

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

"But wherein was it so wondrously peculiar?" asked Ruric, with interest.

"Why, in this: Arsenic was the principal poisoning agent, but that alone would produce symptoms which any physician would know at once. In this case there was something present which overcame all the outward signs of the poison and only let it eat upon the vitals. I know not the secret, though I know there is such a one. Had it not been for your fortunate suspicions the count would have died from the effects of the wound. The poison was working silently and surely, without pain and without outward sign different from the usual sinking of the worn and fainting body. But I have hopes now. The villain must not know that we have discovered him. We will let the thing run for the present."

Kopani was not a little surprised when he found that the priest had been there during his absence, but before he could make any further remark the count awoke. He felt very faint, but that strange sickness of the stomach was lessened. The surgeon prepared some suitable diluents, and, having called in the woman, he gave directions that they should be given in large quantities, and also directed her to prepare some strong barley water for the patient to drink as he wanted beverage.

All the vials were replaced upon the sideboard and then refilled with liquids somewhat like those they had before contained. But the nurse was directed not to use them. Everything that her patient was to take she was to keep under her own charge in the kitchen, and she was also most particularly cautioned against allowing the priest to gain anything from her. But Kopani meant to be sure on that score. He had a little business to transact, and then he was coming back to spend the night himself by the count's side. He meant at all events that the poisoner should have no more opportunity to exercise his diabolical science upon the sick nobleman. He promised the count that he should have safe and competent watchers thereafter.

It was fairly dark now, as Ruric could see by raising the curtain and looking out. He had no idea it was so late. Time had passed without his notice. He moved to the side of the bed and took the invalid's hand.

"I must go now," he said. "But if you are willing I will come again."

"You will come," uttered Conrad in reply, returning the grasp of the hand with all his feeble power. "Oh, you must come often now. I hope I shall live. Perhaps I shall. If I do, I shall owe my life to you. And God knows—for the feeling is even now firm in my soul—that I will always remember how you saved me, and I will never think, never of the sad blow you struck me. Come—come to me when you can, for now—now—as God lives, I speak the truth—now I love you!"

"God bless and keep you!" murmured Ruric in a husky, tremulous voice. And with these words, coming from the very depths of his soul, he turned away and left the room. He heard the voice of the count as he moved toward the open door and thanked God that 'twas a blessing which fell upon his ears.

Ah, those who know not what true forgiveness is know not the holiest emotion of earth!

Ruric had left his sledge at a neighboring inn, and as soon as he gained the street he bent his steps that way. He had gone half the distance from the residence of the count to the inn and was just upon the point of crossing the street when he heard his name pronounced by some one behind him. He stopped and looked around and saw a man approaching him.

It was too dark to distinguish faces plainly even at a usual conversational distance, yet Ruric was not long in concluding that the man who had thus hailed him was a stranger. He was a medium sized man and so closely enveloped in his bonnet and pelisse that his form and features would have been hidden even had it been lighter than it was.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the youth as the man came up.

"Yes, sir. Is your name Ruric Nevel?"

"It is."

"Then you are wanted a few moments at the residence of a lieutenant named Orsa?"

"Alaric Orsa?" asked Ruric.

"The same."

"But he does not live here in the Kremlin."

"He is here now, at any rate, and would see you."

"But you said he was at his residence," suggested other, who was fearful that some evil might be meant for him.

"I know nothing to the contrary, sir," the stranger returned promptly. "All I can say is Alaric Orsa has fallen upon the ice and hurt himself severely and upon being informed that you were near by

with a sledge he asked that you might be sent for."

"Been hurt, has he?"

"Yes, sir."

"I believe no bones are broken, but he is so badly sprained that he cannot walk."

"Ah, then perhaps he wants me to carry him home."

"I can't say as to that, sir. They only sent me to find you. I don't know the man myself."

There was something so frank in the statement thus made that Ruric believed it all honest, and he stood no longer in doubt.

"I will go," he said. "But lead the way quickly, for I have no time to waste."

"I will lead you, for as you will want to follow," answered the man.

And thus speaking he turned back, and, having gone some dozen rods by the way they had both come, he turned down a narrow street which led toward the river. Half way down this he went, and then he turned again—this time to the left—and thus Ruric found himself in a narrow, dark lane, within which the snow was deep and almost untrodden.

"Look ye," cried the youth, stopping as he found himself over knees in snow, "I think we have gone about far enough in this direction."

"This is the shortest way," said the stranger guide apologetically.

"I did not think the snow was so deep here. But it's only in the next street."

"Then on you go."

Again the stranger started, and Ruric followed on. The lane was a crooked one, and more than once the youth had another inclination to stop. He had no direct fear, but yet he had some just grounds for doubt. Had he not seen what had been attempted against the count he might have had no such doubts now, but as it was he thought that if one attempt had been made to ruin him through the emperor's displeasure by the man who was now trying to murder the count it would not be at all improbable that some more effective plan should be adopted toward him. He was pondering thus when they came to a cross lane full as narrow as this, into which the guide turned.

"Look ye once more, sirrah!" cried the youth, now stopping short.

"Do you call this a street?"

"Yes, sir, and on this street we shall find the man we seek. It is only a short cut from where he is to the inn where your horse is, so you won't have to retrace these dubious ways. Only a little farther, sir."

"But I don't like this."

"Why, bless you, sir, if you wish to go direct to the inn where your horse is this will be the nearest way."

"Well, on you go."

And on they went, now slipping on the ice, now in the snow to their knees and anon stumbling along over frozen huddles and deep holes.

