

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER XVI.—Continued.

"Let that monk be who he may; whether man or devil, God or saint, I'll destroy him! I have the power, and I'll use it. As warden of the city I have the power to arrest him upon suspicion of conspiracy. I'll do it! Where is he now?"

"I know not." "Never mind, I'll to the Emperor first. I'll study my plan, and ere the sun sets it shall be carried out. By heavens, I'll be baffled thus no more. I could have wished that this gun-maker had been quietly out of the way, for then all would have been clear and plain, and I should not have feared the trouble of his clamoring about my ears. But let him go. I would not give much for the life he has left. I'll dispose of him soon. But that monk—without heavens! he dies at once, and without consultation with the Emperor; for I can swear he is a conspirator."

"Good!" ejaculated the priest. And thus the business was arranged for the present. Passion helped the duke wondrously in his conclusions; and even before the priest left, the stout nobleman began to wish that he had a very little more power. In fact, as he came to reason he began to doubt; but he gave up not one idea of the plan he had formed for the vengeance his soul so madly craved.

CHAPTER XVII.

TRANSACTIONS OF A NIGHT.

"I DARE NOT! Oh I dare not!" "But it is your only hope." "And whither shall we go?" "Anywhere rather than remain here. Oh, my mistress, if you do stay here you know the fate which awaits you. There is no other means of escape from the wicked duke's power."

"And I must thus cast myself among strangers—lose my all of earth—" "Hold, Rosalind. By St. Paul! there is surely one in Moscow who will help you. Let us go to the Emperor. Oh, if he be the man I have heard he will surely listen!"

"Ah, Zenobie!—the duke is high in power, and his influence is great at court. Peter would not dare to thwart him."

"It may be so, but I do not believe it. And yet, my mistress, just think, for one moment, how you stand in that respect. You have nothing to lose. This life of earth, with all its pains and sorrows, and with its most exquisite tortures, he'ds nothing worse for you within the bounds of possibility than to become the duke's wife. If there were but one chance in the thousand you had better try it. Remember—you cannot possibly lose anything; but the chances are for you. Let us go to the Emperor."

"But how, Zenobie?" "This evening—after the darkness of night has gathered over the city—let us go. I tell you I do not believe the Emperor will deliberately suffer a great wrong to be done for the sake of pacifying the duke. He has more noble independence than that."

The young countess did not answer at once. She pressed her small white hand hard upon her brow, and thus she remained for some time buried in profound thought. At length she raised her head, and the fire of determination was in her eye.

"I will go," she said. "I will go to the Emperor. He will help me if he has a human heart."

"You have one satisfaction, my mistress: he can not harm you."

"Can not?" "I mean that you can be but made to marry with Olga; and all other harm would be as nothing compared with that."

"Aye—you are right, Zenobie. We will go this very night."

The more Rosalind pondered upon this new resolve the more hope did she derive from it. Ere long she conversed more freely with her attendant, and at times that old smile would struggle for a moment upon her face. Yet she had gloomy moments, too. Her fear was too deeply fixed to be swept away so easily.

The afternoon passed away, and as the shades of night gathered over the great city the two girls were astir. Zenobie gathered together such articles of clothing as would be needed, and then proceeded to prepare her mistress for the adventure.

"Fear not," she said, as she drew on Rosalind's robe of fur, "for there can be no danger worse than that we flee from. Try only to remember that you flee from the duke's foul embrace!"

This served to nerve the fair young countess up to the task, and her frame ceased its trembling.

"I shall not falter now," she said. "But shall we find the Emperor at this late hour?"

"Bless me, 'tis not late. But even if we do not see him to-night we can do it in the morning. We shall find plenty in the imperial palace who will shelter us till then."

The girls were now ready, and all that remained was to start on their strange

mission. With noiseless steps they left the apartment where they had dressed and proceeded along the corridor to the great staircase. Zenobie knew there would be less danger there than to go down the other way among the servants. Having descended these stairs they came to the great hall which opened one way into the saloons. They took the former course, and were soon in the court. The only trouble now was in passing the porter's lodge at the gate, for they knew the great gate was not open, and to gain the street they must pass through the room where the porter always stayed. Zenobie went ahead and looked in. The porter sat by the fire playing with his dog.

"My mistress," whispered the girl, as she came back, "old John is in the lodge, and we need have no fear. He is a simple good-natured fellow, and I am sure I can get by him. Do you go in advance—cover up your face—don't look at him; and be sure you don't tremble. Leave it all to me. Remember now; you have—" "Fear not Zenobie. Go on."

So on they went, and when they reached the lodge Rosalind went in first and stood by the wicket, while Zenobie followed, and opened the door that looked into the porter's room.

"Good John," she uttered, in anxious tones, "come and open the wicket for me quick. My good mistress is very ill, and Tilda and I are going for the doctor. Come—be quick."

"But why don't some of the men go?" asked John, as he started up and forced his dog back.

"Because 'twould take them longer to do the errand than 'twill us. But don't detain us. We shan't be gone long."

The honest porter had orders not to allow the countess to pass out, but he thought not of that now. He had known the gentle girl from a child, and so well did he love her that he might not have stopped her even had he known she was then waiting to pass out. At all events, he could not refuse the present request, so he came out and opened the wicket without further question, and the girls passed through.

"Now—now," uttered Zenobie, in nervous haste, "we are clear of the palace. Here is the street. Our walk is not long."

Rosalind answered not, but drawing her robe more closely about her to keep out the cold, biting wind, she hastened along by the side of her companion. Hope was now alive within her. She turned one glance behind her, and she could see the light which she had left burning in her chamber. It seemed at that moment to be the fiery eye of a demon gazing after her, and instinctively she quickened her pace.

