take me home," the wretched maiden murmured, after a pause. "I feel the chill hand upon my heart even now, and I know that earth cannot bind my spirit long with such a curse upon it!"

Zenobie had no words of consolation more to offer, so she did all she could do. She drew the head of her mistress upon her bosom, and there she held it for a long time. She held it thus until the door of the apartment was opened and a female domestic entered.

"Lady," the new-comer said, trembling perceptibly while she spoke, "the duke bade me tell you he awaited your coming below in the hall."

She stopped here, and seemed to wait for an answer; but Rosalind did not speak. "What answer shall I give him, lady?"

At this the countess started up, but she sank back again without speaking. "Tell him we will come," interposed Zenobie, who saw that the announcement had taken the last power of effort from her mistress.

"Yes—yes," whispered the countess, as the messenger hesitated and gazed inquisitively into her face.

And with this the woman left the apartment. "My dear mistress," spoke Zenobie, now calling all her power of self-control to her aid, "all means of help and escape we have tried in vain. The time has come—"

"Oh, God have mercy!" groaned the countess. "And we must meet it, since there is

no further hope. It will be better to go down at once than to arouse the bad man's anger by more delay. Were there the least glimmer of hope, we would not go; but there is not. You know what I mean."

A few moments Rosalind sat like one dead. Then she started up with her hands clasped, and raised her eyes toward heaven. She did not speak aloud, but her lips moved, and she surely uttered a prayer to God—and it was none the less eloquent because it was silent. Then she turned to her companion. Her lips were set and colorless, and a deathly look had overspread her whole face.

"Zenobie," she said, in a tone which bore no feeling more than the gliding of cold, icy sound, "I am ready. Once more before the last joy of earth departs from me, let me bless thee, and press thee to my bosom. I am pure now!"

She opened her arms as she spoke, and when she closed them again Zenobie was within their embrace.

"Bless you—bless you ever! God keep and guide you to the end of life, and then receive you home to Himself! Kiss me.—There—I am ready now!"

The broken-hearted girl wiped the tear from her eye, and in a moment more she was as cold and passionless as before.

"Lead on, Zenobie. I shall walk without help."

Without looking around the Moslem maiden led the way to the hall. She walked slowly, and she fancied she could hear the beating of her mistress's heart. In the hall stood the duke with some half dozen of his own male attendants. He took the hand of the countess as she approached him, and gazed earnestly into her face; but he did not speak. He led her towards one of the drawing-rooms, and when they entered there they found the hump-backed priest already in waiting.

Rosalind came well-nigh fainting when she saw this miserable villain ready for his work. She knew now that the priest was like the master. "You see, my dear Countess," spoke the duke, in a low, hypocritical tone, "that we have all prepared. I trust we shall have no trouble before this holy man."

This last sentence was spoken in a threatening tone, but it had no effect upon Rosalind. She hardly heard the words he spoke.

"Come, father," said Olga, turning now to the priest. "We are ready." Savotano moved forward, and mumbled a Latin prayer. Then he looked upon the twain before him, and directed them to kneel.

"No! no! no!" gasped the fair countess trembling for the first time. "I can not do that!"

"Kneel!" hissed the duke, between his clenched teeth. And as he spoke he grasped the maiden more firmly by the arm and forced her down. She uttered a quick cry of pain as she felt the unmerciful grip, but she could not resist the strong arm of her persecutor.

"Now go on!" the duke cried, as he held the maiden down. "Go on Savotano, and let the business be done as soon as possible."

"Hold!" It was a voice of thunder which spoke thus, and it came from the door. The duke started to his feet, and he beheld Ruric Nevel, the gun-maker, approaching the spot. But the youth came not alone. Behind him came the huge buik of Valdimir the monk. And more still—back of the monk came the widow, Claudia Nevel, and the boy Paul. And then there was, besides all this, a heavy tramp of feet in the hall, and the clang of steel.

"Hold! Stop this accursed mockery!" Ruric shouted, as he strode up the apartment.

"Miserable dog!" gasped the duke, mad and frantic with rage, "how dare you come hither?"

"Look ye, proud duke," the monk interposed, coming quickly forward; "I am at the bottom of all this. I have come to stop this foul work!"

Rosalind had started to her feet when she first heard Ruric's voice; and now, as the monk spoke, a ray of hope darted to her soul, and with a quick bound she reached her lover's side.

"Ruric! Ruric!" It was all she could say; and with a flood of tears she pillowed her head upon his bosom, and his stout arms were wound fondly about her.

"Fear not," he whispered, "for, oh, Rosalind, thou art safe now."

The mad duke saw the movement, and with a bitter curse he started towards them.

"Now by the living gods!" he shouted, with his fists clenched, and his eyes flashing fire, "you have come to your death! What ho, there!—Without! Slaves, where are ye?"

