

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

alone, the first since morning. And now tell me about that black monk. What did he say his name was?"

"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 say to you?"

"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 maid asked, blushing.

"He asked me if I thought you loved the young gunmaker. 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. 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 careful."

"And I would be careful. But, oh, you could not have resisted him. He drew it from me almost as 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 he 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 cannot 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—today it was in black velvet. But his shape is his most striking characteristic. He is the fattest 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 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 with more than ordinary interest. He had once made up his mind that he would say nothing to his mother about the affair until it was over, but as the time was set and the hour drew nigh his mind wavered. When it was over, where might he be? But he was cut short in his reflections by the voice of his parent."

"Ruric," she said, and her voice trembled while she spoke, "you will pardon me for prying into your affairs, but I cannot hide from myself that something of more than usual moment is the matter with you. Why are these men calling to and fro? And why are you so thoughtful and moody? You know a mother's feelings, and you will pardon a mother's anxiety."

"Surely, my mother," the youth returned, gazing up for a moment and then letting his eyes droop again. At length, he resumed, "I

had made up my mind to tell you all ere you spoke."

"There was something deep and significant in Ruric's tone, and his mother quickly caught the spark."

"What is it?" she tremblingly uttered, moving her chair nearer to her child's side.

"Listen," the young man said. And thereupon he detailed the circumstances attending the visit of the Count Damonoff to his shop. Then he told of his own visit to Rosalind and its result and then of the visit of Stephen Urzen.

"And now, my mother," he added without waiting for any reply, "you know it all. You see how I am situated. Remember, our nation has reached its present point by successful war. The soul of the nation is built upon military honor, and since our noble emperor has opened the way of advancement of the lower

est of his subjects who are brave and true the coward is looked upon with disgust upon all hands. Yet, my mother, I would have you speak."

"For some moments Claudia Nevel was silent. But at length she said, while a tear glistened in her eye:

"I have given one loved being up to my country's good. Russia took my husband from me, and I could ill afford now to lose my son. Yet rather than one stain should rest upon his name I would see him dead before me. Oh, Ruric, you know whether dishonor would rest upon you were you to refuse this challenge."

"I will speak plainly, my dear mother," returned the youth in a tremulous tone, for his parent's kindness had moved him. "In my soul I should feel perfectly justified in refusing this meeting, for no principle of real honor is at stake. But were I to back out now from this I should never meet another generous look in Moscow. Every one would point the finger of scorn toward me, and the word coward would ring always in my ears. It may be a false state of things—I feel that it really is so—but how can I help it? It is the curse of all great military epochs. Battle alone makes heroes, and so all must measure their honor by the force of their arms. The count carries even now upon his brow the mark of my blow, and all will say he has a right to demand satisfaction, though I know that he provoked the quarrel on purpose. I cannot refuse him on the ground of station, for he is above me in that. I must meet him."

"Then," said the mother in a low, calm tone, but with much effort, "you shall not feel that your mother would thwart your design. If your own good judgment says so, then go. If they bring your body to me in the stern grasp of death, I shall pray for the soul that has gone and shall hope to meet you in the home of the redeemed. If you come back to me alive, I shall thank God that you are spared. But, alas, the joy will be clouded with the thought of blood upon your hands and the knowledge that my joy is another's grief!"

"No, no, my mother," cried Ruric quickly and earnestly. "I will not have a fellow being's blood upon my hand if I can avoid it. Only to save my own life will I take his. He has done all this himself—all, all. The quarrel was his own, and the first blow was his. The challenge is his, and now is not the responsibility his also?"

"It is, my son, so far as he alone is concerned. If you have a responsibility, it must be to your own soul. But tell me, has not the emperor made some new law touching this practice of dueling?"

"Yes, but only the challenger is responsible. The party challenged is held free from blame in the eyes of the law."

"Then I shall interpose no more objections," said the mother. She tried to speak hopefully, but she could not hide the fearful sadness of her heart. "Could fervent prayer avert the blow it should not fall, but I can only pray as one without power."

A long time after this was passed in silence. Both the mother and son seemed to have something upon their minds which they wished to say, but dared not. But the former at length overcame her reluctance.

"Ruric, my son," she said, keeping back the tears that struggled for utterance in their silent speech, "is there any little word you would leave—any matter of moment?"

"No, no," the boy answered, speaking calmly by effort. "I am yours, and all is yours. But I shall not fall."

"Ah, be not too confident, my son. Let no such assurance lead you to forget your God. I have heard of this count. It was he who slew Ruric, and Morjak, too, he slew Ruric. He is an expert swordsman and surely means to kill you if he can."

