

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

"Peace, babble!" the excited fool hissed, snatching the weapon and then turning quickly upon the gunmaker.

Thus far Ruric had remained silent, but he felt it his duty to speak now.

"Sir count," he said in a tone so stern and authoritative and with a look so commanding that the other was held in abeyance by it. "I must speak one word. You have provoked a quarrel with me, and you have challenged me. I have no fear of death when duty calls for my life, but I would not die thus, nor would I slay a fellow being thus. Six separate times today since our swords first crossed have I spared your life."

"Liar!"

"—and twice have I had you before me unarmed," Ruric continued without noticing the interruption. "I had hoped this would have shown you that I sought not harm to you and, furthermore, that you were no match for me at this kind of work."

"Out, fool!" yelled Damonoff, now fairly frothing with rage. "If you dare not cross swords again, say so, but do not crawl off like a coward!"

"One word more," uttered Ruric, paling for an instant beneath the unmerciful insult of the senseless tongue that assailed him, and he stood proudly erect while he spoke, "before these men here assembled and before God I swear that thus far I have spared you, but my own life may be the forfeit if I trifle with you more. So now beware. You have sufficient warning."

Perhaps the count really overlooked the facts of which Ruric had spoken. In his ungovernable rage he may have fancied that 'twas only accident that had worked against him. However, he started forward once more and made a furious lunge at his antagonist.

"Now," he gasped, "play your best, for my sword's my own."

But Ruric spoke not. He saw that the count was stronger than before—for his rage seemed to give him a maniac's power—and that he was earnest only for life or death. He struck quickly and furiously, and his movements were strange and unprecedented. He threw up all rules of exercise and cut and thrust only in wild madness. Twice Ruric came nigh being run through. He lost all run of his opponent's play and quickly saw that he must put a stop to the conflict or run the risk of leaving a childless mother in his home to see that day's sun sink.

"Will you give over?" he asked as he struck the count's point down.

"Never! Submit to such as you? Bah!"

A few moments more the conflict lasted. One more opportunity he had at Damonoff's heart, and he spared him. All present saw it save the madman.

"Fool!" uttered the monk, who trembled from head to foot with excitement, his huge belly shaking like a bag of jelly. "Will you throw away your own life, Ruric Nevel? Shall I tell your mother you left her of your own will?"

This mention of his mother called the last lingering doubt from Ruric's mind. Again he struck the opposing point down, and then he pressed his own point upon the count's bosom. He avoided the heart—he tried to avoid the vitals—but he threw his arm forward, and his glittering blade passed through the fool's body. With an expression of pain upon his features he started back and rested his reeking point upon the trodden snow. The count came furiously on again, but he struck wildly and at random, Ruric merely warding off his blows, until finally his arm sank. On the next moment his sword fell from his nerveless grasp, and he sank, fainting, back into the arms of his attendants.

CHAPTER VI. BEFORE THE EMPEROR.

"Is he dead?" asked Ruric, starting quickly forward.

"Hold, my son," uttered the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm. "Surely you have nothing to fear. It was none of your work, no more than if you had run your sword to the heart of a wild beast that had attacked you."

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth. "I was careful of that. I would have struck him upon the head with the flat of my sword, but I feared I might break his skull."

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time. "He has only fainted from the shock of the blow, coupled with his own fears and passions."

"But will he die?" Ruric asked, kneeling down by the fallen man's side.

"I cannot yet tell," the doctor said, at the same time wiping the blood away, which was flowing freely.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk. "Now is the best time, for the place is not yet inflamed, and while he is thus insensible he will be free from pain."

The surgeon at once saw the

truth and propriety of this, and he proceeded to act upon the suggestion. Having selected a probe which appeared applicable, he examined the wound. Ruric watched him eagerly and with a painful expression.

"I do not think this wound is mortal," the surgeon reported as he carefully felt his way along the course the steel had taken. "It has passed below the right lung and only severed some of the smaller blood vessels. I think, with proper care, he may recover."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Ruric, with his hands clasped.

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen. "You were ready enough to accept his challenge."

"Aye, else you would have called me coward," returned the gunmaker, with a flashing eye. "Had I refused to meet him that fatal word would have met me at every turn. I knew that such a man as he was no foe for me at any game where strength of arm and sleight of hand were required. So I meant to disarm him and then give him up his life, believing that such a move would end the combat. You know how I labored to spare him. But I could not. Yet I would not have the life of a fellow being, a countryman, upon my hands in such a quarrel. My father died fighting for his country, and so would I die if my death must come from the hand of man. But to die thus would be a curse upon my name, and to inflict such death upon another would be a curse in my memory."

"I believe you, my son," the monk said. "Only if the count dies you should not allow such feelings as you mention to overcome you. In no way are you to blame for this."

"True, father. You speak truly," added the surgeon. "The young man has acted most nobly, and no blame can be attached to him."

Ruric seemed somewhat relieved by these assurances, and, having seen the count's wound dressed and assisted in bearing the insensible form to the sledge, he took Alaric's proffered arm and proceeded to his own tent.

"Who is that monk?" asked the lieutenant as they entered their sledge.

"I only know that he is called Vladimir," returned Ruric. "I have only seen him once before. Have you ever seen him ere this?"

"Yes; several times about our barracks. He has been there when some of our poor fellows have been sick and dying. He seems to be a good hearted man and, I judge, quite intelligent."

"I agree with you there," our hero said. "I think he is a good man, but there is nevertheless a mystery about him which I cannot solve. His countenance is familiar to me, and yet I cannot tell where nor when I have seen him."

"Aye," added Alaric quickly and eagerly; "that is precisely the case with me. I am very sure that I have seen that man under different circumstances. And others of our company have thought the same."

The two men watched the movements of the monk while they thus spoke, and they noticed that he entered his sledge and drove off toward Borodino.

