

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER VII.—Continued.

"And which of the two do you call the best sword-man?" Peter asked.

"Why, sire—the count is, or was, vastly his superior."

"And what say you, sir lieutenant?"

Alaric trembled, for this was addressed to him. He knew that the duke was anxious to crush his friend, and he feared to draw the wrath of that powerful nobleman down upon his head. But a happy thought came to his aid.

"Sire," he said, "I would rather you would judge of that for yourself."

"Me judge? And how am I to do that?"

"Let Ruric Nevel's skill be tried here before you. If I mistake not you have some good swordsmen near your palace. There is Demetrius the Greek."

"What—my Master-at-Arms?"

"Yes, sire."

"Why—he is the best swordsman in my empire. I think our young adventurer would fare badly in his hands."

"Never mind, sire; you could judge."

"Why," said Peter, with a smile, "Demetrius handles the count as I would a mere child."

"Sire," spoke Ruric, modestly, but yet frankly, "it were surely no disgrace to overcome by your tutor."

"And will you take a turn with him at the sword?"

"Yes, sire—if so it please you."

"By my soul," cried the Emperor, leaping up, "we'll have some diversion out of this trial. What ho, there! Light up the chamber. Let every lamp be lighted, for we want sight now. Send Demetrius here—and tell him to bring his round-edged sword!"

Both the Duke and Urzen stood aghast at this new turn, but they dared not interfere, for they saw that their imperial master was all excitement now to see a trial of skill at that science which, above all others, he tried to make his officers learn. But then they had one hope: Demetrius might overcome the gun-maker so easily that Peter should not see his real power.

Demetrius soon came, and under his arm he carried the sword. They were of the common size, but with round edges and points on purpose for play. The master-at-arms was a powerfully built man, and possessed a splendid form. He was a Greek by birth, and was now retained by the Emperor as a teacher of the sword exercise.

"Demetrius," said Peter, "I have sent for you to entertain us with a show of your skill. Here is a man about whose power there is some dispute. Mind you—it is all in kindness—Ruric Nevel, take your weapon."

The youth stepped forward and extended his left hand for the sword, and the right hand he extended for the other to grasp. It was taken warmly, for the Greek saw in an instant that he had a noble man to deal with. And those two men were not much unlike in form. Demetrius was an atom the taller, but Ruric showed the most muscle.

The night had come on, but the great lamps were all lighted, and the room was as bright as day.

"Sir," said Ruric, addressing the Greek, "this is none of my seeking, though I will confess that for a long while I have longed to cross a playful sword with you. I play well."

"I like you," the Greek returned bluntly and kindly; "and if you beat me I will not like you less. I can afford to be beat once, seeing that thus far I have never been since first I offered to fence."

"Come, come," cried Peter, who was impatient for the entertainment, "let's see the opening. Now, stand aside, gentlemen."

Like twins stood those swordsmen as their weapons crossed with a clear, sharp clang. The Greek led off carefully, and Ruric as carefully warded every stroke. Then the former assumed a guard, and Ruric led off in turn. Ere long the sword-clashed with sharper ring, and soon sparks of fire flew out from the clanging steel. Louder and louder grew the clang, and quicker and quicker grew the strokes. The thrusts were made with skill and force but as yet neither had been touched.

The Emperor was in ecstasy. He clapped his hands and shouted *bravo* with all his might.

By and by Ruric's eye grew more intense in its sparkling fire. His opponent saw it, but he could not tell what it meant. The youth was about to risk the most daring feat of all he knew. Steadily he raised his eye, and his lips were set like steel. At length he saw that the Greek was playing for a thrust, and he lowered his point. Demetrius saw the chance, and drawing his arm quickly back he made the thrust with all his power. He was sure now he had won, for there was no earthly way in which his point could be struck either down or up. But see! With a gliding motion—a motion almost imperceptible—Ruric raises his sword and the other slides along upon its side, and the other point, instead of touching his breast,

is caught in the cross-guard of his haft. Then, quick as lightning and with all his might, Ruric bends his elbow downward with the whole weight of his massive shoulder, and throws his wrist upward. On that instant the Greek sees and feels what meant that strange fire of the eye. He feels his point caught, but before he can close his grasp more firmly the haft is wrenched from his hand—it strikes the vaulted ceiling with a dull clang—and, descending, is caught fairly on the hilt by Ruric Nevel!