At length the guide stopped and opened a small gate which was fixed in a high, thick brick wall. Ruric hesitated here again. He had no weapon of any kind. If he had had even a pistol or a sword, he would have cared not. But he did not show his thoughts to his guide. The gate opened with a creak upon its frosty hinges, and by the dim starlight the youth could see an open court beyond, and farther still a house of some kind loomed up.

"This place seems not to be used much," remarked Ruric as he saw the snow in the court was trodden but little, only one or two tracks being visible from the gate to the house.

"Ah—yes—you said—what?"

"I said this place didn't seem to be used much," the youth repeated, though he was sure the fellow heard the first time.

"Ah, yes—a—the usual entrance is the other way, by the sledge path."

"And where is that?" Ruric asked, not being able to see any such path.

"Oh, it's around on the other side."

By this time they had reached the door of the house, which our hero could now see had an old, dilapidated appearance, and the guide plied the iron knocker with zeal. Ere long a man made his appearance with a lantern in his hand.

"Ah! Has the gunmaker come?" the latter asked.

"Yes," returned the guide.

"Well, I'm glad he's here, but I don't believe Orsa is fit to move," said the first speaker. And then, turning to Ruric, he said:

"But I'm glad you've come, sir, for the lieutenant wishes to see you very much. This way, sir."

This was all so frank and prompt that the young man began to think he had been a fool for being frightened. He followed the man with the lantern into the hall, and from thence down a long flight of stairs into a basement. The lantern did not give much light, but it was sufficient to reveal the fact that the house was an old one and not very large, for Ruric could see windows upon the opposite side of the hall which looked out of doors. As he reached the foot of the stairs he found himself upon a brick floor, and he saw the walls were of stone. A little farther on a door was opened, and this led to a small apartment, within which was a fireplace and a good fire burning.

"There, good sir," said the second guide, "if you will wait a few moments I will go and see how the lieutenant is."

As soon as Ruric was left alone he looked about him. The room was of moderate size for a small house, and the idea of inhabiting the cellar was a common one in Moscow during the winter season. The windows, two in number, were close up to the ceiling and very small and were patched with pieces of board in two or three places.

Ere long the man came back, and with him came three others, one of whom the youth recognized as the individual who had conducted him to the house.

"Orsa will see you, sir," said he with the lantern.

Ruric arose to follow him, the other three men approaching the fire as though they would remain there.

"I'll wait outside the door," he passed through into the room beyond when he thought he heard footsteps behind him. It was a sliding, shuffling sound, and he turned his head to see what it was. As he did so he received a blow which staggered him and which would have felled an ordinary man to the floor. He gathered himself quickly up, but before he could fairly turn about he received a second blow, heavier than the first, which brought him upon his knees. In an instant all four of the men were upon him, and he could see that they had ropes in their hands with which to bind him. With all his might he threw the fellow who held his right hand back against the wall, and another he sent in an opposite direction, and in a moment more he would have been upon his feet, but just at that instant a noise, as if the rope tightened about his neck, he was drawn back upon the brick floor again.

"Now, resist any more, and we'll choke you as sure as fate!" cried the man who had held the lantern and now had a hold upon the rope.

"Oh," groaned Ruric, while the massive cords worked like cables in his arms and shoulders, "give me a fair chance! Let me up and free—then lock your doors, if you please!"

"No, no, good sir," replied the ruffian, with a wicked smile. "We know your power, and we are not disposed to test it further. We have had trouble enough already. Shall we?"

The man stopped speaking, for at that moment another noise was heard down over Ruric's head, and ere he could avoid it it had been drawn tightly about his arms. He was now at the mercy of his captors, and, having rolled him over upon his breast, they proceeded to secure his arms behind him, which, being done, they bade him to rise. Of course he could have no desire to lie there upon the cold bricks, and he got upon his feet as well as he could.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, I will conduct you to your own apartment," said the leader of the gang.

"But wherefore is this?" the gunmaker gasped, rendered almost speechless with the mingled emotions of surprise and anger. "Why have you done this? Whose hirelings are ye that you thus waylay and seize upon an honest man who has done no harm to any of you?"

"Never mind that now, sir," the ruffian coolly answered. "Office it for you to know that you are safe for the present."

"But will ye not tell me what this is for? There is some intent."

"Yes, and come with me and you shall see. Come."

Thus speaking, the man turned once more, and, having picked up his lantern, he moved on, while the others, taking Ruric by the arms, followed after. The prisoner made no resistance now, for he knew that it would be useless. At a short distance another flight of stairs was reached.

"Down here?" uttered Ruric, with a shudder.

"Of course. You'd freeze up here."

These words struck harshly upon the youth's soul, for it meant that he was to be detained in this lonely place.

At the bottom of these stairs they came to a vaulted passage, at the end of which was a door. This was opened, and Ruric was led through into the place beyond. He cast his eyes quickly about, and he found a mistress, and she closed the recital with some opinion of her own wherein Ruric Nevel was held up as a pattern after which all men who wished to win the love of woman should be made.

But before any answer could be made by Rosalind the door of the apartment was opened, and the duke entered. He smiled very kindly as he bowed to his ward, and then, with a wave of his hand, he motioned for Zenobia to withdraw, and after the attendant was gone he took a seat close by his fair charge. The maiden looked up into his face, and, though there was no serious look there as yet, still she could plainly see that he had something of more than usual importance on his mind. She shuddered as she gazed upon him, for she could not help it. There was something in the look of the man—a sort of hidden intent, which came out in his tone and glance; a deep meaning, something which he had never spoken, but which was yet manifest—that moved her thus. What it was she could not tell. It was the prompting of that instinct of the human soul which may repel an object while yet the working mind detects no harm.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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