

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

sion. Speak plainly, and be sure of your sympathy."

A few moments more the youth gazed silently upon his mother, and then he answered:

"All this thought has been of one person—of Rosalind Valda."

Claudia never started as she heard that name, and for she while the color forsook her cheeks.

"What, my dear boy, what of her have you thought?" she asked tremulously.

"What but for one thing could I think, my mother? You have seen her?"

"Yes, Ruric."

"And you have marked the grace, the loveliness, the soul given beauty of the noble girl?"

"I know that she is beautiful, my son, and also that she is good; at least so I think."

"Then what but love could move me with deep thought of her? Oh, my mother, I do love her! I love her with the whole strength of my heart and soul."

"Alas, my Ruric, she will never dare love thee!"

"You know not that," the youth quickly replied, his eyes burning deeply and his open brow flushing.

"Did I not know she loved me, I am sure I would never have allowed my thoughts such range. We were children together, and even then she loved. Fate has dealt differently by us in the years that have passed since those childhood times, but you I am sure that her love for me is not changed, save as increasing age must change all the emotions of our nature into deeper, stronger lights and shades."

"But think, my boy, you a mere artisan, she the offspring of nobility and the word of a duke—a stone, cold, proud aristocrat, who looks upon our station only as a burden, masters look upon their bonds of burden. I fear you will find little else but misery in such a course of thought."

"At least, my mother, I will see Rosalind, and if she loves me as I love her, and if she would accept my hand!"

"Hush, my boy. Do not check such hopes. Why should she care with thee when the richest nobles of the land would kneel for her hand?"

"Hold!" cried Ruric, starting to his feet, his handsome face flushed and his bright eye burning. "Speak not thus—at least not now. I desire not myself, but I claim a soul as pure and a heart as noble as any man in the land. My mind is as clear, my hopes are as high, my ambition is as true to real greatness and my will as firm as any of them. If Rosalind seeks the love of a true heart and the protection of stout arms and determined success, then I fear not to place myself by the side of any suitor in the land; but if she seeks immediate wealth and the glitter of some high sounding title, then—ah, I know she does not! But let it pass now. I will see her."

Claudia would not oppose the wishes of her son, and she said no more upon the subject. For awhile nothing further was said, until Ruric remarked upon the increasing force of the storm.

"Hark!" uttered his mother, bending her ear in a listening attitude. "Was that a knock upon our door?"

"Surely no one is out on such a night that could seek shelter here," returned Ruric. "You must have!"

The youth did not finish the sentence, for at that moment the knock came so loud that it was not to be mistaken. The youth caught up the candle and hastened to the door, opened it, but the blast came roaring in, whirling a cloud of snow into Ruric's face and extinguishing the light at once.

"Is there any one here?" the gunmaker asked, bowing his head and shielding his eyes from the driving snow with one hand.

"Yes," returned a voice from the Stygian darkness. "In God's name, let me in, or I shall perish."

"Then follow quickly," said Ruric. "Here, give me your hand. There, now come!"

The youth found the thickly gloved hand—gloved with the softest fur—and, having led the invisible applicant into the hall, he closed the door and then led the way to the kitchen. As soon as the candle was relighted Ruric turned and gazed upon the newcomer. He was a monk and habited something like one of the black monks of St. Michael. He was of medium height and possessed a rotundity of person which was comical to behold. He was fat and unwieldy and waddled about with laughable steps. His huge black robe, which reached from his chin to his toes, was secured about the waist with a sash of the same color, and the snow which lay upon the shoulders and back presented a striking contrast. Ruric brushed away the snow with his own hand, and having taken his visitor's thick fur bonnet the latter took a seat near the fire.

Before a word was spoken the youthful host carefully examined his guest's features, and the latter seemed equally desirous of discovering what manner of person he had fallen in with. The monk's face

was a peculiar one. The features were very dark and prominent and almost sootier in their strongly marked outlines. His brow was very strong in mental development, and his eyes were dark and brilliant. The slight circle of hair that escaped from beneath the tight skullcap which he retained upon his head was somewhat tinged with silver, though his face did not betray such advanced age as this silvery hair would seem to indicate.

"You have been caught in a severe storm, good father," said the youth, after he had somewhat recovered from the effect of the cold.

"Aye, that I have, my son," the monk returned in a deep, rumbling voice. "I left the Kremlin this morning after thinking of such a change. This storm has commenced since I started on my return. About half a mile from here my horse got fouled in the snow, and I left him with an honest peasant and then started to make the rest of my way on foot, but I reckoned wildly. The driving storm blinded me, and the piling drifts swallowed me up at every dozen steps. My body is not very well adapted to such work. Na, na, ha! But I saw your light, and I determined to seek shelter here for the night. By St. Michael, but this is a most severe storm. Yet you are comfortable here."

