

## RURIC NEVEL.

## A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

## CHAPTER X.—Continued.

The gun-maker gladly consented to this; and having gathered up the phials and the wine-bottle, and concealed them beneath his pelisse, the surgeon left.

Ruric Nevel was happier now, for hope was with him while he prayed that God might spare the unfortunate count.

## CHAPTER XI.

## AN ASTOUNDING AFFAIR.

Half an hour had the gun-maker sat by the side of the sick man's bed, when he was aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen by the gentle opening of the door. He turned and beheld a human form emerging from the narrow, dark entryway. As it came into the room the watcher started, for he beheld the hump-backed priest, Savotano.

"Who is here?" the arch fiend whispered, shading his eyes and trying to peer into the gloom.

"—sh!" uttered Ruric. "The count is asleep."

By this time our hero had so far overcome the first emotion caused by the villain's entrance that he could be calm.

"And who is this?" the priest whispered, moving nearer to the bed. "Ha! The gun-maker!"

"Yes," replied the youth, watching every look and movement of the fellow most closely.

"You are in a strange place I should say," Savotano whispered, not looking the young man directly in the face, but casting upon him a sidelong glance, as though he dared not look direct.

"Speak not too loud, sir priest," said our hero, determined to enter into no conversation with the man if he could avoid it. "Do not awaken the count, for he is very faint and weak."

And then Ruric had another reason. He feared if Damonoff should awake, that the strange discovery they had made might be revealed; and of course he wished not that the villain should yet know how well he was understood.

"But why are you here?" pursued Savotano, who seemed determined to know. "I am this poor man's spiritual comforter, and I surely have a right to know wherefore is the presence of one bearing the peculiar relations towards him which are sustained by you."

Ruric's first impulse was one of disgust and wrath, but he managed to keep it to himself.

"Sir priest," he returned, moving his chair noiselessly nearer to the visitor, so that his whisper might not disturb the sleeper, "I heard that the count was dying, and I would not have him die without first forgiving me for all that I had done."

"And has he done it?"

"He has."

"And why do you remain here? Where is his attendant?"

"She is out somewhere. The count has had a strange fit—a startling spasm—and I feared if he had another the woman could not manage him alone."

"Ah," uttered Savotano. "A spasm?"

"Yes—a most strange one—as though something were at his heart—as though his brain were on fire, and his whole system shaking."

The priest turned his head away, but Ruric saw plainly the exultant look which rested there. There was no mistaking any more. That one look—for Ruric saw it—was proof enough.

"Well, well," the misshapen villain said, "I will call again when he is awake. I would not have him die, and I not by him."

Thus speaking Savotano arose and moved towards the door. His step was eager, and his every look betrayed some anxious purpose. He stopped as he reached the door and looked back, but he did not speak. Ruric was afraid he might go to the sideboard to look at the medicine but he did not. He simply cast one more glance at the watcher, and then left the room.

In half an hour more the surgeon returned. His face wore a clear, emphatic expression, and his movements were all quick and prompt, as though each one was for the purpose of announcing some self-evident decision.

"Well," he uttered, with a quickly drawn breath, "we have put the medicines to a test." And then he leaned back and looked into Ruric's face.

"And what did you find?" the young man asked.

"Just what we had expected. We have detected arsenic in three of the medicines which the Count had to take; but this poison is not alone. There is much opium in the wine, even so that we could smell it when our suspicions guided us. The poison has been most adroitly fixed. The priest must have one of those receipts which have been used by scientific poisoners, for no physician in Moscow could have concocted the deadly poison."

"But wherein was it so wondrously peculiar?" asked Ruric, with interest.

"Why—in this: Arsenic was the principal poisoning agent, but that alone would produce symptoms which any

physician would know at once. In this case there was something present which overcame all the outward signs of the poison, and only let it eat upon the vitals. I know not the secret, though I know there is such an one. Had it not been for your fortunate suspicions the count would have died from the effects of the wound. The poison was working silently, and surely—without pain, and without outward sign different from the usual sinking of the worn and fainting body. But I have hopes now. The villain must not know that we have discovered him. We will let the thing run for the present."

Kopani was not a little surprised when he found that the priest had been there during his absence, but before he could make any further remark the count awoke. He felt very faint, but that strange sickness of the stomach was lessened. The surgeon prepared some suitable diluents, and having called in the woman he gave directions that they should be given in large quantities; and also directed her to prepare some strong barley water for the patient to drink as he wanted beverage.

All the phials were replaced upon the sideboard, and then refilled with liquids somewhat like those they had before contained; but the nurse was directed not to use them. Everything that her patient was to take she was to keep under her own charge in the kitchen; and she was also most particularly cautioned against allowing the priest to gain anything from her. But Kopani meant to be sure on that score. He had a little business to transact, and then he was coming back to spend the night himself by the count's side. He meant at all events, that the poisoner should have no more opportunity to exercise his diabolical science upon the sick nobleman. He promised the Count that he should have safe and competent watchers thereafter.

It was fairly dark now, as Ruric could see by raising the curtain and looking out. He had no idea it was so late. Time had passed without his notice. He moved to the side of the bed and took the invalid's hand.

"I must go now," he said, "but if you are willing, I will come again—"

"You will come," uttered Conrad in reply, returning the grasp of the hand with all his feeble power. "Oh, you must come often now. I hope I shall live. Perhaps I shall. If I do, I shall owe my life to you. And God knows—for the feeling is even now firm in my soul—that I will always remember how you saved me—and I will never think, never, of the sad blow you struck me. Come—come to me when you can, for now—now—as God lives I speak the truth—now I love you!"

"God bless and keep you," murmured Ruric, in a husky, tremulous voice; and with these words, coming from the very depths of his soul, he turned away and left the room. He heard the voice of the count as he moved toward the open door, and thanked God that 'twas a blessing which fell upon his ears.

