

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

"I am sure of it," said Paul. A moment Ruric's frame quivered with suppressed passion. Then he said:

"Let them come, and if they come, or if either of them comes, while I am gone, tell them, or him, that I am their very humble servant in all things reasonable."

Paul promised, and then the gunmaker turned away. In the hall he threw on his heavy fur pelisse, and, having reached the nearest hostelry, he took a horse and sledge and started off for Kremlin, within which the duke resided.

Within one of the sumptuously furnished apartments of the palace of the Duke of Tula sat Rosalind Valda. She was a beautiful girl, molded in perfect form, with the full flush of health and vigor and possessing a face of peculiar sweetness and intelligence. She was only 19 years of age, and she had been ten years an orphan. Her hair was of a golden hue, and the sunlight loved to dwell amid the clustering curls. Her eyes, which were of a deep, liquid blue, sparkled brightly when she was happy, and when she smiled the lovely dimples of her cheeks held the smile even after it had faded from her lips. There was nothing of the aristocrat in her look—nothing proud, nothing haughty—but gentleness and love were the true elements of her soul, and she could only be happy when she knew that she was truly loved. She liked respect, but she spurned that respect which only aims at outward show, while the heart may be reeking with vilest sensualism.

Rosalind sat there in the apartment which was hers for her own private use, and she was sad and thoughtful. One fair hand supported her pure brow, while with the other she twisted the ends of the silken sash that confined her heavy robe. Thus she sat when the door of her apartment was opened and a young girl entered. This newcomer was a small, fair creature, bright and quick, with that raven hair and those large dark eyes of dreamy light which bespeak the child of a Moslem blood. Her name was Zenobia, and she was now about 16 years of age. Rosalind's father had picked her up on the battlefield from which the Turks had fled, and, being unable to find any claimant, he had brought her home, then almost an infant. And now she was Rosalind's attendant and companion. She loved her kind and gentle mistress and would have laid down life itself in the service.

"How now, Zenobia?" asked Rosalind as she noticed the girl hesitate. "There is a gentleman below who would see you," the girl replied. "Tell him I cannot see him," said Rosalind, trembling.

"But this is Ruric Nevel, my mistress," Rosalind said. "Ruric!" uttered the fair maiden, starting up, while the rich blood mounted to her brow and temples. "Oh, I am glad he has come! My prayers are surely answered. Lead him hither, Zenobia."

The girl departed, and ere long afterward Ruric entered the apartment. He walked quickly to where Rosalind had arisen to her feet, and, taking one of her hands in both his own, he pressed it to his lips. He had had a well formed speech upon his lips when he entered the room, but 'twas gone now. He could only gaze into the lovely face before him and murmur the name that sounded so sweetly to his ears. But the emotions of his soul became calm at length, and then he spoke with more freedom.

"Lady," he said after he had taken his seat, "you will pardon me for this visit when you know its cause, and you will pardon me, too, if I speak plainly what I have to speak."

"Surely, sir."

"Oh, call me Ruric. Let us at least not forget the friendship of childhood."

"Then I am not a lady," said Rosalind, smiling.

"No, Rosalind."

"Ah, Ruric!"

"As we were in childhood," whispered the youth.

"In all but years," returned Rosalind in the same low tone.

"And I may wear the same image in my heart?"

"I cannot cast it from mine if I would."

"The image of childhood, dear Rosalind?"

"Aye, say that it has grown to manhood, dear Ruric."

"What more could he ask for love? He had not aimed at this confession so soon, but he put it not from him now. He gazed a moment into the fair maiden's kindling eye, and as he saw the loveliest tear gathering there and the happy smile working its way about the rosy lips and away in the joyous dimples he opened his arms and clasped the fondly loved one to his bosom.

"Oh, I am not deceived in this," he murmured. "Speak, dearest one."

"I cannot forget the love of the happy times ago," the noble girl replied, gazing up through her happy tears. "Oh, how many and many an hour have I prayed to God that those days might return and that the one true heart of earth I loved

might be mine once more. Ruric, why should I hide the truth or why set it aside? To me thou art all in all. I have no one else to love and none to love me else save the noble girl who brought you hither. I can tell you no more."

Happy Ruric! Happy at that moment, forgetting all else but the love that gleamed out upon him then, he clasped the cherished object ardently to his bosom.

But the moments flew on, and at length his mind came to the subject of his visit.

"Rosalind," he said, holding one of her fair hands in his grasp, "you know the Count Conrad Damonoff?"

"Aye," returned the maiden, with a shudder. "He is here very often, and he has forced himself upon my companionship when, if he had sense, he must have known I liked it not."

"He is a suitor for your hand, is he not?"

"Not now?" repeated Ruric, with surprise. "What mean you?"

"Why, simply that he has asked the duke for my hand and that he was answered in the negative."

"Did you hear the duke answer him so?"

"No; but so the duke assured me he had done. But what mean you?"

"I will tell you. Yesterday the count came to my dwelling accompanied by Stephen Urzen. He had a paper drawn up by the duke's own hand in which I was made to say, or, rather, by which the writer said, that he declaimed all pretensions to your hand and that he wished not to marry you; that he freely gave you up, meaning to seek within the sphere of his own social circle some companion when he wished. And this I was asked to sign."

"By the count?"

"Yes, by the duke's orders."

"Oh, it cannot be!" uttered the fair girl, trembling.

