

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER V.—Continued.

But Ruric spoke not. He saw that the Count was stronger than before—for his rage seemed to give him a maniac's power—and that he was earnest only for life or death. He struck quickly and furiously, and his movements were strange and unprecedented. He threw up all rules of exercise, and cut and thrust only in wild madness. Twice Ruric came nigh being run through. He lost all run of his opponent's play, and quickly saw that he must put a stop to the conflict, or run the risk of leaving a childless mother in his home to see that day's sun sink.

"Will you give over?" he asked, as he struck the Count's point down.

"Never! Submit to such as you? Bah!"

A few moments more the conflict lasted. One more opportunity he had at Damonoff's heart—and he spared him. All present saw it save the mad man.

"Fool!" uttered the monk, who trembled from head to foot with excitement, his huge belly shaking like a bag of jelly, "will you throw away your own life, Ruric Nevel? Shall I tell your mother you left her of your own will?"

This mention of his mother called the last lingering doubt from Ruric's mind. Again he struck the opposing point down, and then he pressed his own point upon the Count's bosom. He avoided the heart—he tried to avoid the vitals—but he threw his arm forward, and his glittering blade passed through the fool's body. With an expression of pain upon his features he started back, and rested his reeking point upon the trodden snow. The Count came furiously on again, but he struck wildly, and at random, Ruric merely warding off his blows, until finally his arm sank. On the next moment his sword fell from his nerveless grasp, and he sank fainting back into the arms of his attendants.

CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE THE EMPEROR.

"Is he dead?" asked Ruric, starting quickly forward.

"Hold, my son," uttered the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm. "Surely you have nothing to fear. It was none of your work—no more than if you had run your sword to the heart of a wild beast that had attacked you."

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth. "I was careful of that. I would have struck him upon the head with the flat of my sword, but I feared I might break his skull."

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon, as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time. "He has only fainted from the shock of the blow, coupled with his own fears and passions."

"But will he die?" Ruric asked, kneeling down by the fallen man's side.

"I can not yet tell," the doctor said, at the same time wiping the blood away, which was flowing freely.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk. "Now is the best time, for the place is not yet inflamed; and while he is thus insensible he will be free from pain."

The surgeon at once saw the truth and propriety of this, and he proceeded to act upon the suggestion. Having selected a probe which appeared applicable, he examined the wound. Ruric watched him eagerly, and with a painful expression.

"I do not think this wound is mortal," the surgeon reported, as he carefully felt his way along the course the steel had taken. "It has passed below the right lung, and only severed some of the smaller blood vessels. I think, with proper care, he may recover."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Ruric, with his hands clasped.

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen. "You were ready enough to accept his challenge."

"Aye—else you would have called me coward," returned the gun-maker, with a flashing eye. "Had I refused to meet him that fatal wound would have met me at every turn. I knew that such a man as he was no foe for me at any game where strength of arm and sleight of hand were required. So I meant to disarm him and then give him up his life, believing that such a move would end the combat. You know how I labored to spare him. But I could not. Yet I would not have the life of a fellow-being—a countryman—upon my hands in such a quarrel. My father died fighting for his country—and so would I die if my death must come from the hand of man; but to die thus would be a curse upon my name, and to inflict such death upon another would be a curse in my memory."

"I believe you, my son," the monk said. "Only if the Count dies you should not allow such feelings as you mention to overcome you. In no way are you to blame for this."

"True, father—you speak truly," added the surgeon. "The young man has acted most nobly, and no blame can be attached to him."

Ruric seemed somewhat relieved by these assurances, and having seen the Count's wound dressed, and assisted in bearing the insensible form to the sledge, he took Alaric's proffered arm and proceeded to his own team.

"Who is that monk?" asked the lieutenant, as they entered their sledge.

"I only know that he is called Valdimir," returned Ruric. "I have only seen him once before. Have you ever seen him ere this?"

"Yes—several times about our barracks. He has been there when some of our poor fellows have been sick and dying. He seems to be a good-hearted man, and, I should judge, quite intelligent."

"I agree with you there," our hero said. "I think he is a good man; but there is nevertheless a mystery about him which I cannot solve. His countenance is familiar to me, and yet I cannot tell where, nor when, I have seen him."

"Aye," added Alaric quickly and eagerly; "that is precisely the case with me. I am very sure that I have seen that man under different circumstances. And others of our company have thought the same."

The two men watched the movements of the monk while they thus spoke, and they noticed that he entered his sledge and drove off towards Borodino.

"Ruric," said the lieutenant, after they had ridden some little distance, and at the same time gazing wonderingly into his companion's face, "you handle the sword like a magician. By my soul, I'd give all I own at this present moment—my commission and all—if I could handle the sword as you can."

"I do understand the weapon passing well," returned the youth modestly; "but I have worked hard to gain the science."

"Ah—'tis not all science," the officer added. "That wondrous strength of yours is a host in itself."

"And yet," said Ruric, "I have seen weaker men than myself who would overcome me easily—or, at least, who might overcome me."

"But they were not in this city," suggested Orsa, with a peculiar shake of the head.

"True, Alaric. I am not in the habit of mentioning my own powers; but yet I may say that there is no man in Moscow who is my superior in the use of any sort of offensive arms."

The lieutenant readily admitted the truth of this, and then the conversation turned upon the subject of the Count, and the course he had pursued with respect to the event which had just transpired. This conversation lasted until they reached the door of Ruric's residence, and having thanked his friend for his kindness, and expressed the hope that at some time he might have opportunity to return some adequate favor, the gunmaker entered the house.