Ah, those who know not what true forgiveness is, know not the holiest emotion of ear h!

Ruric had left his sledge at a neighboring inn, and as soon as he gained the street he bent his steps that way. He had gone half the distance from the residence of the count to the inn, and was just upon the point of crossing the street, when he heard his name pronounced by some one behind him. He stopped and looked around, and saw a man approaching him.

It was too dark to distinguish faces plainly, even at a usual conversational distance; yet Ruric was not long in concluding that the man who had thus hailed him was a stranger. He was a medium-sized man, and so closely enveloped in his bouret and pelisse that his form and features would have been hidden even had it been lighter than it was.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the youth, as the man came up.

"Yes, sir. Is your name Ruric Nevel?"

"It is."

"Then you are wanted a few moments at the residence of a lieutenant, named Orsa."

"Alaric Orsa?" asked Ruric.

"The same."

"But he does not live here in the Kremlin."

"He is here now, at any rate, and would see you."

"But you said he was at his residence," suggested our hero, who was fearful that some evil might be meant for him.

"I know nothing to the contrary, sir," the stranger returned, promptly. "All I can say is, Alaric Orsa has fallen upon the ice, and hurt himself severely, and upon being informed that you were near by with a sledge, he asked that you might be sent for."

"Been hurt, has he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Badly?"

"I believe no bones are broken, but he is so badly sprained that he cannot walk."

"Ah—then perhaps he wants me to carry him home."

"I can't say as to that, sir. They only sent me to find you. I don't know the man myself."

There was something so frank in the statement thus made that Ruric believed it all honest, and he stood no longer in doubt.

"I will go," he said, "but lead the way quickly, for I have no time to waste."

"I will lead as fast as you will want to follow," answered the man.

And thus speaking he turned back, and having gone some dozen rods by the way they had both come, he turned down a narrow street which led towards the river. Half-way down this he went, and then he turned again—this time to the left—and thus Ruric found himself in a narrow, dark lane, within which the snow was deep and almost untrodden.

"Look ye," cried the youth, stopping as he found himself over knees in snow, "I think we have gone about far enough in this direction."

"This is the shortest way," said the stranger guide, apologetically. "I did not think the snow was so deep here. But it's only in the next street."

"Then on you go."

Again the stranger started, and Ruric followed on. The lane was a crooked one and more than once the youth had another inclination to stop. He had no direct fear, but yet he had some just grounds for doubt. Had he not seen what had been attempted against the count, he might have had no such doubts now; but as it was, he thought that if one attempt had been made to ruin him through the Emperor's displeasure by the man who was now trying to murder the count, it would not be at all improbable that some more effective plan should be adopted towards him. He was pondering thus when they came to a cross lane, full as narrow as this, into which the guide turned.

"Look ye once more, sirrah," cried the youth, now stopping short. "Do you call this a street?"

"Yes, sir; and on this street we shall find the man we seek. It is only a short cut from where he is to the inn where your horse is; so you won't have to retrace these dubious ways. Only a little further, sir."

"But I don't like this."

"Why—bless you, sir; if you wish to go direct to the inn where your horse is, this will be the nearest way."

"Well—on you go."

And then they went again—now slipping on the ice—now in the snow to their knees—and anon stumbling along over frozen huddles and deep holes. At length the guide stopped and opened a small gate which was fixed in a high, thick brick wall.

Ruric hesitated here again. He had no weapon of any kind. If he had had even a pistol, or a sword, he would have cared not. But he did not show his thoughts to his guide. The gate opened with a creak upon its frosty hinges, and by the dim starlight the youth could see an open court beyond, and further still, a house of some kind loomed up.

"This place seems not to be used much," remarked Ruric, as he saw the snow in the court was trodden but little—only one or two tracks being visible from the gate to the house.

"Ah—yes—you said—what?"

"I said this place didn't seem to be used much," the youth repeated, though he was sure the fellow heard the first time.

"Ah, yes—a—the usual entrance is the other way, by the sledge path."

"And where is that?" Ruric asked, not being able to see any such path.

"Oh—it's around on the other side."

By this time they had reached the door of the house, which our hero could now see had an old, dilapidated appearance, and the guide plied the iron knocker with zeal. Ere long a man made his appearance with a lantern in his hand.

"Ah—has the gun-maker come?" the latter asked.

"Yes," returned the guide.

"Well—I'm glad he's here, but I don't believe Orsa is fit to move," said the first speaker. And then turning to Ruric he said:

"But I'm glad you've come, sir, for the lieutenant wishes to see you very much. This way, sir."

This was all so frank and prompt that the young man began to think he had been a fool for being frightened. He followed the man with the lantern into the hall, and from thence down a long flight of stairs into a basement. The lantern did not give much light, but it was sufficient to reveal the fact that the house was an old one, and not very large, for Ruric could see windows upon the opposite side of the hall which looked out of doors. As he reached the foot of the stairs he found himself upon a brick floor, and he saw that the walls were of stone. A little further on a door was opened, and this led to a small apartment within which was a fireplace, and a good fire burning.

"There, good sir," said the second guide, "if you will wait a few moments I will go and see how the lieutenant is."

As soon as Ruric was left alone he looked about him. The room was of moderate size for a small house, and the idea of inhabiting the cellars was a common one in Moscow during the winter season. The windows, two in number, were close up to the ceiling, and very small, and were patched with pieces of board in two or three places. Ere long the man came back and with him came three others, one of whom the youth recognized as the individual who had conducted him to the house.

"Orsa will see you, sir," said he with the lantern.

Ruric arose to follow him, the other three men approaching the fire as though they would remain there. He had reached the door and passed through into the

(Continued on Page 5.)

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