"I am aware of that, my mother. But do you know that we are all prone to overlook our own powers when pondering upon the feats of others? I may be pardoned for assuming you that the only man who has ever yet overcome the count at the sword play was one of my own scholars. While in Spain I practised with some of the best swordsmen in the kingdom. But, listen, I will send one word. For yourself I can tell you nothing which you do not know. But yet you may see Rosalind. If you do, tell her—But you know my soul. You can tell her as you please. But I shall not fall."

It was now late, and ere long Ruric kissed his mother and then retired to his bed.

And the widow was left alone. With her eyes she followed the retreating form of her beloved son,

and when he was gone from her sight she bowed her head and sobbed aloud. When she reached her humble couch, she knelt by the side thereof and poured forth her pent soul to God. When her head had pressed the pillow, she tried to hope, she tried to fasten one hope in her mind, but she looked only into the night. Not one ray of light reached her struggling soul. She opened her eyes of promise in vain, for she looked into a gloom so utter that out of its depths loomed only the blackness of despair.

"Sleep on, Ruric. But, oh, couldst thou know how thy fond mother's heart is racked there'd be no sleep for thee!"

CHAPTER V.

THE DUEL.

On the following morning Ruric was up betimes, and at the breakfast table got a word of the one all absorbing theme was uttered. After the meal was finished the gunmaker went out to his shop and took down from one of the closets a long leather case in which were two swords, both of the same make and finish, only different in size. They were Toledo blades and of most exquisite workmanship and finish. Ruric took out the heavier one, which was a two edged weapon with a cross hilt of heavily grained metal. He placed the point upon the floor, and then, with all his might, he bent the blade till the pommel touched the point. The little steel sprang back to its place with a sharp click, and the texture was not started. Then he struck the flat of the blade upon the anvil with great force. The ring was sharp and clear, and the weapon remained unharmed.

"By St. Michael, Paul, Moscow does not contain another blade like that. Damonoff never saw a better."

Thus spoke the gunmaker to his boy as he balanced the beautiful weapon in his hand.

"I think you are right, my master," the boy returned, who had beheld the trial of the blade with unbounded admiration. "But," he added, "could you not temper a blade like that?"

"Perhaps if I had the steel. But I have not. The steel of these two blades came from India and was originally in one weapon, a ponderous two handed affair belonging to a Bengal chieftain. The metal possesses all the hardness of the finest razor, with the elasticity of the most subtle spring. My old master at Toledo gave me these as a memento. Were I to mention the sum of money he was once offered for the largest one you would hardly credit it."

"How much?" asked Paul, with a boy's curiosity.

"It was a sum equal to about 700 ducats."

"And yet he gave it away?"

"Aye, for its price was but imaginary, while its worth to him was only commensurate with the good it did him. If he told the truth, he loved me, and these he gave me as a parting gift as the best patterns I could wish for when making such."

After this Ruric put up the small sword, and then he gave Paul a few directions about the work, promising to be back before night. The faithful boy shook his head dubiously as he heard this promise, but he said nothing, and shortly afterward Ruric went into the house. Just then Alaric Orsa drove up to the door.

Ruric was all ready but putting on his bonnet and pelisse. His mother was in the kitchen. He went to her with a smile upon his face. He put his arms about her and drew her to his bosom.

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back." He said this and then kissed her.

"God keep—and—"

It was all she could say. Ruric gazed a moment into her face, then he kissed her again, and again he said:

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back."

He dared not stop to speak more. Gently seating his fond mother upon a chair, he turned and hurried from the place. In the hall he threw on his pelisse and bonnet, and then he opened the door and passed out.

"Have you a good weapon?" asked Orsa as the horse started on.

"I have a fair one. I think it will not deceive me," returned Ruric.

"I asked," continued Orsa, "because Damonoff prides himself upon the weapon he wears. It is a German blade, and he thinks he can cut in twain the blade of any other weapon in Moscow with it."

"I have a good weapon," Ruric said quietly, "and one which has stood more tests than most swords will bear. And after some further remarks he related the peculiar circumstances attending the making of the sword and his possession of it."

At length they struck upon the river, and in half an hour more they reached the appointed spot. The day was beautiful. The sun shone brightly upon the glistening snow, and the air was still and calm. The sharp frost of the atmosphere served only to brace the system up, and Ruric threw open his pelisse that he might breathe more freely. He had been upon the ground but a few minutes when the other party came in sight around the head of the river.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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