

## RURIC NEVEL.

## A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

## CHAPTER XII.—Continued.

"Aye, Zenobie; I know he will," Rosalind answered, while the old shudder came back to her frame, and the old grief to her soul.

"And have you no hope?"  
"Only one—in Ruric. He may help me."

"Oh, I hope he can. He is a noble man."  
Rosalind answered with a look of gratitude, and Zenobie proceeded:  
"Where is the titled lord more noble than he? Oh, were I to choose a husband now, and he were free, and I were in your position, I'd choose Ruric Nevel before all the emperors of earth."

"So would I," returned the fair maiden.  
"If I were a countess, as you are, oh, how I should love to make such a man a count."

"But my marrying him would not make him a count. Were he a count, and I like what he is now in station, his marrying me would give me the title; but we poor women do not have that power."

"Well, then, we should so much more have the right to choose our own husbands."

Rosalind made no oral answer, but her look showed that she sympathized with the sentiment.

"My mistress," at length spoke Zenobie again, this time in a low whisper, "why may we not leave this place?"

Rosalind started as though she had heard the speech of a spirit, and for a moment a look of hope gleamed upon her face: but it quickly passed away.

"Alas! where should we go?"

This was a part of the plan which Zenobie had not thought of; and ere she could make any reply one of the female domestics entered the apartment, and announced that a woman wished to see her young mistress. Rosalind asked who it was, but the girl could only tell her that it was a middle-aged woman, and very good-looking. The young countess bade Zenobie go down and conduct her up. Ere long afterwards the attendant returned, and with her came Claudia Nevel. Rosalind had not seen the good woman for over a year, but she knew her at once, and starting up from her seat she bounded forward and embraced her warmly.

"Ah, Aunt Claudia, I am glad you have come. You will let me call you aunt, as I did in those happy times long gone by."  
"Aye, sweet Rosalind," returned the widow, imprinting a warm kiss upon the fair white brow.

The countess noticed the strange sadness of the woman's tone, and then, for the first time, also, she noticed the sadness of her look.

"Aunt Claudia, you look sad," she said while a chill dread struck to her own heart.

"Aye," the widow uttered, as though she were afraid to venture the question she wished to ask. "I have been very sad, because I have had a terrible fear. Has—has—not Ruric been here?"

"When?" uttered the maiden, catching the whole fear now.

"Within these three days?"  
"Just then. Day before yesterday he was here—in the forenoon."

"And I have not seen him since?" the poor woman groaned.

"Not seen him?—Ruric gone? Oh, where? where?"

"He said he was going to see the Count Damonoff when he left here," interposed Zenobie, who joined in the grief.

"Aye—so he told me," returned the mother. "I have been there, and they have not seen him since that evening. The surgeon who attends the count went out to the inn where Ruric put up his horse, and the animal was still there, his owner having not called for him."

"Oh, God, have mercy!" ejaculated the young countess, in a paroxysm of grief.

At this moment there came a rap upon the door, and Zenobie went to answer the summons. It was the black monk, Valdimir, who thus demanded admittance. At any other time both Rosalind and Claudia might have been startled by the strange visit, but now they instinctively hated his coming as a source of hope.

"Ladies," spoke the fat monk, approaching the spot where they stood, and bowing very low, "you will pardon this unseemly method of gaining admission here, but I had no other choice, for I feared the duke would refuse me did I apply to him. I have come to learn, if possible, where Ruric Nevel may be."

The widow tried to answer, but instead of speaking she burst into tears. Rosalind struggled a moment with the deep emotions that stirred within her, and she, too, fell to weeping. Zenobie was obliged to answer.

"Good father," said she, "we here are after the same knowledge. His poor mother has come here to try if she might find some clue to the noble youth; and thus did my mistress gain the first intelligence that he was gone. Pray, good sir, do you know anything about him? What have you heard?"

Both Claudia and the young countess now raised their heads, for they would hear what reply the monk could make.

"I only know that he is missing," Valdimir replied. "A little while ago I called upon the sick count, and there I learned that Ruric Nevel had mysteriously disappeared. And I learned, also, of the noble purpose for which he visited the count."