The widow sat in her great chair by the fire. She was pale and anxious. Her brow was supported by her hands, and at every sound from without she would start up with a frightened expression and listen. At length the sound of bells struck upon her ear—they came nearer and nearer—and she stopped at her door. She would have arisen, but she could not. With her hands clasped she bent eagerly forward, and listened with a frantic interest. Soon the door opened. Surely no one but he would enter without knocking. She started to her feet—the inner door opened—a male form stood before her.

"Mother!"

"Ruric! My boy! Safe!"

She tottered forward and sank upon the bosom of her noble son, and while she murmured her thanks to God.

By and by the widow became more calm but still there was an earnest, eager look of fear upon her face. Ruric saw it, and he knew well what it meant.

"Mother," he said, "the Count is not dead."

"Nor wounded!" she uttered, quickly and eagerly.

"Yes—badly. But listen: I could not help it. And thereupon he related all the circumstances connected with the conflict. When he had concluded, his mother pondered a few moments, and then she said:

"Surely, my son, I will try and suffer nothing from this, even should the wicked man die. In all you acted but upon the defensive. From the first he has only been intent on attacking you; and on the battle-ground he would have killed you if he could."

"Most surely he would, mother. Aye—he would not have hesitated to stab me in the back could he have gained the opportunity. He was mad beyond all self-control, and his eagerness to kill me was only equalled by his chagrin at being overcome by one whom he had hoped easily to conquer."

After this Ruric went to his shop, but Paul manifested no great emotion upon beholding him.

"You seem to take it as a matter of course that I should return alive and well," said the gun-maker with a smile.

"Why—of course," returned the boy, composedly. "What would a score of such men as he be to you? Conrad Damonoff held a sword before Ruric Nevel? No, I only smiled when I heard his challenge. I should have as soon thought of being anxious about your return from a marten hunt."

Ruric smiled at his boy's peculiar eagerness of expression, but he felt a degree of pride in his words, nevertheless.

It was towards the latter part of the afternoon that Ruric was somewhat startled by seeing some of the imperial guard approaching his house; and ere long afterwards his mother came to him pale and trembling, and informed him that he was wanted by the Emperor's officers.

"Oh!" she groaned, with clasped hands and tearful eyes, "they will take you from me now!"

"Fear not, my mother," the youth confidently returned. "The Emperor will not blame me when he knows all the particulars. But come—let us go in."

Ruric found the officers—three of them—in the kitchen, and he asked them if they sought him.

"We seek Ruric Nevel, the gun-maker," replied the leader.

"I am the man, sir. May I know what is wanted?"

"Cannot you guess?"

"Why—yes. I suppose it must be on account of the duel which was fought this morning."

"Exactly."

"And who wants me?"

"Who should want you but the Emperor?"

"Oh, they will not take my noble boy from me!" cried Claudia catching the officer by the arm. "Tell our good Emperor that Russia has taken my husband from me—that he fell in his country's cause. Tell him my boy was not to blame."

"Hush, mother," interposed Ruric.

"Fear not yet."

"Come," said the leader. "It is growing late, and Peter will not brook delay."

"But they will not harm him!" the mother frantically cried, clinging now to her son.

"No, no, my mother. Rest you easy here until I return." And then turning to the guard he added, "Lead on, and I will follow."

"Now rest you easy, my dear mother"; and with these words Ruric gently set her back into her chair, and then hastened out after the officers. In the entry he put on his bonnet and pelisse, and then followed his conductors out to the street, where stood a double sledge, with two horses attached.

"You seem to look upon the killing of a Russian nobleman as a very small affair," said one of the officers, after they had started on their way.

"Is he dead, then?" Ruric quickly asked.

"The doctors think his case a critical one. But that is not the thing; you would have killed him if you could."

"No, no. By heavens, 'tis not so! All who were present will swear that I tried to spare him."

"Very well," returned the officer.

"We shall see about that when we come to the palace. Perhaps you may go clear; but, upon my soul, I would not willingly occupy your place."

Ruric cared not to argue the point with those who knew nothing about the circumstances, so he remained silent during the rest of the ride. It was near sundown when they reached the imperial palace, and Ruric was conducted at once into the Emperor's presence.

The Emperor Peter was in one of the smaller audience chambers, sitting at a large table covered with purple velvet heavily wrought with gold, and upon either hand stood some of his private attendants. He was a young man, not yet so old as Ruric by some three years, but his face already wore a mature look. His frame was solid, but not large—being rather slight than otherwise in physical bulk. His dress betrayed negligence and carelessness, and was in marked contrast with the rich garbs of his attendants.

Such was Peter of Russia—yet a youth—small in frame, and careless of those graces which go to make up the sum of court life; but still able to bear the affairs of a great nation upon his shoulders. Within that head worked a mighty brain, and in that bosom beat a heart thirsting more for the good of Russia than for self or kindred.

Ruric saw Stephen Urzen and the surgeon there; and he also saw the Duke of Tula there. He met the Duke's eye, and a peculiar sensation of fear ran through his mind as he saw the stern, threatening expression that rested upon Olga's face.

"Sire," spoke the leader of those who had conducted the prisoner thither, "Ruric Nevel stands before you."

"Ah," uttered Peter, casting his eagle eye over the forms before him. "Nevel—advance."

With a bold, yet modest step, Ruric advanced to the table, and with a low bow he awaited the Emperor's pleasure. There was a shudder perceptible in the frames of those who wished the prisoner well, for well they knew their mighty ruler's iron will and sternness of legal purpose.

CHAPTER VII.

A STARTLING TRIAL.

In order to understand the circumstances under which Ruric was brought before the Emperor it will be necessary to go back a few hours. The autocrat had occasion to send for the surgeon, Kopani, who had attended at the duel, and as he was some time in answering the summons he was questioned, when he did come, concerning his tardiness. His answer was, that he had been attending the Count Damonoff.

"And what ails the Count?" asked the Emperor. "He was well yesterday."

(Continued on Page 5.)



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