

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

"Ah, sire, because I gave direction that you should not be troubled with the affair. But I have them now. It is only last evening that I got a clew upon them. We found them in an old building near the river here in the Kremlin, and this same Buric Nevel was with them. But he made his escape."

"I do remember me now that the fellow had a bold bearing and a fearless look," said the emperor half to himself, "and if such a man turns villain there must be danger in it."

"Aye, sire, you speak truly, and now, with your order, I can apprehend the fellow at once."

"I can send and have it done, my dear duke."

"But your officers may not find him. I know where he is and can have him taken at once. He has several hiding places."

"Well, then you might do the work with more advantage."

"Aye, and I can have him tried and disposed of without further trouble to you, sire."

"No, no. I wish to see him," returned the emperor. "I will give you the necessary order, and you may bring him here."

Peter then turned to his secretary and bade him fill an order for Buric Nevel's arrest. The stout master at arms looked on with a troubled countenance, and his glances toward the duke were anything but loving. He did not seem to relish the business at all, and the expression of his countenance would seem to indicate that he did not believe all that the duke had said.

"However, the order was soon made out and in the duke's possession."

"Remember," said Peter, "you will bring him before me."

"You shall be obeyed, sire."

If the emperor did not notice the strange, dark look of the duke as he turned away, the Greek did, and he fancied, too, that he knew what it meant. But he said nothing then.

Olga bowed low as he clutched the order, and, having once more promised obedience, he hurried from the imperial presence. As he passed out through the wide court he walked slowly and thoughtfully with his head bowed. But soon he started up, his hands came together with an emphatic movement, and he moved on more quickly. He had gained the street and approached a small court within which stood a house of entertainment, where he stopped. In a few moments more a man came out from the inn, and as soon as he had satisfied himself that the newcomer was the duke he spoke.

"Olga, is't you?"

"Yes."

It needed but a single glance in the dim starlight to recognize the form of the humpbacked priest. He walked quickly to where the duke stood, and the two moved off together.

"Now what luck?" Savotano asked as he gained the street once more.

"Good—as good as I could even hope," returned the duke. "I have the power for arresting the gunmaker."

"And for executing him?"

"It amounts to the same. I am ordered to bring him before the emperor, but that is easily managed."

Here the duke stopped and gazed about him, and then, bending his head so that no word could possibly pass beyond his companion's ears, he continued:

"You can call upon three of your best men, and I can furnish two from among my own servants. Early in the morning, by the time the sun is up, they must be at the gunmaker's dwelling. They must make him angry—of course he will resist—and then kill him. It is very simple—very. They can easily dispatch him, and then we have only to tell the emperor that he resisted the duke and bade them secure the duke and the foul priest."

Rosalind Valdaï gazed upon the transformed man until the strange truth worked its way to her struggling mind, and then she turned once more to Buric. She gazed up into his face, and she saw the holy smile which rested there. The joyful truth came to her now, and, with one long, low cry of frantic hope and bliss, she sank upon her noble lover's bosom. She could not speak. She could only cling closely and more close to her loved protector, and, with her head pillowed close by the heart that beat for her, she wept away all the grief of her opened soul.

"Olga," spoke the emperor after the nobleman had been firmly bound, "your race of iniquity is run."

"No, no, sire!" the duke cried in humble, supplicating tones. "Say not so! In this single thing I may have been wrong, but let my mad, consuming love be some palliation for my offense. Oh, you will not crush me with public shame for this! You will not cast from you one who loves you well!"