Twice during the day did the Duke of Tula call at the imperial palace without being able to find the Emperor; but in the evening he was more fortunate. The Emperor was in, and Olga was admitted at once to his presence.

"Well, my lord duke," said Peter, as Olga approached; "what business calls you from home at this hour?"

"Business of importance, sire. Business of less moment to me than to the state."

"Ah? Proceed." Only two attendants were with the Emperor, one of whom was Demetrius the Greek, and the place of and once was in one of the private apartments near the bed-chamber, where only privileged ones were ever allowed to come.

"Sire," commenced the duke, "you remember the gun-maker who was before you not long since?"

"Ah—yes. The one who took my Greek's sword from him."

"The same, sire. Have you heard from him since?"

"By my soul, Olga, I had well-nigh forgotten the fellow. Yes, yes—I remember him well now. He was a right stout knave."

"Aye—atd a dangerous one, too, sire. A dangerous man," said the duke, with a dubious shake of the head.

"Ah!—what has he done?" "Why he has been engaged in various robberies to my certain knowledge; and only a few evenings since he knocked down one of our holy priests, and robbed him of all he had. He is at the head of a numerous band of desperadoes."

"Is it possible?" "I know it, sire."

"By St. Paul! I should not have believed this."

"Nor would I have believed it, sire, had I not received proofs not to be questioned. I, as my duty, have long been anxious to ferret out this gang of robbers—"

"But I have never heard of them, Olga," interrupted Peter.

"Ah, sire, because I gave direction that you should not be troubled with the affair. But I have them now. It is only last evening that I got a clue upon them. We found them in an old building near the river, here in the Kremlin, and this same Ruric Nevel was with them. But he made his escape."

"I do remember me now that the fellow had a bold bearing, and a fearless look," said the Emperor, half to himself; "and if such a man turns villain there must be danger in it."

"Aye, sire—you speak truly. And now with your order, I can apprehend the fellow at once."

Children Cry for Pitcher's Castoria.

"I can send and have it done my dear duke." "But your officers may not find him. I know where he is and can have him taken at once. He has several hiding-places."

"Well—then you might do the work with more advantage."

"Aye; and I can have him tried and disposed of without further trouble to you sire."

"No, no. I wish to see him," returned the Emperor. "I will give you the necessary order, and you may bring him here."

Peter then turned to his secretary and bade him fill an order for Ruric Nevel's arrest. The stout master-at-arms looked on with a troubled countenance, and his glances towards the duke were anything but loving. He did not seem to relish the business at all, and the expression of his countenance would seem to indicate that he did not believe all that the duke had said.

However the order was soon made out and in the duke's possession.

"Remember," said Peter, "you will bring him before me."

"You shall be obeyed, sire."

If the Emperor did not mark that strange, dark look of the duke as he turned away, the Greek did; and he fancied, too, that he knew what it meant. But he said nothing then.

Olga bowed low as he clutched the order, and having once more promised obedience, he hurried from the imperial presence. As he passed out through the wide court he walked slowly and thoughtfully, and with his head bowed; but soon he started up his hands came together with an emphatic movement, and he moved on more quickly. He had gained the street, and approached a small court within which stood a house of entertainment, where he stopped. In a few moments more a man came out from the inn, and as soon as he had satisfied himself that the new-comer was the duke he spoke.

"Olga—is't you?" "Yes."

It needed but a single glance in the dim twilight to recognize the form of the humpbacked priest. He walked quickly to where the duke stood and the two moved off together.

"Now what luck?" Savotano asked as they gained the street once more.

"Good—as good as I could even hope," returned the duke. "I have the power for arresting the gun-maker."

"And for executing him?" "It amounts to the same. I am ordered to bring him before the Emperor; but that is easily managed."

Here the duke stopped and gazed about him, and then bending his head so that no word could possibly pass beyond his companion's ears, he continued:

"You can call upon three of your best men, and I can furnish two from among my own servants. Early in the morning—by the time the sun is up—they must be at the gun-maker's dwelling. They must make him angry—of course he will resist—and then kill him. It is very simple—very. They can easily dispatch him thus, and then we have only to tell the Emperor that he resisted the imperial authority even unto death. So you see this is even better than it would have been had I received direct authority for his death; for then some form of trial would have been necessary, but now we have only to go to his house—provoke him to quarrel—kill him—and then tell the Emperor how it happened. What think you?"

"Why," returned the priest, with a wicked chuckle, "I can only say that Master Nevel is done for—he is a dead man."

"Exactly. Nothing could be better—nothing."

After the explanation of this fiendish, hellish scheme, the two walked on some distance in silence.

"Stop," uttered the duke, catching his companion by the arm. "There come two persons this way. We must not meet them. Here—into this passage—quick!"

It was a narrow, dark passage leading to the next street into which the duke dragged his companion, and here he meant to remain until the two persons had passed. The fact was, the duke did not wish to be seen with the priest at that hour in the street, and it is no matter of surprise that he should at that moment have been influenced by guilty fear. The two pedestrians came on, and passed the spot where the men stood. They were females, and one of them the priest saw in the face. The features were upturned to the starlight, and he recognized them. He caught the duke quickly and nervously by the arm.

"By the host of heaven!" he whispered, "twas the countess!"

"Rosalind?" gasped Olga.

"Yes—as sure as death!" "Then come—quick!"

Savotano understood the meaning of this, and he followed the duke quickly out. At a few bounds Olga reached the females, and one of them he caught by the arm. She uttered a sharp, quick cry, and as she turned her face up she revealed the fair features of the Countess Rosalind Valda! The priest had no need to stop the other girl, for she stopped of her own accord as soon as she found that her mistress was captured.

"Aha!" Olga uttered, when he saw that pale face. "What now, eh? Where are you bound at this unseemly hour?"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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