"Aye, father, we try to be comfortable," said Ruric. "My mother could hardly survive a winter in some of the dwellings which stand hereabout."

The monk made no answer to this save a sort of commendatory nod, and shortly afterward the youth asked:

"Do you belong here in the city, good father?"

"Aye, at present I do," the monk returned. And then, with a smile, he added: "I suppose you would like to know whom you have thus rescued. My name is Vladimir, and my home is wherever I may chance to be on God's heritage. At present I am residing here in Moscow. There, could you ask me to be more frank?"

Ruric smiled, but he made no direct reply. He was too deeply interested in the face of the monk to enter with much eagerness into conversation. At length the guest asked if he could be accommodated with some sleeping place, and, having answered in the affirmative, the youth lighted another candle and conducted him to a chamber which was located directly over the kitchen and which was very well warmed by means of several iron tubes that connected with the furnace below.

"Mother," uttered Ruric as soon as he had returned to the kitchen, "who is that man?"

"How should I know?" the woman replied.

"But have you never seen him before?" Ruric asked in an earnest, eager tone.

"I cannot tell, my son. His face most surely calls up some strange emotions in my mind, but I think I never saw him before."

"And yet he seems familiar to me," the son resumed. "Those eyes I surely have seen before, but to save my soul I cannot remember when or where."

And so Ruric pondered, but to no avail. After he had retired to his bed he lay awake and thought of the strange face, and all through the night his dreams were but startling visions of the black monk.

CHAPTER 11.
A STRANGE PROCEEDING.

When Ruric came down in the morning, he found the monk already there and breakfast nearly ready. But little was said during the mealtime, for the monk seemed busy with thoughts of his own, and Ruric was too much engaged in studying the strange man's features and pondering upon the various doubts and surmises that had entered his mind. After the meal was over the monk accompanied the gunmaker to his shop, and there he spent some time in examining the quaint articles of machinery that were used in the manufacture of arms.

Ruric was engaged in finishing a pair of pistols, and for some minutes the monk had stood silently by his side watching his movements. At length the youth stopped in his work and laid the pistol down.

"Excuse me, good father," he said rather nervously, at the same time turning his visitor in the face. "But I must ask you a question. Where have I seen you before?"

"How should I know?" the monk returned, with a smile.

"Aye," resumed Ruric, with some hesitancy, "I know not but that you might enlighten me. I have surely seen you somewhere."

"And are there not hundreds whom you have seen in this great city?" he asked, with some scornful gleam in his eyes, "who might recognize you as you recognize me?"

"Ah, it may be so, but not like this. There may be a thousand faces I would recollect to have seen, but not one of them would excite even a passing emotion in my soul. But your face calls up some powerful emotion, some startling memory of the past, which bothers me. Who are you, good father? What are you? Where have we met before?"

"No," said Vladimir, with a shake of the head. And then, with a more serious shade upon his face, he added: "Let this pass now. I will not dwell to you that there may be some reason for your strange face, but I assure you most assuredly that until last night I never came in direct companionship with

you before—at any rate, not to my knowledge. You have acted the good Samaritan toward me, and I hope I may at some time return the favor."

"No, no!" quickly responded the youth. "If you return it, then it will be a favor no more. I have only done for you what every man should do to his neighbor, and so far from needing thanks for my services I would rather give them for the occasion, for I know of no source of joy so pure and pleasurable as that feeling in the soul which tells us we have done a good act."

The dark monk reached forth and took the youthful artisan's hand, and, with more than ordinary emotion, he said:

"You touch the harp strings of the soul with a noble hand, my son, and if any deed of kindness can give me joy it will be a deed for you. We may meet again, and until then I can only say, God bless and prosper thee."

With these words the monk turned away, and ere Ruric could command presence of mind enough to follow him he had gone from the house. The youth wished to say something, but amid the varied emotions that went leaping through his mind he could gather no connected thoughts.

After the monk was gone Ruric returned to his bench and resumed his work. He asked his boy if he had ever seen the strange man before, but Paul only shook his head and answered dubiously.

"What do you mean?" the gunmaker asked, gazing the boy in the face. "Do you think you have seen him before?"

"I cannot tell, my master. I may have seen him before and I may not. But surely you would not suppose that my memory would serve you better than your own?"

