

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER XVII.—Continued.

"Oh, God!" It was all the poor girl could utter. She saw the dark face of her hated and feared guardian, and the last glimmer of hope faded from her soul. "By my soul," the duke resumed, fastening his gripe surely upon the maiden's arm, "it is fortunate I have found you, for you might have fallen into difficulty else. You were bound for the imperial palace, eh?"

At first Rosalind thought of struggling for escape, but she felt the strong gripe upon her arm, and she knew that such a movement could result only in her own harm.

"Say," repeated the duke, "were you not bound for the palace?"

"Aye, proud duke, I was," the countess replied, gazing up into the man's face. "I was trying to escape from your accursed power!"

"Aha! But come—we'll turn toward home. You'll be better off there. And this is our little Zenobia, is it?"

The attendant looked up, but she made no reply. Then Olga turned to the priest. "Savotano, hurry off your men in the morning, and then come to me. I'll have work for you to-morrow. By Saint Paul! the work delays no longer!"

And then, with a sinking, breaking heart, Rosalind Valdaï was led back toward the ducal palace.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRANGE AND COMPLICATED.

Ruric Nevel dreamed that he was a great general, and that he was upon the eve of an engagement. He gained a view of the commander of the opposing army, and he saw that it was the Duke of Tula. Yet the duke had an enormous hump upon his back, and instead of the usual uniform he wore the garb of a priest. This was very strange—at least so ran Ruric's thoughts in the dream. Soon the engagement commenced, and the loud-mouthed artillery opened its thunder. The din was deafening and strange, and Ruric shouted in vain to his aids, for the roar of cannon drank up his words direct from his lips. Louder and more loud grew the crash, and finally Ruric started for the charge. His horse was shot under him, and with a quick leap he reached his feet.

"Ruric! Ruric! My master!" Slowly the youth opened his eyes, and Paul stood by him in his night-clothes. He gazed about him, and found that he had leaped from his bed, and now stood shivering upon the floor.

"Don't you hear that racket at the door?" asked Paul.

"What? Ha—there is some one knocking," Ruric uttered, as he heard the sound. "And have you not heard it before?"

"No."

"Why did you leap up thus?"

"I was dreaming."

"I thought 'twas the noise below. Why—they've been making a perfect thunder of noise down there. Shall I go down?"

"Yes, go, Paul, and I will dress as soon as possible. What time is it?"

"It must be near daybreak."

And thus speaking Paul turned and went to his own room, where he threw on an outer garment, and then he went down. At the door he found a stout man wrapped up in furs, while close by stood a sledge with two horses attached to it. In the east the golden tints of morn were already visible.

"A gun-maker, named Nevel, lives here does he not?" asked the applicant, after having first made some passing remark on the trouble he had had in starting some one up.

Paul feared that there might be something out of the way, but he dared not tell a falsehood where it could not possibly be of any use, so he answered in the affirmative.

"Then let me see him as speedy as possible."

"He is preparing to come down, sir. If you will walk in you may see him very soon."

The stranger followed the boy into the kitchen, where it was quite warm, the fire in the furnace having been burning all night. Ere long Ruric came down, and the visitor started up.

"How!" uttered the gun-maker, starting forward and extending his hand. "Demetrius?"

"Aye, my friend," the Greek replied with a smile, "I am an early visitor, eh?"

"I should say so; but, early or late, you are welcome."

"Thank you. But we must not spend much time here now. My sledge is here at your door, and I wish you to accompany me."

"But wherefore is this?" asked the youth in surprise. "What has happened now?"

"I'll tell you: Last night, Olga, the duke, came to see the Emperor. I had just been giving his majesty some exercise at the sword, so I was present at the interview. The duke wished for power to arrest you; and in explanation of the request he stated that you were at the head of a band of robbers here in the city, and

that you had already committed several robberies. I needn't tell you all he said—but he made you out to be a most unmitigated villain, and with this the Emperor granted his request. Olga wished for power to execute you at once, but Peter would not go so far as that. He gave the power of arrest, but ordered the duke to bring you before him."

