

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER IV.—Continued.

It was now late, and ere long Ruric kissed his mother, and then retired to his bed.

And the widow was left alone. With her eyes she followed the retreating form of her beloved son, and when he was gone from her sight she bowed her head and sobbed aloud. When she reached her humble couch she knelt by the side thereof and poured forth her pent-up soul to God. When her head had pressed the pillow she tried to hope—she tried to fasten one hope in her mind; but she looked only into the night. Not one ray of light reached her struggling soul. She opened her eyes of promise in vain—for she looked into a gloom so utter that out of its depths loomed only the blackness of Despair.

Sleep on, Ruric. But oh, could'st thou know how thy fond mother's heart is racked, there'd be no sleep for thee!

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

On the following morning Ruric was up betimes, and at the breakfast table not a word of the one all-absorbing theme was uttered. After the meal was finished the gun-maker went out to his shop and took down from one of the closets a long leather case, in which were two swords, both of the same make and finish, only different in size. They were Toledo blades and of most exquisite workmanship and finish. Ruric took out the heaviest one, which was a two-edged weapon with a cross-hilt of heavily gilded metal. He placed the point upon the floor and then with all his weight he bent the blade till the pommel touched the point. The lithe steel sprang back to its place with a sharp clang, and the texture was not started. Then he struck the flat of the blade upon the anvil with great force. The ring was sharp and clear, and the weapon remained unharmed.

"By St. Michael, Paul, Moscow does not contain another blade like that. Damascus never saw a better."

Thus spoke the gun-maker to his boy as he balanced the beautiful weapon in his hand.

"I think you are right, my master," the boy returned, who had beheld the trial of the blade with unbounded admiration. "But," he added, "could you not temper a blade like that?"

"Perhaps, if I had the steel. But I have it not. The steel of these two blades came from India, and was originally in one weapon—a ponderous, two-handed affair, belonging to a Bengal chieftain. The metal possesses all the hardness of the finest razor, with the elasticity of the most subtle spring. My old master at Toledo gave me these as a memento. Were I to mention the sum of money he was once offered for the largest one you would hardly credit it."

"How much?" asked Paul, with a boy's curiosity.

"It was a sum equal to about seven hundred ducats."

"And yet he gave it away."

"Aye—for its price was but imaginary, while its worth to him was only commensurate with the good it did him. If he told the truth he loved me, and these he gave me as a parting gift, as the best patterns I could wish for when making such."

After this Ruric put up the small sword and then he gave Paul a few directions about the work, promising to be back before night. The faithful boy shook his head dubiously as he heard this promise, but he said nothing, and shortly afterwards Ruric went into the house. Just then Alaric Orsa drove up to the door.

Ruric was all ready but putting on his bonnet and pelisse. His mother was in the kitchen. He went to her with a smile upon his face. He put his arms about her and drew her to his bosom.

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back." He said this and then kissed her.

"God keep—and—"

It was all she could say.

Ruric gazed a moment into her face—then he kissed her again—and again he said:

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back."

He dared not stop to speak more. Gently seating his fond mother upon a chair he turned and hurried from the place. In the hall he threw on his pelisse and bonnet, and then he opened the door and passed out.

"Have you a good weapon?" asked Orsa, as the horse started on.

"I have a fair one. I think it will not deceive me," returned Ruric.

"I asked," resumed Orsa, "because Damonoff prides himself upon the weapon he wears. It is a German blade, and he thinks he can cut in twain the blade of any other weapon in Moscow with it."

"I have a good weapon," Ruric said quietly; "and one which has stood more tests than most swords will bear." And after some further remarks he related the peculiar circumstances attending the

making of the sword, and his possession of it.

At length they struck upon the river, and in half an hour more they reached the appointed spot. The day was beautiful. The sun shone brightly upon the glistening snow, and the air was still and calm. The sharp frost of the atmosphere served only to brace the system up, and Ruric threw open his pelisse that he might breathe more freely. He had been upon the ground but a few minutes when the other party came in sight around the head of the river.

As soon as the Count and his second arrived, and the horses had been secured, the lieutenant proposed that they should repair to the building which was close at hand. This was a large open boat-house, which was unused and deserted in the winter, and it was proposed to go in there because the reflection of the strong sunlight from the bright snow was calculated to blind and blur the eye.

"Ha! what means that?" uttered Orsa, as he saw a sledge just turning the bend of the river with an officer in it.

"It is only a surgeon," replied Damonoff. "I would not cut a man's flesh without giving him a fair chance to survive it."

