

RURIC NEVEL.

A TALE OF RUSSIA TWO HUNDRED YEARS AGO.

CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

In the mean time the duke was in his private room below. He was pacing to and fro across the floor with his hands behind him, and his brow was dark and lowering. Ever and anon he would stop near the door and listen, and then proceed. At length there came a rap upon the door, and the duke said, "Enter." It was a priest who entered the apartment—a small deformed man, somewhere about fifty years of age. His face was very dark; his features sharp and angular; his eyes dark, and sunken deep into his head; his brow heavy above the eyes, where the shaggy brows hung over, but sloping back from thence, leaving the points where phrenologists locate benevolence and veneration deficient and flat. Upon his shoulders he wore a huge, ungainly hump; and, all in all, he was just such a man as a timid person would shun. His name was Savotano. The duke had been the means of getting him into the church, and in consideration thereof he had bound himself to do the duke's evil work. But this is not all.

Some years before there had been a murder in Moscow, and Savotano did the bloody deed. It was a work of pure vengeance. Olga had him apprehended; but he was not brought to justice. The duke found him to be shrewd, unscrupulous wretch, willing to serve those who would pay him well, and ready to let himself then to any one who could save his life. Olga was a man of plots and schemes. He fancied that such a man as Savotano might be of use to him; so he proposed to save him if he would serve his benefactor. The villain was glad enough to accept the proposition, and the bargain was made. Could Savotano enter the church, and assume the sacred garb, he might in many cases work to better advantage. The wretch readily agreed to this, too; and through Olga's powerful influence he gained a place in the church. He knew that the duke held his very life, and he failed not to serve him. His clerical robes shielded him from much suspicion; and moreover, the place gave him additional advantages to work at his diabolical trade. His salary from the government was sufficient for his support, while an occasional sum from his master enabled him to enjoy many of those luxuries which were denied to most of his brethren. Olga feared not to trust this man, for the fellow had nothing to gain by betrayal but everything to lose.

And such was the man who now entered the duke's private room. He entered with a bold air, for though he was somewhat in the duke's power, yet there was a peculiar satisfaction in knowing that when he fell the noble lord must fall with him, part way, at least. Brethren in crime cannot count much upon respect.

"I have come, my lord," the priest said as he shook the snow from his robe, and then took a seat by the furnace-pipe.

"And how is the count?" asked Olga.

"He is recovering, I am sure."

"Does Kopani say so?"

"Yes. He says he will have him out within a month."

"By heavens, Savotano, this must not be."

"But tell me, my lord, what is the particular need of the count's departing?"

The duke gazed his visitor a few moments in the face, and then he said:

"Why, since the affair interests you, I'll tell you. Thus far I have paid you promptly all your dues, but I cannot do so much longer unless we can make some of our points work. My property is on the decrease fast. I have not enough left to live on. Within the past three years I have made some bad ventures. I put into—but never mind—suffice it for me to say that I am at the end of my fortune."

The duke was about to say that he had placed large sums in the hands of the Minister Galitzin for the purpose of carrying out the conspiracy by which the Princess Sophia was to have been placed upon the throne, with Galitzin for her prime minister, and himself also high in power. He chose not to tell this—and no wonder, for heads had ere then been taken to pay for such indiscretions.

"And now if this count survives I thus have one source cut off. My half of Drotzen is used up and mortgaged to him, but if he dies the whole comes to me. His father and myself married sisters, and they owned Drotzen, and on his side the Count is the only heir; so in the event of his death the whole comes to me. You understand this now."

"Perfectly," returned the priest. "And 'tis a pity your first effort did not succeed."

"So it is," said the duke uneasily.

"When I sent him with that message to the gun-maker I felt sure he would be slain, and then I hoped that the other could be disposed of for having slain him. But the Emperor has turned all my plans upside down, for the present at least. Savotano, you must have a hand in Damonoff's death."

"That is easily done, my lord," replied the priest quietly.

"You have free access there?"