"Aye," interposed Claudia, with sudden energy, "he went to try and gain the count's forgiveness. I don't think they spoke falsely there. I don't think any there would wish him harm from any lingering revenge."

"No, no," returned the monk; "his mission thither was most nobly fulfilled. So far from cherishing any spirit of revenge is the count, that he will ever bear for Ruric the holiest gratitude of his soul."  
"Do you think so?" the widow asked hopefully.

"I know it," was the monk's assured reply. "But," he continued, relapsing into perplexity, "I can not imagine what has become of him. But hold. My dear child, is there not a humpbacked, ungainly priest who sometimes visits your guardian?"

This was addressed to Rosalind, and a fearful tremor shook her frame as she heard it, for its import was at once apparent.

"Do you suspect?" She had started forward and grasped the monk's arm, as she thus commenced, but she could not continue. The thought she would have uttered was terrible.

"Go on," whispered Valdimir, bending his head low down so as to catch her very thoughts if they left her lips. "What would you say?"

"Oh, I ought not—and yet I know his soul is capable even of that." Thus much the fair countess murmured to herself; and then she gazed up and spoke to the strange man before her:

"Do you suspect my guardian?"  
"Do you suspect him?" the monk returned.

"Oh, I know not what to think!"  
"But listen:" resumed Valdimir, earnestly. "I would know all that you know, and then perhaps I can assist you. Fear not, for as true as God lives I mean to save Ruric if I can; and if I can but gain a clue to him now, I can surely save you both. Trust me, for I possess a wondrous power for the good of those who trust me. Now, what end could the duke have in view in wishing for Ruric's removal. I know what he had in view in concocting the duel: It was the death of Damonoff, and the undivided possession of Drogzen. Now, answer me. What does he aim at now?"

In spite of all doubts Rosalind found herself trusting the monk. There was an air of conscious truth and power in his look and tone that won upon her.

"Good father," she returned, after a few moments' thought, "the duke has sworn by a most fearful oath that he will have me for his wife!"

"Ha! uttered the monk, starting back a pace and clenching his hands. "Does he mean that?"

"Oh, most truly he does!" the young countess replied; and she spoke more firmly now, for there was something in the sudden energy of the monk's exclamation that gave her hope.

"Then he wants your estates, too. By my soul, he is aiming for wealth with a high hand. And do you suppose he fears Ruric Nevel in connection with this scheme?"

"Yes father—I will speak plainly, for I trust you. I do not think you would betray one who never harmed you."

"Let the end of these things tell you that. But now finish what you had begun—about your thoughts of the duke."

"He knows, holy father, that I love Ruric, and he knows too, that Ruric loves me. May he not, under such circumstances, fear that the noble youth will try to thwart him?"

"Very likely," returned Valdimir thoughtfully. "I will profit by this, and I am much mistaken if you do not also profit by it. I have those in Moscow who will work for me. I cannot, of course, directly assure you of salvation, for Ruric may never be found!"

A quick groan escaped from Claudia's lips as the monk thus spoke; but before Rosalind could speak the door of the apartment was opened, and the Duke of Tula strode in! He stopped as he came nigh to where the company stood, and his eyes flashed, and his frame trembled with passion.

"How now?" he cried, as soon as he could command speech. "What means this gathering here in my own palace? Meddling monk, how dare you drag your detestable form hither? Out, reptile! Out! And let me catch you here again and my dogs shall tear you up as they do carrion!"

Without a word the monk turned away. His face was pale as death, and his hands were clenched till the fingers' ends seemed to settle themselves into the palms.

"Remember," the duke exclaimed, as Valdimir reached the door, "if you dare to cross my door-stool again—"

"Hold!" gasped the monk, in a hoarse starting tone. "Offer no more threats. But mark me, proud duke,—you shall see the day on which you'll wish God had made you a dog ere he gave you speech to arouse the just vengeance of Valdimir!"

And thus speaking the black monk disappeared. Claudia started to pursue him, but he did not follow out the impulse. Ere he reached the door he stopped and turned back.

