

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

CHAPTER XIX.

Pale as death sat the fair young countess in her dressing room. She did not tremble now, for every nerve had become fixed in utter despair.

"Will you not change your dress, my mistress?" asked Zenobia in a low, tremulous tone.

"No, no," the maiden replied, and her voice sounded strangely even in her own ear, it was so low and hollow. "Why should I dress for the sacrifice? The dumb beast may suffer garlands about its neck before being led to the heathen altar, but, alas, God has not given me a brute's ignorance to help me now. No, no, Zenobia; I will not dress for the bride."

"But the duke expects it."

"I care not. He cannot ask me to do it. He may do all he wills, for I am helpless here, but he dare not ask."

"Oh, my dear mistress!" cried the faithful girl, throwing her arms about the neck of her mistress and weeping as she did so, "would to God that I could bear this for you."

"I thank you all the same, my best of friends," the countess replied, gazing gratefully up into her attendant's face. "But it matters not much now. I shall not suffer long. My sorrow will soon cease."

Zenobia looked inquiringly up, but she did not speak.

"God will soon take me home," the wretched maiden murmured after a pause. "I feel the chill hand upon my heart even now, and I know that earth cannot bind my spirit long with such a curse upon it."

Zenobia had no more words of consolation to offer, so she did all she could do. She drew the head of her mistress upon her bosom, and there she held it for a long time. She held it thus until the door of the apartment was opened and a female domestic entered.

"Lady," the newcomer said, trembling perceptibly while she spoke, "the duke bids me tell you he awaits your coming below in the hall."

She stopped here and seemed to wait for an answer. But Rosalind did not speak.

"What answer shall I give him, lady?"

At this the countess started up, but she sank back again without speaking.

"Tell him we will come," interposed Zenobia, who saw that the announcement had taken the last power of effort from her mistress.

"Yes, yes," whispered the countess as the messenger hesitated and gazed inquisitively into her face.

And with this the woman left the apartment.

"My dear mistress," spoke Zenobia, now calling all her power of self control to her aid, "all means of help and escape we have tried in vain. The time has come."

"O God, have mercy!" groaned the countess.

"—and we must meet it, since there is no further hope. It will be better to go down at once than to arouse the bad man's anger by more delay. Were there the least glimmer of hope, we would not go. But there is not. You know what I mean."

A few moments Rosalind sat like one dead. Then she started up, with her hands clasped, and raised her eyes toward heaven. She did not speak aloud, but her lips moved, and she surely uttered a prayer to God, and it was none the less eloquent because it was silent. Then she turned to her companion. Her lips were set and colorless, and a deathly look had overspread her whole face.

"Zenobia," she said in a tone which bore no feeling more than the gliding of a cold, icy sound, "I am ready. Once more, before the last joy of earth departs from me, let me bless thee and press thee to my bosom. I am pure now!"

She opened her arms as she spoke, and when she closed them again Zenobia was within their embrace.

"Bless you, bless you ever! God keep and guide you to the end of life and then receive you home to himself! Kiss me. There, I am ready now!"

The broken hearted girl wiped the tear from her eye, and in a moment more she was as cold and passionless as before.

"Lead on, Zenobia. I shall walk without help."

Without looking around the Moslem maiden led the way to the hall. She walked slowly, and she fancied she could hear the beating of her mistress' heart. In the hall stood the duke with some half dozen of his own male attendants. He took the hand of the countess as she approached him and gazed earnestly into her face, but he did not speak. He led her toward one of the drawing rooms, and when they entered there they found the humpbacked priest already in waiting. Rosalind came well nigh fainting when she saw this miserable villain ready for his work. She knew now that the priest was like the master.

"You see, my dear countess," spoke the duke in a low, hypocritical

tone, "that we have all prepared. I trust we shall have no trouble before this holy man."

This last sentence was spoken in a threatening tone, but it had no effect upon Rosalind. She hardly heard the words he spoke.

"Come, father," said Olga, turning now to the priest. "We are ready."

Savotano moved forward and mumbled a Latin prayer. Then he looked upon the twin before him and directed them to kneel.

"No, no, no!" gasped the fair countess, trembling for the first time. "I cannot do that!"

"Kneel!" hissed the duke between his clenched teeth, and as he spoke he grasped the maiden more firmly by the arm and forced her down. She uttered a quick cry of pain as she felt the unmerciful grip, but she could not resist the strong arm of her persecutor.

"Now go on!" the duke cried as he held the maiden down. "Go on, Savotano, and let the business be done as soon as possible."

"Hold!"

It was a voice of thunder which spoke thus, and it came from the door. The duke started to his feet, and he beheld Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker, approaching the spot. But the youth came not alone. Behind him came the huge bulk of Vladimir, the monk, and more still, back of the monk came the widow, Claudia Nevel, and the boy, Paul, and then there were, besides all this, a heavy tramp of feet in the hall and the clang of steel.

"Hold! Stop this accursed mockery!" Ruric shouted as he strode up the apartment.

"Miserable dog!" gasped the duke, mad and frantic with rage. "How dare you come hither?"

"Look ye, proud duke," the monk interposed, coming quickly forward; "I am at the bottom of all this. I have come to stop this foul work!"

Rosalind had started to her feet when she first heard Ruric's voice, and now, as the monk spoke, a ray of hope darted to her soul, and with a quick bound, she reached her lover's side.

"Ruric, Ruric!" It was all she could say, and with a flood of tears, she pillowed her head upon his bosom, and his stout arms were wound fondly about her.