"Yes."

"And can you not watch with him some night?"

"I think I can."

"Then do so. When he is dead two hundred ducats are yours."

"Then he dies."

"Good!—And now there is one more. This gun-maker must be got out of the way."

"Ah," uttered Savotano, looking up incredulously. "Do you mean so?"

"Most assuredly I do."

"But why him?"

"Do you fear to undertake the work?"

"Not at all, my lord; I only wished to know why he was wanted away."

"The reason is simple. I must marry with Rosalind Valdai. Her property is worth the whole of Drotzen twice told—over two million of ducats."

"So much?" uttered the priest, opening his eyes with greedy wonder.

"Yes; it is one of the finest estates in Moscow, and it pays her now a yearly income of a hundred thousand ducats. She does not know it—Ha, ha, ha—"

"Ha, ha, ha," laughed the priest in concert. "She don't, eh?"

"No—she knows nothing about it. But I must secure this; and in order to do it I must marry her; and—if I would be sure of that, this accursed gun-maker must be out of the way."

"But what is he to her?"

"She loves him."

"And is not your authority—"

"Hold, Savotano. I'll explain to you in a few words. I'm afraid the Emperor has taken a fancy to this youngster, and if he has he may be appealed to in this case. The girl will take marriage hard. I shall have to hire you to perform the ceremony."

"Which I should be pleased to do," returned the priest, with a coarse smile.

"You shall have the opportunity. But first we must have the young Nevel taken care of."

"I think I can manage that, my lord."

"And how will you do it?"

"I suppose you don't want him put where he can get off and come back here."

"No. Finish him while you are about it!"

"I will."

"But mind: it must be done so that in no possible way suspicion can fall upon me. You must contrive some way so that suspicion shall be led at once to some apparent point, and there baffled."

"Leave me alone for that, my lord. I can call help if I want it."

"Are there not places in the city where a body can be hidden?—where they may be so disposed of and never be found?" asked the duke, as the thought came to his mind.

"Never mind," returned the other, with a confident nod of the head. "If I meddle with the matter it shall be well done."

"Very well. I'll trust it with you."

For a few moments after this there was a dead silence, during which only the moaning of the wind could be heard. But at length the duke started up, and with sudden energy he said:

"Ah, Savotano, there is one thing I came nigh forgetting. You have heard of this strange monk—Valdimir his name is."

"Aye—and I have seen him, too. You mean that huge lump of human fat?"

"Yes. And now tell me who and what he is. He was at the duel; and I know he has been here to my house. Who is he?"

"You've secured me there, my lord, for I can tell you no more about him than I can about the man in the moon. In short no one seems to know him, save that he is a monk, of some Roman order, and named Valdimir. He has been here only a few months, as near as I can find out. And yet I think I know what his business is; or, at least, why he's here."

"Ah—why suspect?"

"Yes—and if my suspicions be correct we could have him taken care of at any moment."

"Explain."

"Why—I think he is a spy of the Pope—sent here from Rome to learn something of our Emperor's plans."

"But he has not visited the imperial palace."

"Oh yes, my lord. He has been there several times; and once the Emperor himself was obliged to send him out of the audience chamber."

"But have you any particular reasons for thinking him a spy from the Pope?"

"Why—he is a Romish monk; and he hangs about the most important places in our city. Even the circumstances I have just related—his trying to remain in the audience chamber while private business was going on, and having to be ordered out by the Emperor—is some ground for suspicion. I mean to watch him, at all events."

"That's right," returned the duke. And then, after a moment's thought, he added: "I do not see why he should be around after every petty duel that may be fought, if he is a spy from Rome. And besides, I have heard one or two persons say that they were sure they had seen him before."

"Oh, that may be only the result of some strong resemblance which he bears to some one else. I am sure he was never here before—not in Moscow."

Again the hump-backed priest was cautioned about the work he had in hand, and having promised over and over again to be very careful, he took his leave.