"Ruric," said the lieutenant after they had ridden some little distance and at the same time gazing wonderingly into his companion's face, "you handle the sword like a magician. By my soul, I'd give all I own at this present moment, my commission and all, if I could handle the sword as you can."

"I do understand the weapon passing well," returned the youth modestly, "but I have worked hard to gain the science."

"Ah, 'tis not all science," the officer added. "That wondrous strength of yours is a host in itself."

"And yet," said Ruric, "I have seen weaker men than myself who would overcome me easily or, at least, who might overcome me."

"But they were not in this city," suggested Orsa, with a peculiar shake of the head.

"True, Alaric. I am not in the habit of mentioning my own powers, but yet I may say that there is no man in Moscow who is my superior in the use of any sort of offensive arms."

The lieutenant readily admitted the truth of this, and then the conversation turned upon the subject of the count and the course he had pursued with respect to the event which had just transpired. This conversation lasted until they reached the door of Ruric's residence, and, having thanked his friend for his kindness and expressed the hope that at some time he might have man. But 'tis too late now. The die is cast. Yet I have some joy in this. You have shed a happy light upon my dying hour. God bless you!"

Ruric's feelings were easily moved, and there was something in the deep solemnity of this occasion that started his heart to a tender mood, and the last words of the dying man flowed the cup. He bowed his head, and, covering his eyes with one hand while he held in the other the hand of Conrad, he wept freely and silently.

At this moment the woman arose and left the room.

"She's gone," said the count after he had recovered somewhat from the deep emotions which had been stirred within his own soul. "Sit down here beside me."

Ruric obeyed the request, and after he had seated himself he gazed sadly into the sick man's face.

"Say, Ruric," the count asked, while an eager look overspread his face, "wast true what Kopani told

me—that you overcame Demetrius the Greek with the sword?"

"I did," the youth replied in a whisper.

"But you did not disarm him? You did not fairly take his sword from him?"

"I did, Conrad."

"My soul, is it possible? And where have you been all your life?"

"In Moscow and in Spain."

"And yet obscure?"

"Never mind that now," interrupted Ruric. "I have something of more interest. Do you—But you will pardon me for what I may say, for I assure you I mean it all for your good?"

"Speak on," said Conrad, at the same time running his eyes almost anxiously over the gunmaker's nobly developed breast and shoulders.

"Then, first, I have just come from the Lady Rosalind—Ah, I meant not to say that."

"Go on. I may have felt a pang at the mention of that name, but I know she loves you, and were I strong at this moment as ever I'd relinquish all claims of her to you. So fear not."

"Thank you, sir count, for this. But, I was remarking, I am not long from her presence, and between us both we have suspected some dark things. Do you think the duke was really your friend?"

The count started, and a strange gleam shot from his eyes.

"Go on," he uttered.

"Then listen. Before you ever came to my shop the duke had solemnly promised Rosalind that she should receive no more trouble from you—that you would claim her hand no more."

"Do you know this?"

"I do."

"But it cannot be. Why should he have sent me on that mission to you?"

"I had taught one of his officers the sword exercise, and he knew I was your superior in strength and the use of the weapon."

"Well, go on," whispered the count nervously and anxiously.

"Why, he thought very likely that we should not meet on such a question without a quarrel. He knew your natural impetuosity and my strength of arm and hoped you would fall."

"But—go on!"

"His estate is running out, and he wants the whole of Drotzen."

"Ah, I see it now!"

"The duke had proposed himself for Rosalind's hand," resumed Ruric. "He says he has loved her long, and he will force her to marry him if he can, though he breaks her heart."

"My God!" gasped the count, fairly starting up to a sitting posture. "How blind I have been! By my soul, he never was cordial, never kind!"

Ruric gently laid the sick man back, and then he said:

"From all that I can see and understand, the proud duke meant to get all your wealth and all of Rosalind's."

The count spoke not yet. He lay with his eyes closed and groaned in agony at the strange revelations that were breaking in upon him.

"But, see! Why starts Ruric so suddenly, and why does he turn so pale? Why do his hands tremble, and why is his brow bent so eagerly?"

"What is it?" asked the count, startled by the strange event.

"Hold!" whispered Ruric in a frantic tone. "You were recovering once?"

"From this wound?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I was getting well fast, and the doctors said I should be stout and well in a month. But suddenly this change came on. Let's see. On Friday morning I felt the first relapse."

"The very time!" gasped Ruric to himself.

The count moved his head forward and would have caught his companion by the hand if he could.

"For God's sake, Ruric, what is it?"

"As I came this way I saw a humpbacked priest pass out from this house?" said the gunmaker interrogatively.

"Yes, yes," returned the count, speaking shortly and quickly. "It was Savotano. He has attended me. The duke recommended him."

"And was he here Thursday night?"

"Thursday? Ah, yes; he watched with me that night."

"And has he been in attendance since?"

"Yes—every day. But why do you ask? Say, what is that meaning upon your face? What is it?"

"At this moment the door of the apartment was quietly, noiselessly, opened, and Kopani, the surgeon, entered the place.

"Ha!" cried Ruric, starting toward him and grasping him by the arm. "Your patient is poisoned! A deadly poison has been given him, and it is even now eating his life away!"

"Impossible!" gasped the surgeon, straining his eyes to see plainly who it was that spoke to him. "Ah!" he uttered as he became somewhat used to the gloom of the apartment. "Is it you, sir?"

"Aye, but mind not that now. Cannot you do something for the count? He has been poisoned."

"It cannot be!"

"By the hopes of my salvation," cried Conrad Damonoff, starting up to a sitting posture, "he speaks the truth! That accursed priest! Oh, Olga, Olga, I never dreamed that thou wast mine enemy!"

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