"And then you may find him serviceable to yourself, eh?" suggested the lieutenant. "Of course. There is no telling what may happen."

In a moment more the new sledge came up, and Ruric recognized its inmate as an army surgeon whom he had seen before, though he knew not his name.

"Now for the old boat-house," cried Urzen.

"Aye," added Damonoff. "Let us have this business done, for I would be back to dinner. I dine with Olga to-day, and a fair maiden awaits my coming."

"Notice him not," whispered Orsa, who walked close by Ruric's side. "That is one of his chief points when engaged in an affair of this kind. He hopes to get you angry, and so unhinge your nerves."

"Never fear," returned the gun-maker. "Be sure he only brings new danger to himself, for such efforts will find their point in the muscle of my arm."

The party halted when they reached the interior of the rough structure, and the Count threw off his pelisse and drew his sword. Ruric followed his example.

"Sir Count," the latter said, as he moved a step forward, "ere we commence this work I wish all present to understand distinctly how I stand. You have sought this quarrel from the first. Without the least provocation from me you have insulted me most grossly, and this is the climax. So, before God and man, be the result upon your own head."

"Out, lying knave—"

"Hold," cried the surgeon, laying his hand heavily upon the Count's arm. "You have no right to speak thus, for you lower yourself when you do it. If you have come to fight, do so honorably."

An angry reply was upon Damonoff's lips, but he did not speak it. He turned to his antagonist and said:

"Will you measure weapons, sir? Mine may be a mite the longest. I seek no advantage; and I have one here of the same length and weight as my own if you wish it."

"I am well satisfied as it is," replied Ruric.

"Then take your ground. Are you ready?"

"I am!"

The two swords were crossed in an instant, with a clear, sharp clang.

There was some contrast between the two combatants, but not much apparently. The Count was a little the taller and Ruric was somewhat heavier. But to a close observer there was a peculiar contrast in the bearing of the two men. That breast swelling out so nobly, and those massive shoulders, made for the seat of physical power, were Ruric's alone to possess. Yet Conrad Damonoff was accounted a strong man. In the athletic sports of the court club he had few superiors, and not many equals. But Ruric Nevel had never shown his strength there.

Now, for the first time, that contemptuous look passed from the Count's face. As he caught his antagonist's position—as he noticed the calm, dignified, quiet ease of every limb; and as he caught the deep, mystic fire of those expressive eyes, he knew that he had no common amateur to deal with.

At length Conrad Damonoff started back, and a quick cry escaped his lips. His antagonist's point had touched his bosom—it had pressed against his heart, and had not been driven home. Well he knew that his life was no longer, for the gun-maker had gained it, and—spared it.

"You fence well," he gasped, struggling to regain his composure.

"You are not a novice," returned Ruric calmly, at the same time allowing his point to drop.

"Come on," the Count uttered, now gathering all his energies for another effort.

And again the weapons were crossed. This time Damonoff was more guarded. Before he had been impelled by his own assurance; but now he was forced to regard his opponent's power. Ruric quickly found that the other was more careful than at first, and he carried his own point accordingly. At the twelfth stroke the Count made a feint to the left—then at the throat, and then, with a quick, lightning-like motion, he brought his point to

his antagonist's heart. But his meaning had been read from the first by Ruric. The youth caught the motion of the eye, and he saw that his heart was the place looked to. His own movement was almost instinctive. He received his antagonist's sword midway upon his own blade—then moved his arm quickly forward and caught the point under his cross-guard—then, with all his power, he wrenched his arm upward and backward, and the Count's sword went flying across the building. It struck the opposite wall with a dull clang, and the next instant it was half buried in the snow.

"Fear not, sir," said Ruric, as the Count started back with both hands raised, "I never strike an unarmed man."

Damonoff's arms fell to his side, and a deep blush of shame mantled his face.

"By St. Paul," cried the surgeon, "your life is forfeited, sir Count; and now you should be satisfied."

"No, no," the discomfited man exclaimed, starting up with rage and mortification. "That was but a slip. 'Twas a false step—a cowardly faint. I am not overcome."

"But, man of mortality, even now your life is Nevel's. He may run you through now if he chooses."

"But he has not," the Count cried, springing to where his sword had fallen, and snatching it up.

"Sir Count," here spoke Ruric, calmly, but with marked contempt, "you should not blame me for what I have done, for thrice have you tried to break my sword."

"Then try it again!" Damonoff returned. "Take my sword again if you can."

"Perhaps not," our hero retorted. "But be sure your sword shall be used no more after this day."