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And Olga, Duke of Tula, was left alone with his own thoughts. Better for him had that wicked priest been his executioner! Better for him had he been upon the count's bed, racked with dying pains! Better for him had he been a poor gun-maker, so he had been honest! Oh, better for him had he been the meanest beggar that walked the earth, than what he was! But he did not realize this. He had a goal ahead, and he tried to overlook the black, dreadful gulf that yawned between him and it!

CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

The news went out that the Count Conrad Damonoff must die. A few days before the best surgeon in Moscow said he would recover; but now that same surgeon said he must fall. A strange change had come over him. It was not a fever, but rather a consuming of vitality. He was failing fast, and no art of medicine could revive him. Some thought he must be bleeding inwardly, but others knew better than this, because in that case there would be some outward symptom. The wound itself was healing, but the disease was not. The physician and the priest were now in daily, and the former almost in hourly attendance. The surgeon was Kopani; and the priest was the hump-backed Savotano!

Thus lay the count upon his bed, weak and faint, but at present, almost free from pain, and an old woman was his only attendant, the priest having just left. It was just after noon. The dying man had just taken a powerful stimulating draught though it was against the injunctions of the priest, as he said that by such means the invalid might die bereft of sense, and thus lose his hold upon salvation—he had just taken this draught when there was a low rap upon the door. The woman arose to answer the summons. She conversed a few moments with the girl who had knocked, and when she returned to the bed she announced that Ruric Nevel wished to enter.

"Let him come in," whispered the count.

"But—"

"Never mind," he interrupted, as the woman commenced thus to expostulate. "Let him come in. By heavens, if he is my enemy let me see him. It may serve to arouse me."

So the woman went to the door again, and soon afterwards Ruric Nevel entered the apartment. He stepped lightly, noiselessly, to the bedside, but it was some moments ere he could distinguish objects by the subdued light of the place. By and by, however, he overcame the difficulty, and he started back in horror, as he beheld the features of his adversary. How pale and sunken! How deathlike and ghastly! The count noticed the movement, and he noticed the look.

"Count Damonoff," spoke the gun-maker, in a low, solemn tone, "a few days since I heard that you were recovering, and I thanked God. But to-day they told me you were dying, and I have come to ask that I may take your hand ere you pass away from earth. As God is my Maker and my Judge, I would rather lie down here and die for you than have you pass away with a curse of me upon your soul or on your lips. Pardon me for what I have done, and never again will I engage in such a wicked work. For my own life, it is my country's and my mother's, and I have no right to throw it away; and my antagonist's life is the sacred property of God, which I have no right to touch but in self-defence. Forgive me."

Slowly and heavily moved the dying man over, and then he extended his thin and wasted hand.

"Ruric," he said—and his voice was stronger now, for the potion was working—"I am glad you have come—very glad; for I have wished, above all else of earth, to see you. I could not send for you, for I knew not how you might come. I have been all wrong in the things that have passed betwixt thee and me. I was mad, and a fool. I blame you not; but rather do I thank you for your kindness through all the scene. Oh, I forgive you with all heart; and now tell me that I am forgiven?"

"Forgiven?" repeated Ruric, with a trembling lip, still holding the count's hand within both his own. "Oh, would to God I could call you back to life! Forgiven? Oh, God, who reads all hearts, knows how humble, how sacred, is my forgiveness to you! Could I call you back—could I wipe out the past from my memory, I could die content."

"Enough," returned the count, warmly. "This was my holiest wish, though pride has kept back its utterance. Oh, I feared you would gloat over my death—that you would be glad when I was gone!"

"No, no; I should have been a monster then."

"There are many such. And yet I wronged you by the thought. But I could not help it."

A moment more passed in silence, and then the invalid resumed:

"There is one reason why I should like to live; I should be prepared for a better life. Since death has come—since I have known that he stood waiting by my bed—I have wondered at the evil life I have led; and I have thought that if the dark king would let me remain here a few years

(Continued on Page 5.)

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