"And he further assured me that the duke had requested him to obtain my signature thereto, so that he might receive your hand without impediment."

"So that the count might receive my hand?"

"Yes."

"But the duke assured me only yesterday that I should be troubled no more with the count. May there not be some mistake?"

"There can be no mistake on my part. The instrument was in the duke's own hand."

"But you did not sign it?"

"Ask me if I took my own life—if I made a curse for all I loved."

"It is strange," the maiden murmured, bowing her head a few moments. "And yet," she added, looking up into her companion's face, "I do not think the duke would be treacherous."

"He may be," answered Ruric. "He knows how lightly our noble emperor holds empty titles, and perhaps he fears if this matter came to the imperial ear and you should claim the right to marry with whom you pleased Peter would grant your prayer; hence he wished to get my claim set aside so that he may have a clearer field in which to move. Do you know how the duke's affairs stand at present?"

Rosalind thought awhile ere she answered, and then, while a startled expression came to her face, she said:

"Ruric, I do remember now that between the duke and young Damonoff there is some matter of dispute. There is some question of property."

"Ah!" uttered the youth earnestly. "How is that?"

"Why, as near as I can understand it, there was a dispute between the duke and the elder Damonoff concerning the ownership of Drozden, the estate on the Don, in Kaluga, and since the father's death Conrad has maintained his family claim. You know the duke and the old count married sisters, and this estate belonged to them."

"And now," suggested Ruric, "may not the duke mean to compromise this matter by giving your hand to the count and taking Drozden in exchange?"

"Oh, I cannot think so!" the maiden returned earnestly. "The duke would not do that. He is kind to me, I am sure. He loves me as though I were his own child. I know he does, for in a thousand ways he has shown it. He is mindful of my comfort and anticipates my every want. No, no; if he is deceiving any one, he must be deceiving the count."

Ruric started as the new suspicion flashed upon him. Had the duke sent Damonoff upon that mission on purpose to get him into a quarrel? "By my soul," thought the youth to himself, "the duke knows that I have taught the sword play, and he knows that the count would in this match for me. So he thinks in this subtle manner to make me an instrument for ridding him of a plague!" But the youth was careful not to let Rosalind know of this. He knew she would be unhappy if he knew that a duel was likely to come off between himself and the count.

After some minutes of comparative silence Ruric touched upon a point which lay very near his heart.

"Rosalind," he said, taking both her hands in his own, "there is one point upon which we have never spoken, and I know you would have me speak plainly and candidly. You know my situation. My father and your father fought side by side, but my father fell, while yours returned to his home. For his eminent services your father received a title and a noble estate from the grateful Fe-

odor, while my father was only forgotten; hence our stations are now widely different. Yet I am not poor. No other man in the empire can compete with me in the manufacture of arms, and from my labor I derive a handsome income. You know it all. And now, if other obstacles were removed, would you give me your hand and become mine for life?"

"Aye, Ruric," the noble girl answered, with beaming eyes and a joyful expression of countenance. "Were you reduced to the lowest estate of poverty, so long as your generous, pure soul was free I should only be the more anxious to lift you up. Oh, my love knows only the heart whereon it is secured, and for my future if you ask only the truth of my husband's love."

"Bless you, dearest," Ruric murmured, clasping the fair being to his bosom. And for a long while Rosalind's head lay pillowed upon the shoulder of the man she so truly, fondly loved.

That was not the time for bringing forward doubts and fears. Ruric had many questions in his mind concerning the impediments that stood in the way of their union, but he kept them to himself now. At length he arose to take his departure, and he simply said as he drew the maiden to his side:

"You will not allow the duke to give your hand away?"

"Never, Ruric."

"If he asks you for your hand to bestow upon any of his friends, you will tell him?"

"That my heart is not mine to give and that my hand cannot go without it."

"Oh, bless you, Rosalind, bless you! God keep and guard you ever."

There was one warm, ardent pressure of lip to lip, and then Ruric Nevel turned away and was soon in the open court. Here he entered his sledge and then drove to the barracks in the Khitigorod, where he inquired for Alarie Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard. The officer was quickly found, and as he met Ruric his salutation was warm and cordial. He was a young man, not over five and twenty, and one of the finest looking soldiers in the guard.

"Alarie," said the gunmaker after the first friendly salutations had passed, "I may have a meeting with Conrad, Count Damonoff. He has sought a quarrel—insulted me most grossly—aimed a blow at my head—and I knocked him down. You can judge as well as I what the result must be."

"Most assuredly he will challenge you," cried the officer excitedly.

"So I think," resumed Ruric calmly. "And now, will you serve me in the event?"

"With pleasure."

"I may refer his messenger to you?"

"Yes, surely. And how shall I act? What will you do?"

"Knock him down again under the same provocation."

"I understand. You wish to retract nothing?"

"No. Listen; I will tell you all since I seek your aid."

And thereupon Ruric related all that had occurred at the time of the count's visit to his shop.

"Good," uttered Alarie as the gunmaker finished. "He must challenge you, and then you'll punish him. He's too proud now. He can handle some of his lilytops who associate with him, and perhaps he thinks he can do the same when he comes out among the harder men. But never mind, I will be punctual and faithful."

Ruric reached home just as his mother was placing the board for dinner. He often went away on business, and she thought not of asking him any questions.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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A Fiendish Attack.

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