For a moment all is still as death in that chamber. Ruric is the first to break the silence. He advances to the Greek, and, as he hands back both the swords, he says:

"Demetrius, remember your promise. I know you are a brave man, for I can see it in your forgiving glance. You will not like me less for this."

"By heaven, no!" the noble Greek cries dropping both the swords, and extending both hands, which the gun-maker grasped. "I honor you—I love you."

Peter Alexiowitch, the impetuous Emperor—then in the zeal and fire of youth—leaped from his standing-place, and caught Ruric by the hand.

"By Saint Michael!" he cried, earnestly and loudly, "you stand clear of all blame, for full well do I know that, had you so desired, you could have slain Conrad Damonoff at your first thrust."

"Sire," returned the youth, now speaking tremulously, "twice did I disarm the count, and yet spare him. And when, in my rage, I broke his weapon in twain to bring him to his senses, he seized a second sword."

"Sir Duke," spoke the Emperor, turning towards Olga, who stood trembling with rage and mortification, "you see you must have labored under a mistake. You can retire now—not a word, sir!"

With a quivering lip and a trembling step the duke left the apartment; and after him went Stephen Urzen.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, if you leave Moscow without my consent, you do so at your peril. I will not lose sight of you. You are at liberty."

In an hour more Ruric was upon his mother's bosom. He told her all that had happened—all but the last words of the Emperor. He did not tell her of those, for he knew not whether they boded him good or evil.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MASK FALLS FROM A VILLAIN'S FACE.

It was about two weeks after the events last recorded that Rosalind Valda sat in her own apartment with Zenobie for her companion. It was in the afternoon and a severe storm was raging without.

"Now, Zenobie," spoke the beautiful maiden, "we have a moment alone—the first since morning. And now tell me about that black monk. What did he say his name was?"

"Valdimir."

"Ah, yes. I have heard his name; and if I mistake not he is a sort of mysterious being."

"He is, my mistress; and I am just as confident that I have seen him before as I am that I have seen you before."

"How? Seen him before?"

"Yes."

"But where?"

"Ah," returned the young girl, with a dubious shake of the head, "there is the mystery. For the life of me I cannot tell. He knew me—he knows everybody—and yet he has not been long in the city, if one might judge from his conversation."

"But what did he stop you for? Where was it?" asked Rosalind, eagerly.

"It was in the church he stopped me—in our church of St. Stephen. He was at the altar, and he beckoned to me as I rose to come out. I went to him, and he asked about you."

"About me?"

"Yes—and about Ruric Nevel."

"And what about us?" the maiden asked blushing.

"He asked me if I thought you loved the young gun-maker. He was so kind—and he appeared so anxious to know—and then he seemed to take such an interest in Ruric that I could not refuse to answer him."

"But what did you tell him?"

"I told him you did love Ruric. I told him how you had been children together—and how you would now give your hand to him sooner than to the proudest noble in the land. He asked me some things about the duke, but I would not tell him that. When I must tell of evil I tell the truth. I will not speak if I can properly avoid it."

"You were right, Zenobie. You were very right—about this last part; but you should not have told all you knew concerning Ruric and me."

"I hope I did nothing wrong. Oh, I should be proud to acknowledge my love for such a man."

"Aye—and so I am, my little sprite. I love Ruric with my whole soul, and would be proud to give him my hand this day; but that is no reason why you should tell of it."

"Surely, my mistress, I meant no harm," the young girl cried, eagerly.

"Hush, Zenobie. I do not blame you. Only I would have you be careful."

"And I would be careful. But oh, you could not have resisted him. He drew it from me almost ere I knew it. He put his questions in such a strange manner that I could not speak without telling

what he wanted to know. He did not say, 'Does she love Ruric Nevel?' but he took it for granted that such was the case, and then ere I was aware of it he had made me say so. But he surely does not mean you harm; nor does he mean harm to Ruric. He is a good man, I know."

"I wish I could see him," returned Rosalind, half to herself.

"You can not mistake him if you ever do see him, my mistress. He is a strange-looking man; and then he dresses differently from most of our church officers. He dresses all in black—to-day it was in black velvet. But his shape is his most striking characteristic. He is the tallest man in Moscow. His belly shakes when he laughs, and his chin seems to sink clear out of sight. He would be a funny man, and would make me laugh, if he did not puzzle me so."

"And did he ask you about anything else?"