Ruric was not fully assured by this answer. He gazed into Paul's face, and he fancied he detected some show of intelligence there which had not been spoken. But he resolved to ask no more questions at present. He had asked enough, he thought, upon such a subject, and he made up his mind to bother himself no more about it, feeling sure that if his boy knew anything which would be for his master's interest to know it would be communicated in due season. So he applied himself anew to his work, and at noon the pistols were finished.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, just as Ruric had finished tempering some parts of a gun lock, the back door of his shop was opened, and two men entered. They were young men, dressed in costly furs and both of them stout and good looking. The gunmaker recognized them as the Count Conrad Damonoff and his friend Stephen Urzen.

"I think I speak with Ruric Nevel?" said the count, moving forward.

"You do," returned Ruric, not at all surprised by the visit, since people of all classes were in the habit of calling at his place to order arms.

The count turned a shade paler than before, and his nether lip trembled. But Ruric thought that might be the result of coming from the cold into a warm place. However, he was soon undeceived, for the count's next remark was significant: "You are acquainted with the Lady Rosalind Valda?" he said.

"I am," returned Ruric, now beginning to wonder.

"Well, sir," returned Damonoff, with much haughtiness, "perhaps my business can be quickly and satisfactorily settled. It is my desire to make the Lady Rosalind my wife."

Ruric Nevel started at these words, and he clasped his hands to hide their tremor. But he was not long debating upon an answer.

"And why have you come to me with this information, sir?" he asked.

"You should know that already. Do you not love the lady?"

"Upon my soul, sir, count, you ask me a strange question. What right have you to question me upon such a theme?"

"The right that every man has to pave the way for his own rights," replied Damonoff sharply. "But if you choose not to answer let it pass. I know you do love the lady, and now I ask you to renounce all claims to her hand."

"By St. Paul, sir, count, your tongue runs into strange moods of speech! I renounce all claims to Rosalind Valda's hand! Was't so you meant?"

"Aye, sir, precisely so."

"Perhaps you will inform me what claims I may have upon the lady," Ruric returned, with some trepidation in his tone, for the very subject was one that moved him deeply.

"Ruric Nevel, you shall not say that I did not make myself fully understood, and hence I will explain." The count spoke this as speaking a man who feels that he is doing a very condescending thing, and in the same tone he proceeded: "The Lady Rosalind is of noble parentage and very wealthy. My own station and wealth are equal with hers—my station, at all events. She may possess the undivided right to more property than I do; but that matters not. I love her, and I have been to see the noble duke, her guardian, and he objects not to my suit, but he informed me that there was one impediment, and that was her love for you. He knows full

well, as I know, and as all must know, that she could never become your wife; but yet he is anxious not to interfere too much against her inclinations. So a simple denial from you to the effect that you can never claim her hand is all that is necessary. You understand me, I trust. We seek this only for the fair lady's own good. Of course you must be aware that the duke would never consent to her union with you, and yet he would wish to have your denial to show to Rosalind when he announces his decision. I have a paper here all drawn up, and all that will be necessary is simply your signature. Here. It is only a plain, simple avowal on your part that you have no hopes nor thoughts of seeking the hand of the lady in marriage."

As the count spoke he drew a paper from the bosom of his marten doublet, and, having opened it, he handed it toward the gunmaker. But Ruric took it not. He drew back and gazed the visitor sternly in the face.

"Sir, count," he uttered in a tone full of noble indignation, "what do you suppose I am? Do you mean to tell me that Olga, duke of Tula, has commissioned you to obtain such a renunciation of me?"

"Stephen," spoke the count, turning to his companion, "you heard the instructions the duke gave me this morning?"

"Aye," returned Urzen, directing his speech to Ruric; "I did hear, and you have stated the case plainly."

"I may be as much surprised as yourself," resumed the count haughtily, "at this strange taste of the duke. Why he should seek this signal from you I can only imagine upon his desire to call up no regrets in the bosom of his fair ward. He knows that she was once intimate with you and that she now feels a warm friendship for you. For her sake he would have this signal from you."

"But how for her sake?" asked Ruric.

"Why," returned Damonoff, "do you not see? Rosalind in the simplicity of her heart may think that you—a—that you might claim her love and out of pure principle grant it to you simply because you were the first claimant."

"But I never claimed her love," said Ruric warmly. "If she loves me, she loves me from her heart. With the noble duke I never spoke but once, and then he came here for me to temper his sword. If you would marry with the lady, do so, and if you seek help in the work seek it from those who have some power in the matter."

"You mistake, sir," uttered the count hotly. "I seek not power now. I only seek a simple word from one who may have some influence, even as a beggar, having saved the life of a king, may, through royal gratitude, wield an influence. Will you sign the paper?"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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