"Fear not," he whispered, "for, oh, Rosalind, thou art safe now."

The mad duke saw the movement, and with a bitter curse, he started toward them.

"Now, by the living gods," he shouted, with his fists clinched and his eyes flashing fire, "you have come to your death! What, ho, there! Without! Slaves, where are ye?"

In a moment more the side door was thrown open, and a dozen of the duke's servants came rushing in.

"Ha!" Olga cried. "You are in time. Seize these dogs! Kill them on the spot if they offer one act of resistance. At them now! Down with the dogs!"

"Hold!" It was Vladimir who spoke, and every arm dropped as they heard that voice. It was different from the voice they had heard the fat monk use before.

The duke started as though a thunderbolt had burst at his feet.

"Who art thou?" he gasped, staggering farther back.

"Olga, duke of Tula," spoke the monk in tones which sounded strange for him, because they were so different from those he had been wont to use, "I am thy master!"

As he spoke he threw open the long black robe which enveloped his person and cast it upon the floor at his feet, and there it lay, a huge pile of wadding and stuffing! The vast rotundity of person was gone, and the strange man now stood in his own fair form. His chin—that prominent chin—was no more hidden, and he was but a small man—not much larger than the boy Paul, who stood near him. Next he placed his hand to his head and tore away the tight skullcap, and the ring of gray hair came away with it, leaving a cluster of glossy hair floating down over the neck and shoulders!

"Great God of mercy," gasped Savotano, staggering back, "it is the emperor!"

"Aye," cried Peter, turning his darkly flashing eye upon the staggering duke. "I am your emperor! Paul, go and call the guard."

The boy hastened from the palace, and when he returned he was followed by a party of the Imperial guard.

"Mercy, mercy, sire!" gasped the duke, sinking down on his knees.

But the emperor answered him not. He only turned to his guard lantern, he had upset column and all, and just as he reached the passage he heard a heavy fall, and he knew that his enemy had stumbled over the fallen column. He heard the curses, loud and deep, which dropped from the lips of the baffled man as he picked himself up, and in a moment more he was edified by a conversation between the two, for villain No. 1 had revived, though the tone of his voice plainly indicated that he had a severe pain still lingering within him.

"Michael, Michael!" groaned No. 1, and as he spoke Ruric could hear him scrambling up on his feet.

"Hi, Oriol!" returned No. 2.

"Have you dropped him?"

"No!" cried Michael, with a curse which he did not choose to transcribe. "He's a perfect devil!"

"But where's the lantern?"

"He put it out."

"But you ought to have knocked him down, you clown."

"So had you."

"Me? Why, he kicked me over."

"Well, he dodged by me and kicked over the lantern."

"But where is he now?"

"He's gone. Hark! Ha, I guess they've caught somebody."

"Yes; they've caught somebody."

"And of course it's him. He went that way. Let's go and find him."

He did not finish the sentence, for at that moment a voice came up in thunder tones, and it said:

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"Great God!" gasped villain No. 1.

"What is that?"

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"By the living gods, that is not from any of our men!" uttered the second ruffian. "Ha, they are coming this way."

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"There is but one place," returned Oriol. "Here in the little drawing room. Come, let's find it. Oh, curses on that gunmaker's head! If he be not the very devil, then he's a bound partner of his. Have you found the entrance, Michael?"

"No. It's near you somewhere. Can't you—Ha! In, in!"

At that moment the glare of a flaming torch flashed through the gloom of the place, and the two villains stood revealed. A dozen stout men, all well armed, appeared in the only passage by which they could escape, for to have fled into the drawing room of which they had spoken would have availed them nothing.

"Ho, villains!" shouted Vladimir, the monk, raising his flaming torch high above his head with his left hand, while in his right he waved a heavy sword. "Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"Here, here!" cried our hero, starting forward into the larger room.

"What! Safe—alive—well?" uttered Vladimir.

"Aye, my noblest of friends. But, oh, cast off this accursed bond from my arms. It cuts into the flesh."

The rope was quickly taken off, and then the youth embraced his deliverer. No questions were asked there. Only a few sincere thanks were uttered, and then attention was turned to the two villains, who yet stood trembling near them. They had not attempted an escape, for the way was blocked up. They were quickly secured, and then the party turned away from the place, and as they went Ruric gave the monk an account of the manner in which he had been entrapped and of the events which had transpired since.

"Merciful heavens!" ejaculated Vladimir as Ruric closed his account of the manner in which he had overcome the two men who had thought to murder him. "It was a narrow escape."

"But I might not have escaped without your coming," the youth said, "for they would surely have found me. With my hands lashed behind me as they were I could not have escaped."

"True, true," returned Vladimir thoughtfully. "It was a narrow chance. But it is over now."

"And how gained you the knowledge of my whereabouts?" asked Ruric.

"I'll explain it to you when we have time. But did I understand you to say that the humpbacked priest was there?"

"He came to my dungeon with the rest, and 'twas he that I knocked down. Have you not found him?"

"No; we have seen nothing of him. We found two men in the hall, and that was all."

The place was searched all through for the priest, but he could not be found, and when Vladimir was assured that the arch villain had made his escape he prepared to leave the building. The prisoners, four of them, were led out first and taken away by the monk's followers.

When Ruric reached the street, the stars were all out, and the cool, frosty air struck gratefully upon his brow. He turned toward his mysterious companion, and under the grateful impulse of the moment he stopped. He raised his hands toward heaven, uttered one fervent sentence of thanksgiving to God and then moved on again.

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