

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

Continued from First Page

lantern, and the chill wind came moaning through the cracks and crevices in the decaying masonry.

"There," spoke one of the guides as he set his lantern upon the top of a broken column. "We will stop here."

The words were spoken in a sort of hushed, unmerciful tone, and Ruric felt them strike fearfully upon him. He gazed upon the man who had spoken, and he saw that he was preparing to throw off his pelisse, which he had thus far worn. As soon as this was off he moved to where his companion stood and commenced whispering.

Could Ruric mistake longer? What reason but one could there have been for bringing him to such a place? To the left, where the basin had once emptied itself, there was a dark, deep, cave-like place, at the mouth of which a heap of rubbish had collected. What a place in which to hide a dead body! So thought Ruric. But he was startled from the dark reverie by a darker reality.

One of the men had taken a club, a long, heavy bludgeon which the youth had not before seen, and was just balancing it in one hand while he spat upon the other.

"You will not murder me here in cold blood!" uttered Ruric, starting back.

The stout ruffian clutched the club in both hands, but made no verbal answer.

"Speak! For God's sake answer me!" the prisoner exclaimed, starting back another pace. "Do you mean to murder me?"

"Why," answered the man with the club in a cool, offhanded manner, "since you are so anxious to know, I'll tell you. You will die within a minute!"

"And will you take the life of one who never harmed you? Hold! If money be your object—"

"Stop!" interrupted the villain. "You can't argue us out of it in that way. You've got to die, and the sooner you go the sooner you'll get over it. You won't suffer a bit if you don't go to kicking up a fuss. There, now. If you hadn't bothered me 'twould have been all over by this time."

Oh, what would Ruric have given at that moment for the use of one of his arms! But that was beyond praying for. Yet he had his feet. He said nothing more, but he allowed the man to come within a few yards of him, and then he prepared for the only means of defense he had. The huge club was raised, and at that moment Ruric saw that the other man also had a club. He knew then that they had been concealed there until now.

"Hark!" uttered the second villain just as his companion had raised his club. "What noise is that?"

"I suppose they're coming to see if we've finished the job," returned the other, "and, by the saints, we ought to have done it ere this. But they shall find it done!"

The ponderous club was raised again, and with a quick, decisive movement, the man advanced. Ruric made a movement of the body as though he would bow his head for the stroke. Every nerve and muscle of his frame was set for the trial, and for the instant his heart stood still. Quick as thought his body bent—his right knee was brought almost to his chin—and then, with all the force he could command, he planted his foot in the pit of the assassin's stomach. The effect was electrical. The wretch bent like a broken stick and sank down without a single sign of life.

The second man uttered an oath and sprang forward with uplifted club, but Ruric easily dodged the blow, and then, as the thought for the first time flashed upon his mind he darted to where the lantern stood and overturned it. He had noticed an open passage close at hand which seemed to lead to some sort of a dressing room, and, guided by his memory alone, for it was now dark as Erebus there, he glided swiftly into it. When he knocked over the

himself in a narrow apartment, the walls and floor of which were of stone and the roof of brick, the latter being arched. In one corner was a couch, and upon it were some old skins.

And here the youth was to be left. His guide simply pointed to the low couch and then turned away. Ruric asked a question, but it was not answered. In a few moments more the heavy door was closed upon him, and he was in total darkness. He sought the couch, and, with a deep groan, he sank down.

CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

Rosalind Valdai and Zenobie were together in their sitting room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when she saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and her eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobie, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope! Surely God will not suffer such an unholy work to be done."

"Ah, Zenobie," returned the fair maiden in a fluttering, melancholy tone, "where can I look for hope?"

"I say in God. You have told me we must look to him, and I have believed you. Have you not always been good to God?"

"I have been as good as I knew how, though I have sinned."

"How sinned? Oh, my mistress, if you have sinned, then who is pure? Tell me."

"We all sin, Zenobie. It is our nature."

"So I have often heard, but I hardly think you have sinned. What have you done which you knew to be wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Then how have you sinned?"

"Ah, Zenobie, we all do things which we ought not to do. But yet I mean to do as near right as I can."

"Then leave the rest with God. Oh, when poor mortals do as near right as lies in their power, surely they may leave the rest with God without fear. And now, if God is just, as you tell me, why should he allow the wicked duke to triumph over you? What justice would there be in that when you are all goodness and he is sin itself?"

Rosalind was puzzled. She had tried to teach her attendants to love and honor God, and she had so far succeeded that Zenobie understood all the principles of Christianity and embraced them gladly and joyfully. But now how should she make this point understood? How should she reconcile this apparent injustice with God's universal mercy and justice?

"Can you not tell me?" the young girl asked again. "Why should God allow such a thing? You say he is all powerful and can do what he wills."

"Zenobie," returned the maiden after pondering for awhile, "you do not look at the subject in a proper light. God does not operate by petty, individual decisions, as an emperor does. He sees that certain laws are necessary for the good of mankind, and not a single law of all his code is there but is very good. Last night your head ached, and you suffered, and, of course, you had violated some natural law. It was your own fault. And so this suffering which is now come upon me is the result of a violation of one of God's laws."

"Ah," cried Zenobie eagerly, "but you are the one who suffers while another violates the law. In my case I did both and do not complain."