Ruric stood for a few moments like one confounded.

"Then he must carry me to the Emperor," he said, at length.

"Ah, returned Demetrius, with a dubious shake of the head, 'be not too sure of that. I saw a look upon his face when he turned away that meant more than he dared to speak. As sure as fate he never means that you shall see the Emperor. I know it—I saw it in his evil eye."

"But will he dare disobey the order?"

"Yes, for he hopes to escape by falsehood. How easy for him to swear that he had to kill you to take you."

"I see—I see," uttered Ruric.

"Then come with me."

"Did the Emperor send you?"

"No; but I take the responsibility. I will take you to him myself. Be sure the duke's hirelings will be here before long. Trust to me and all shall be well."

Ruric pondered a few moments, and he saw that his friend was right.

"Let me go and see my mother," he said, "and then I will go with you."

"But make haste," urged the Greek, "for the duke's men may be here soon, and I do not wish them to see you. And—tell your mother to inform whoever may call, that she knows not where you are gone, but that you will be back at night."

The youth nodded assent, and then went into his mother's room, where he explained to her what had happened and what was about to do.

"And how long must these things be?" the mother uttered, gazing eagerly upon her son.

"Not long," returned Ruric. "I may do much towards settling the matter to-day. But fear not, for I am now safe, and shall be until I see you again."

The widow promised all that her son asked, and soon became assured that all was well; but Paul was left with the duty of attending to those who might come for Ruric, though they might see the widow if they persisted. The boy promised to tell all that asked for his master that he was gone away on business, and would not return till evening.

The mother came out before Ruric was ready to start, and her examination of the Greek's countenance seemed to be satisfactory, for the anxious look left her face, and she looked upon the visitor kindly.

As Ruric entered the sledge the dawn of day was plainly announced in the east, and the stars were paling in the sky. The Greek did not take the direct road to the Kremlin, but struck off to the westward, and so entered by the Neglia.

An hour later a party of five men drove up to the gun-maker's cot. They were dark, villainous-looking men, and murder was plainly stamped upon their faces. They entered the dwelling, but they found not their prey. They stormed and swore, but to no purpose, and when they were convinced that the gun-maker was not there they went away.

An hour later still, and another party drove up to the same cot. It consisted of two men in a double sledge, one of whom was Valdimir the monk. The fat, mystic man entered the cot, and there he remained for some time. When he came out the widow and Paul accompanied him; and they all got into the sledge and drove off together.

What did it mean?

It was noon. The proud duke was once more alone in his private room, and he was pacing uneasily to and fro. There was a cloud upon his brow, and trouble in his soul. His lips were firmly set, and his hands clenched. Ever and anon he muttered to himself, and when he did so his hands would work nervously and emphatically. He looked often at his watch, and often he stopped near the door and hearkened.

At length came that well-known shuffling, uncertain, cat-like tread. He threw open his door, and the dark priest glided in.

"Ha, Savotano, I've waited for you," the duke uttered, sinking into a chair, for his nervous walking had made him weary.

"Now tell me the work is done. Oh, for God's sake, don't tell me again of failure!"

"Alas, my lord—"

"Hold, Savotano! By the host of hosts you are not going to tell me of failure!"

"Not really a failure, my lord," the priest returned, nervously. "But our men did not find the gun-maker at home. He had gone when we got there, and no one knew where."

"No one knew? Did not his mother know?"

"No. She said he did not tell her where he was going. He only left word that he was going on business, and should not return till evening."

"By heavens! I think he has fled."

"No, my lord. I do not think so. I think he must have had business."

"But what time were you there?"

"Shortly after sunrise."

"And he gone then?"

"Aye—he had been gone an hour."

"It looks suspicious. But the men

must be there this evening. He shall not escape me now."

"There is no fear of that, my lord. I will see that he is apprehended as soon as he returns."