"No—only he asked me if I knew how the duke stood with the Emperor; and I told him I thought he stood very well. Then he said he had heard that they had had some dispute concerning the duel between the Count Damonoff and Ruric. But I told him I guessed that had resulted in no estrangement, for the duke was as much at court as ever. And after that he told me about the duel, as he was there and saw nearly the whole of the affair."

And Zenobie went on and told all that the monk related about Ruric's bravery; and Rosalind listened now attentively and eagerly. It was a theme that pleased her. The attendant saw how gratefully the account came upon the ears of her mistress, and she closed the recital with some opinions of her own wherein Ruric Nevel was held up as a pattern after which all men who wished to win the love of woman should be made.

But before any answer could be made by Rosalind the door of the apartment was opened and the duke entered. He smiled very kindly as he bowed to his ward, and then with a wave of his hand, he motioned for Zenobie to withdraw; and after the attendant was gone he took a seat close by his fair charge. The maiden looked up into his face, and though there was no very serious look there as yet, she could plainly see he had something of more than usual importance on his mind. She shuddered as he gazed upon him, for she could not help it. There was something in the look of the man—a sort of hidden intent which came out in his tone and glance—a deep meaning, something which he had never spoken but which was yet manifest, that moved her thus. What it was she could not tell.

It was the prompting of that instinct of the human soul which may repel an object while yet the working mind detects no harm.

But she was not to remain in the dark much longer. The Evil One was loose, and his bonds of restraint were cast off. He had marked his prey, and the meshes were gathering about it. "Rosalind," the duke said in a tone which he meant should have been easy and frank, but which nevertheless, was marked strongly with effort, "there is some talk among the surgeons now that Conrad Damonoff may recover."

"Oh, I am glad of that," the fair girl uttered earnestly.

"Yes—I suppose so," resumed Olga, eyeing her sharply. "But you have no particular care for him, I presume."

"For—for—the count?"

"Aye—it was of him I was speaking."

"No, sir. I care only for him as I care for all who need to become better ere they die."

"Aha—yes," said the duke, biting his lip, for in his own mind he had the frankness to acknowledge that he was about as needy of virtue as was the count. "But," he resumed, with a faint smile, "you never loved the man?"

"No, sir," the maiden answered, gazing up into her guardian's face with an inquisitive look.

"So I thought—so I thought." As Olga thus spoke he smiled again, and moved his chair nearer to Rosalind. "I am well aware," he resumed, "that your affections have not yet been set upon any one who is capable of making a proper companion for you through all the ups and downs of life."

Rosalind's eyes drooped beneath the steady gaze of the speaker, and her frame trembled. But ere she could make any reply the duke went on:

"My dear Rosalind, I have now come to a business which I may justly call the most important of my life. I have not approached this subject lightly or with over zeal; but I have come to it through careful consideration and anxious study."

Here the duke stopped and gazed into Rosalind's face. She met his gaze and her eyes drooped again. She trembled more than before, and a dim, dreadful fear worked its way to her mind.

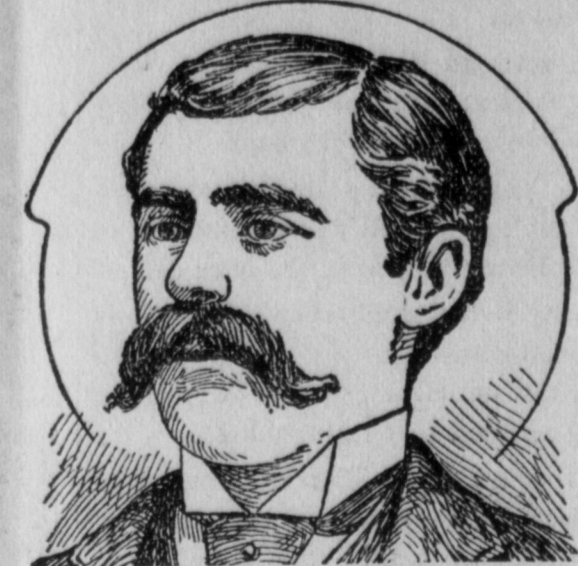
"Rosalind," the nobleman continued, "when I was but nineteen years of age I was married with a girl whom I loved. She lived with me four short, happy years. In that time we were blessed with two children, but they lived not long to cheer us. And then my beautiful wife died and the world was all dark and drear to me. I thought I should never love again. Time passed on and you were placed in my charge. When you first came I loved you; and I wondered if you were to take

(Continued on Page 5.)

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