"Ha! Brag not, but strike. If you can—"

The conclusion of the sentence was drowned by the clash of steel.

At the second stroke the Count made another furious thrust at his antagonist's heart. Ruric sprang quickly aside, and with the whole power of his good right arm he struck Damonoff's blade close to the haft and broke it in twain.

"My other sword! my other sword!" the Count shouted, now blinded by absolute madness. "Oh give me my other—"

"Hold!" cried both the surgeon and Stephen Urzen in concert. "You are mad, Conrad."

"Mad?—Oh, I shall be mad! Where is my sword!" the reckless man yelled, casting the bladeless pom-pom down.

"But will you not listen one—"

"Away, I say! Shall I give up because my sword is broke? By the gods, the weapon deceived me. Where is the other?"

"Deceived thee, Conrad?" repeated the surgeon, sarcastically. "By the holy Host! had thy head but received a hundredth part of the blow, 'twould not be upon thy shoulders now."

But the Count was beyond all reason. In his madness he saw not that his sword had been broken on purpose. He did not see that he had been at his antagonist's mercy. But his friends said it all.

"Ha! whom have we here!" cried Alaric, whose eyes had caught a dark form at the entrance of the old building.

It was Valdimir the monk.

"How now? What seek ye here?" asked Urzen, as the fat, burly monk waddled towards the party.

"I heard the clash of arms, my son, as I rode by, and I stopped to see what it was. Surely, where the work of death is going on a child of the holy church of God may come."

"Aye," cried the Count, "Come in and welcome, but meddle not. Now!—my sword!—where is it?"

Reluctantly Urzen brought forward the second sword, but ere he gave it up he said:

"Beware, Conrad. You had better—"

"Peace, babble!" the excited Count hissed, snatching the weapon, and then turning quickly upon the gun-maker.

Thus far Ruric had remained silent, but he felt it his duty to speak now.

"Sir Count," he said, in a tone so stern and authoritative, and with a look so commanding, that the other was held in abeyance by it, "I must speak one word. You have provoked a quarrel with me—and you have challenged me. I have no fear of death when duty calls for my life, but I would not die thus, nor would I slay a fellow-being thus. Six separate times to-day, since our swords first crossed, have I spared your life—"

"Liar!"

"—And twice have I had you before me unarmed," Ruric continued, without noticing the interruption. "I had hoped this would have shown you that I sought not to harm you; and, furthermore, that you were no match for me at this kind of work."

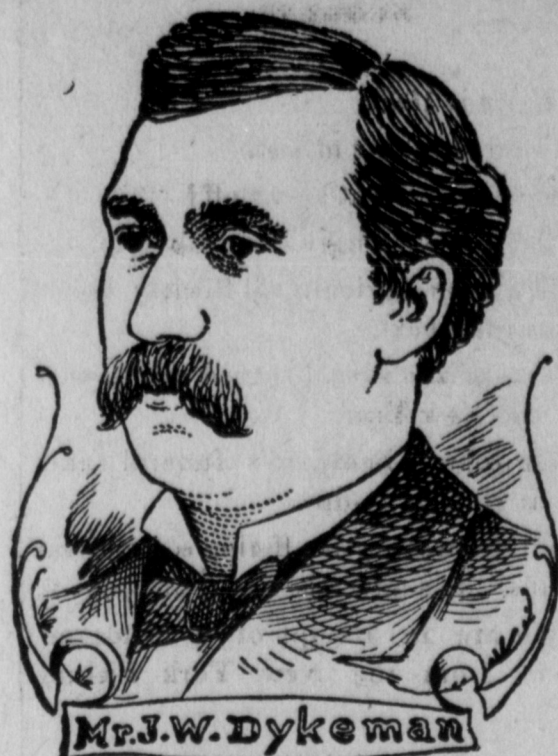
"Out fool!" yelled Damonoff, now fairly frothing with rage. "If you dare not cross swords again, say so; but do not crawl off like a coward!"

"One word more," uttered Ruric, paling for an instant beneath the unmerciful insult of the senseless tongue that assailed him—and he stood proudly erect while he spoke—"before these men here assembled and before my God, I swear that thus far I have spared you; but my own life may be the forfeit if I trifle with you more. So now—beware! You have sufficient warning!"

Perhaps the Count really overlooked the facts of which Ruric had spoken. In his ungovernable rage he may have fancied that 'twas only accident that had worked against him. However, he started forward once more, and made a furious lunge at his antagonist.

"Now," he gasped, "play your best, for my sword's my own!"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



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