In a moment more the side door was thrown open and a dozen of the duke's servants came rushing in.

"Ha!" Olga cried, "you are in time. Seize these dogs! Kill them on the spot if they offer one act of resistance. At them now! Down with the dogs!"

"Hold!" It was Valdimir who spoke, and every arm dropped as they heard that voice. It was different from the voice they had heard the fat monk use before. The duke started as though a thunder-bolt had burst at his feet.

"Who art thou?" he gasped, staggering further back. "Olga—Duke of Tula—" spoke the

monk, in tones which sounded strange for him, because they were so different from those he had been wont to use, "I am thy master!"

As he spoke he threw open the long black robe which enveloped his person, and cast it upon the floor at his feet, and there it lay, a huge pile of wadding and stuffing! The vast rotundity of person was gone, and the strange man now stood in his own fair form. His chin—that prominent chin—was no more hidden, and he was but a small man—not much larger than the boy Paul who stood near him. Next he placed his hand to his head and tore away the tight skull-cap, and the ring of gray hair came away with it, leaving a cluster of glossy hair floating down over the neck and shoulders!

"Great God of Mercy!" gasped Savotano, staggering back, "it is the EMPEROR!"

"Aye!" cried Peter, turning his darkly-flashing eye upon the staggering duke, "I am your Emperor. Paul, go and call the guard."

The boy hastened from the palace, and when he returned he was followed by a party of the Imperial Guard.

"Mercy! mercy, sire!" gasped the duke sinking down on his knees.

But the Emperor answered him not. He only turned to his guard and bade them secure the duke and the foul priest.

Rosalind Valdimir gazed upon the transformed man until the strange truth worked its way to her struggling mind, and then she turned once more to Ruric. She gazed up into his face, and she saw the holy smile which rested there. The joyful truth came to her now, and with one long, low cry of frantic hope and bliss she sank upon her noble lover's bosom. She could not speak—she could only cling closely and more close to her loved protector, and with her head pillowed close by the heart that beat for her, she wept away all the grief of her opened soul.

"Olga," spoke the Emperor, after the nobleman had been firmly bound, "your race of iniquity is run."

"No, no, sire," the duke cried, in humble, supplicating tones "say not so. In this single thing I may have been wrong but let my mad, consuming love be some palliation for my offense. Oh, you will not crush me with public shame for this! You will not cast from you one who loves you well."

"Oh, miserable man!" uttered Peter, with a look of utter contempt upon the base wretch, "add not perjury to your already accumulated crimes. Hark ye: Some months since I knew there was conspiracy in my capital, and I knew there was much of evil, too, which was never reported to me. I resolved to ferret it out, and to that end I meant to mingle among my people without their knowing me. So I had that robe made, and so stuffed and wadded that I could even hide my chin in the seeming fat. I assumed the garb, and my own master-at-arms did not at first know me. Once in a while I made my page assume the garb and be seen in it about the city, and thus all thought of suspecting me was cut off. I have been at the work, Olga, and I have found out all I sought. It was mere accident that first threw me in the way of this young gun-maker, and it was by accident, too, that I overheard the Count Damonoff and his companion discussing the subject of their mission to the gun-maker's shop. Of course I followed that scheme up, and I should have snatched our fair young countess from your grasp ere this had I not been desirous of arriving at another point first. Perhaps you know that the Princess Sophia and the Minister Galitzin have planned a grand overturn of my throne—Ah, you tremble!—And now, my noble Duke," the Emperor continued, in a deeper tone, "I have learned of your own guilt in that affair! Oh—you love me, do you? But I know you now. Two of your poor tools are in my hands. They are named Totma and Viska. They have made a full confession, and I now know all your villainies. I know what you planned against this noble countess, and against her noble lover; I know what you planned against the Count Damonoff; and I know, too, what you have planned against your Emperor—not a word, sir! You are the Duke of Tula no more. A more worthy man wears the ducal coronet from this hour. Ruric Nevel shall assume the station you have disgraced, and I know he will ennoble it once more."

As Peter ceased speaking he waved his hand to his officers, and they bore the prisoners from the room. The priest said not a word; but Olga cursed loudly and bitterly.

When the dark villains had gone Peter stepped forward and took Rosalind's hand. There was a tear in his bright eye, and his nether lip trembled.

"Fair cousin," he said, in a low, soft tone, "I could not promise thee that thou shouldst not wed with the Duke of Tula, for I had even then planned that you should do that thing. But it will not be very hard, will it?"

The countess gazed up, and a murmur of thanks was upon her lips; but the gushing flood started forth anew, and she could only look the joyful blessings she could not speak. Peter imprinted a kiss upon her pure brow, and then gave her hand to Ruric, and as he did so he said, with a warm smile:

"You must be her guardian hereafter, (Continued on Page 5.)

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