"Oh, miserable man," uttered Peter, with a look of utter contempt upon the base wretch, "add not perjury to your already accumulated crimes! Hark ye, some months since I knew there was conspiracy in my capital, and I knew there was much of evil, too, which was never reported to me. I resolved to ferret it out, and to that end I meant to mingle among my people without their knowing me. So I had that robe made and so stuffed and wadded that I could even hide my chin in the seeming fat. I assumed the garb, and my own master at arms did not at first know me. Once in while I made my page assume the garb and be seen in it about the city, and thus all thought of suspecting me was cut off. I have been at the work, Olga, and I have found out all I sought. It was more accident that first threw me in the way of this young gunmaker, and it was by accident, too, that I overheard the Count Damonoff and his companion discussing the subject of their mission to the gunmaker's shop. Of course I followed that scheme up, and I should have snatched our fair young countess from your grasp ere this had I not been desirous of arriving at another point first. Perhaps you know that the Princess Sophia and the Minister Gallitzin have planned a grand overturn of my throne? Ah! You tremble! And now, my noble duke, the emperor continued in a deeper tone, "I have learned of your own guilt in that affair. Oh, you do love me, do you? But I know you now. Two of your tools are in my hands. They are named Totna and Viska. They have made a full confession, and I now know all your villainies. I know what you have planned against this noble countess and against her noble lover. I know what you planned against the Count Damonoff, and I know, too, what you have planned against my emperor. Not a word, sir! You are the Duke of Tula no more. A more worthy man wears the ducal coronet from this hour. Buric Nevel shall assume the station you have disgraced, and I know he will ennoble it once more."

As Peter ceased speaking he waved his hand to his officers, and they bore the prisoners from the room. The priest said not a word, but Olga cursed loudly and bitterly.

When the dark villains had gone, Peter stepped forward and took Rosalind's hand. There was a tear in his eye, and his nether lip trembled.

"Fair cousin," he said in a low, soft tone, "I could not promise thee that thou shouldst not wed with the Duke of Tula, for I had even then planned that you should do that thing. But it will not be very hard, will it?"

The countess gazed up, and a murmur of thanks was upon her lips, but the gushing flood started forth anew, and she could only look the joyful blessings she could not speak. Peter imprinted a kiss upon her pure brow and then gave her hand to Buric, and as he did so he said, with a warm smile:

"You must be her guardian hereafter, and should you tire of the duty your emperor will be ever ready to grant her the asylum she needs."

A week had passed away from the time of the strange scene just recorded. The former duke, Olga, had been convicted of treason and was now on his way to the eternal wilds of Siberia. But let me say here he never reached the land of his banishment. His proud heart broke on the road, and he died, unknown and uncared for, in a peasant's cot among the rugged mountains of Uralia. He had begged of the officer who guided him not to tell his station, and the peasants supposed they were burying a common traveler when they laid away the mortal remains of Olga in the cold grave they had prepared.

Savotano, the humpbacked priest, was executed as a common murderer, while his companions in crime were punished as their various degrees of guilt demanded.

And now comes the closing scene. Within the largest apartment of the ducal palace were assembled a brilliant company, and the emperor himself was master of the ceremonies.

Buric Nevel, the gunmaker of Moscow, knelt at the emperor's feet, and Peter drew his sword and laid the glittering blade upon Buric's shoulders, and as he did so he said:

"Arise, Sir Buric, duke of Tula, and receive thy just titles and bonded instruments!"

The youth arose, pale and trembling with the strange excitement of the moment, and then the emperor handed him a broad parchment roll, with its heavy seals and vignette bearing the arms of the dukedom.

"Now," cried Peter, whose brow was flushed with the joy he himself was making, "let the rest of the work go on. Come, holy father, we need your help to perform the rest of the ceremony."

Buric was pale no longer. As he felt the warm hand of Rosalind trembling within his own and the rich blood mounted to his brow and temples, and in his dark eyes the strange love light danced like reflected sunbeams.

The word was spoken—the bond of union was made—and, after all, Rosalind Valdaï had become Duchess of Tula. The widowed mother was the first to kiss them, and the emperor came next. Then came Paul and Zenobia, hand in hand.

"Aha!" spoke the happy duchess as she caught the new light of Zenobia's eye and then turned to the glowing face of Paul. "You are playing at the game of love."

"You will not object," whispered the fair girl, hiding her face upon the bosom of her mistress.

"No, no, Zenobia."

"And you, my master," spoke Paul, gazing eagerly into Buric's face, "you will not say nay."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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