"Right, Savotano—right! And now to the other matter. I am to be married this afternoon!"

"Ah—so soon?"

"Yes; I waste no more time. What is the use?"

"None, my lord—none at all."

"Then you must remain, for the ceremony shall be performed as soon as possible."

"And does the countess know of your determination?"

"Yes. She knew it ere she retired last night. I told her she should not escape again till she could carry my name with her. By the mass, sir, she sealed her own doom! Ha, ha, ha,—the Duke of Tula will have his coffers filled again. Money must come somehow, and how else so easily as this?"

"Sure enough," returned the priest, with that old coarse, wicked smile. "Sure enough, my lord—how?"

"In no way. Ho, I'll put the seal upon that budget, and stamp it—mine! So here you remain until I am married. To-day—until that ceremony is performed, I am not sure; but to-morrow they cannot harm me. Oh—she shall be mine, Savotano. To-day she is my wife—to-night she shares my bed—and to-morrow all heaven and earth and hell combined cannot undo the work. I have waited long enough. I have worked and schemed, and have puzzled my brain to one great purpose; and yet each step I had marked out has failed me. Darnoff lives—the gun-maker lives—the Black Monk lives—But I, too, live! Ha—I live, Savotano; and now the work shall be done as it might have been done at first had I been so disposed!"

The duke had arisen to his feet while speaking thus, and his manner had been frantic and excited. As he ceased speaking he sank back into his chair and gazed the priest in the face. He was all iron now. Every nerve and muscle was set, and a fierce determination was in his soul.

There is one more scene in the ducal palace, and it goes on at the very time while the duke and his tool are together. Valdimir the monk was in the chamber of the countess, and the fair occupant and her maid were there with him.

"And you are sure he means to make you his wife to-day?" said the monk, in continuation of a conversation which had been going on for some moments—"that he will have the ceremony performed whether you consent or not?"

"Yes, sir," the countess murmured. She gazed into the strange man's face a few moments after she had spoken, and then, starting quickly up, she threw herself upon her knees before him.

"Oh!" she cried, with her clasped hands raised towards him, "can you not help me in this bitter moment? Do not say no. Oh, I know you have some strange power—and you may help me. You cannot know the misery I suffer. Oh, earth has no pangs more cruel! In all the long catalogue of woes there is nothing more bitter! Sir—!" and the maiden raised both hands toward heaven as she thus continued—"sooner than be that man's wife I would with my own hand let a sin against my God! But you may help me."

"Alas, lady, I cannot assure you now."

"Oh—say not so. You can help me flee from here—you can find some hiding-place—some place where my days can be spent in safety from this great evil."

"But how can I help you away, lady?"

"Because you know some secret entrance to the palace. You know some secret passage, else you would not be here now."

"True," the monk replied, in a perplexed tone, "I do know such a way, for by that way I came, and by that way shall I return; but I cannot convey you away thus. I am sorry that—"

The monk stopped here, for at that moment a heavy footfall sounded without. He had started up from his seat when the door opened, and the stout duke entered. The countess uttered one low, quick cry, and sank down. She would have sunk to the floor had not Zenobia caught her and bore her to the couch.

The monk stood erect, with his arms folded across his breast, but his right hand was hidden within the bosom of his robe. The duke started back like one thunder-struck, and it was some moments ere he could gain the power of speech. He turned first as pale as death, and then the blood mounted hotly, fiercely to his brow.

"By the living God!" he gasped, in a hissing, frantic tone, "how came ye here?"

"To learn of your wickedness, Duke of Tula," calmly responded Valdimir.

"Ha! do you hear me in my very palace, dog! But you have ventured here once too often. As sure as there is life in me you go not hence alive!"

"Hold, Olga!" spoke the monk,—and so strange and powerful was the tone that though the duke had turned towards the door, yet he stopped. "This lady tells me you mean to make her your wife. Is it so?"

"Out, accursed monk! Who gave thee right to question me?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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