"And you, woman—who art thou?" he uttered, turning an angry look upon Claudia.

"I am a mourning mother in search of her lost son," the woman sadly replied.

"Ha! I see the likeness now. You are the woman Nevel—mother of the young villain who bears that name! Leave my palace at once; and don't you dare to enter it again!"

The poor woman tried to speak, but she could not. With a deep sob she turned away, and slowly walked from the room.

"Now," resumed the duke, turning towards Rosalind, "what means this secret council?"

"My lord," returned the countess, struggling hard to overcome her powerful emotions, "they were here—to—"

But she could not finish the sentence. Her soul was too deeply moved. She only gave the foul wretch one look of horror and disgust, and then covering her face with her hands, she sobbed aloud.

If the bad man had anything farther to say, he reserved it for some future time.

## CHAPTER XIII.

## THE PLOTTER IS AT WORK.

The Count Conrad Damonoff was able to sit up. He was in a great stuffed chair playing with a favorite dog, while near by him sat Stephen Urzen. The young nobleman had gained rapidly since the visit of Ruric, for the antidotes he had taken had proved efficient, and he soon came back to the point he had reached before the administering of the poison.

"Stephen," he said, pushing his dog gently from him, "has anything been heard yet from Ruric Nevel?"

"Not that I know of," returned Urzen.  
"Oh, I wish I were able to assist in the search. But have you heard anything of what suspicions may be afloat?"

"Only that the humpbacked priest is looked upon by some as having had some hand in it."

"Ha—and how does suspicion point toward him?"  
"Why—in no direct way, I believe. I can not understand it. All I know is, he is suspected."

The count pondered a few moments, and he thought he could see it. Urzen did not know the secret of his friend's strange relapse, for that had been kept private; so he had no clue to the priest's true character such as the count possessed.

"I believe the fellow is a villain," Urzen resumed. "He is surely a villainous-looking man."

"So he is," responded the count.  
"I never saw such a wicked look before in any human face."

"Ah," uttered a voice close by the door. "Who comes in for the flattering remark, my friend?"

Both the count and Stephen turned, and the humpbacked priest himself stood in their presence.

"Ha!" he uttered, as he noticed the position of the invalid. "Up? By the Holy Virgin, you are recovering!"

"Aye," returned Conrad, "I am gaining fast now, as you may see."

The priest struggled hard with his feelings, and at length he managed to conceal the deep disappointment he felt. That is—he hid it from Stephen's eyes, but the count knew him too well.

"You have not been very punctual of late, father," the latter said, "also trying to conceal his real feelings."

"No—no," returned Savotano in a perplexed manner; "I admit it; but the fact is, I have been called away. Let's see—I have not been here since the evening on which I found a stranger sitting by your side while you were asleep."

"Who was the stranger?"  
"I don't know. I think I never saw him before. He was a good-looking young man. Perhaps he is some relative of yours."

This downright falsehood—so bold and flagrant—astonished even the count, for he knew the conversation which the priest had held with Ruric on the occasion. As quick as lightning, too, went the thought to the sick man's mind that this was to hide the probability of his being suspected in connection with Ruric's disappearance.

"I thought you knew that man," the count said, looking the priest sharply in the face.

"No. I may have seen him before, but I did not surely recognize him then. I asked him why he was here, but he would not answer me save by urging me to silence. Who was he, my son?"

The count was at first inclined not to answer, but he thought better of it, and finally told the priest that it was Ruric Nevel. The villain seemed much surprised at this, and professed to wonder why the fellow should come to that place. Urzen, who knew nothing of the falsehood which rested under all this questioning, went on and explained the nature of Ruric's mission, and its result. And thereupon Savotano expressed a wondrous degree of joy and gratification; and he presumed even to bless God that such a reconciliation had taken place.

"And now," the priest resumed, after this matter had been disposed of, "how happened this sudden change in your disease, my son? The doctors thought you dying when I was here last."

"Yes I know," answered the count, still hiding the deep disgust that moved within him; "but a new physician was called

(Continued on Page 5.)

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