"But listen," pursued Rosalind, with a brightening countenance, for the true idea had come to her mind. "It would not be just for a person to enjoy all the good of a law and leave others to suffer all the evil. God has established in us a social nature, and through that part of our nature come the sweetest of our earthly enjoyments. Such a law—the law of sociality—must be universal, and if men break that law they must suffer, and the only way in which God could shield me from suffering would be to release me from the effects of the law. Then I should be a poor, lonesome outcast, forced to live all my days alone like a barren rock upon the top of some bleak mountain. But I would rather live among people and enjoy the companionship of my fellows. I have freely accepted the boon, and now, when its evils come, I must suffer. Had God's intent been followed out there would have been no suffering. It is not his fault that the duke sins. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know," murmured the young girl dubiously.

"But, see," resumed Rosalind. "You choose to exercise your social nature, and of your own accord you mingle among your fellows. Do you not see that thus you are enjoying one of God's richest blessings—the blessing of sociality, friendship and love?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, so far God is good in having given you that power for such enjoyment?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, now, under that law, when my father and mother died I found a friend in the duke and here have found a home. But circumstances have changed. The duke has become wicked in thought—he wants more money—and he will prostitute a power which in obedience of God's law would be good to my ruin. Now, God cannot save me without rendering to pieces one of his most powerful laws and one which is meant for a universal good. The moment he does that he destroys that principle of human dependence whence flow those most holy virtues of love, friendship and charity. He must act by universal laws and not by partial rules and individual exceptions. So as long as I can enjoy the blessings of social life I must be subject to the evils of treachery and social wickedness. Do you not understand now?"

"I see, I see," the girl murmured thoughtfully.

"Aye, Zenobie," the mistress added, while a holy light shone upon her countenance, "God has made us subject to ills here. But look beyond the grave, and how bright it is with hope! I have a father and a mother there. Oh, in all my misery, even in the worst state to which the

bad duke can reduce me, I would not change places with him. You seemed to intimate that God would see me suffer and get let the duke triumph. Triumph? Oh, Zenobie, for what would you have that man's heart in your bosom and his soul in your keeping?"

"I would rather die!" the girl cried, while a cold shudder ran through her frame.

"Then, you see, he does not go clear. Oh, how blind and simple are those who imagine there can be pleasure in sin!"

"The woman's name there to Zenobie's mind, and she pondered upon it a long while. But by and by she came back to the theme from whence they had started, and in pursuance thereof she said:

"My mistress, are you sure the duke will persist in this?"

"Aye, Zenobie; I know he will," Rosalind answered, while the old shudder came back to her frame and the old grief to her soul.

"And have you no hope?"

"Only one—in Ruric. He may help me."

"Oh, I hope he can! He is a noble man."

Rosalind answered with a look of gratitude, and Zenobie proceeded:

"Where is the titled lord more noble than he? Oh, were I to choose a husband now and he was free and I was in your position I'd choose Ruric Nevel before all the emperors of earth."

"So would I," returned the fair maiden.

"If I were a countess, as you are, oh, how I should love to make such a man a count!"

"But my marrying him would not make him a count. Were he a count and I like what he is now in station his marrying me would give me the title. But we poor women do not have that power."

"Well, then, we should so much more have the right to choose our own husbands."

Rosalind made no oral answer, but her look showed that she sympathized with the sentiment.

"My mistress," at length spoke Zenobie again, this time in a low whisper, "why may we not leave this place?"

Rosalind started as though she had heard the speech of a spirit, and for a moment a look of hope gleamed upon her face. But it quickly passed away.

"Alas, where should we go?"

This was a part of the plan which Zenobie had not thought of, and ere she could make any reply one of the female domestics entered the apartment and announced that a woman wished to see her young mistress. Rosalind asked who it was, but the girl could only tell her that it was a middle aged woman and very good looking. The young countess bade Zenobie go down and conduct her up. Ere long afterward the attendant returned, and with her came Claudia Nevel. Rosalind had not seen the good woman for over a year, but she knew her at once, and, starting up from her seat, she bounded forward and embraced her warmly.

"Ah, Aunt Claudia, I am glad you have come! You will let me call you aunt, as I did in those happy times long ago, won't you?"

"Aye, sweet Rosalind," returned the widow, imprinting a warm kiss upon the fair white brow.

The countess noticed the strange sadness of the woman's tone, and then, for the first time also, she noticed the sadness of her look.

"Aunt Claudia, you look sad," she said, while a chill dread struck to her own heart.

"Aye," the widow uttered, as though she were afraid to venture the question she wished to ask; "I have been very sad because I have had a terrible fear. Has—has not Ruric been here?"

"When?" uttered the maiden, catching the whole fear now.

"Within these three days."

"Just then. Day before yesterday he was here—in the forenoon."

"And I have not seen him since?" the poor woman groaned.

"Not seen him? Ruric gone? Oh, where, where?"

"He said he was going to see the Count Damonoff when he left here," interposed Zenobie, who joined in the grief.

"Aye, so he told me," returned the mother. "I have been there, and they have not seen him since that evening. The surgeon who attends the count went out to the inn where Ruric put up his horse, and the animal was still there, his owner having not called for him."

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