

COAST MAIL.

The Gunmaker Of Moscow
By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

"Hold!" cried Ruric, starting to his feet, his handsome face flushed and his bright eye burning. "Speak not thus—at least not now. I flatter not myself, but I claim a soul as pure and a heart as noble as any man in the land. My mind is as clear, my hopes are as high, my ambition is as true to real greatness and my will as firm as any of them. If Rosalind seeks the love of a true heart and the protection of stout arms and determined success, then I fear not to place myself by the side of any suitor in the land; but if she seeks immediate wealth and the glitter of some high sounding title, then—ah, I know she does not! But let it pass now. I will see her."

Claudia would not oppose the wishes of her son, and she said no more upon the subject. For awhile nothing further was said, until Ruric remarked upon the increasing force of the storm.

"Hark!" uttered his mother, bending her ear in a listening attitude. "Was that a knock upon our door?"

"Surely no one is out on such a night that could seek shelter here," returned Ruric. "You must have"—The youth did not finish the sentence, for at that moment the knock came so loud that it was not to be mistaken. The youth caught up the candle and hastened to the door. Opening it, but the blast came roaring in, whirling a cloud of snow into Ruric's face and extinguishing the light at once.

"Is there any one here?" the gunmaker asked, bowing his head and shielding his eyes from the driving snow with one hand.

"Yes," returned a voice from the

stygian darkness. "In God's name, let me in, or I shall perish."

"Then follow quickly," said Ruric. "Here, give me your hand. There, now come."

The youth found the thickly gloved hand—gloved with the softest fur—and, having led the invisible applicant into the hall, he closed the door and then led the way to the kitchen. As soon as the candle was relighted Ruric turned and gazed upon the newcomer. He was a monk and habited something like one of the black monks of St. Michael. He was of medium height and possessed a rotundity of person which was comical to behold. He was fat and unwieldy and waddled about with laughable steps. His huge black robe, which reached from his chin to his toes, was secured about the waist with a sash of the same color, and the snow which lay upon the shoulders and back presented a striking contrast. Ruric brushed away the snow with his own hand, and having taken his visitor's thick fur bonnet the latter took a seat near the fire.

Before a word was spoken the youthful host carefully examined his guest's features, and the latter seemed equally desirous of discovering what manner of people he had fallen in with. The monk's face was a peculiar one. The features were very dark and prominent and almost angular in their strongly marked outlines. His brow was very strong in mental development, and his eyes were dark and brilliant. The slight circle of hair that escaped from beneath the tight skull-cap which he retained upon his head was somewhat tinged with sil-

ver, though his face did not betray such advanced age as this silvery hair would seem to indicate.

"You have been caught in a severe storm, good father," said the youth after his guest had somewhat recovered from the effect of the cold.

"Aye, that I have, my son," the monk returned in a deep, rumbling tone. "I left the Kremlin this morning little thinking of such a change. This storm has commenced since I started on my return. About half a mile from here my horse got fondered in the snow, and I left him with an honest peasant and then started to make the rest of my way on foot, but I reckoned wildly. The driving storm blinded me, and the piling drifts swallowed me up at every dozen steps. My body is not very well adapted to such work. Ha, ha, ha! But I saw your light, and I determined to seek shelter here for the night. By St. Michael, but this is a most severe storm. Yet you are comfortable here."

"Aye, father, we try to be comfortable," said Ruric. "My mother could hardly survive a winter in some of the dwellings which stand hereabout."

The monk made no answer to this save a sort of commendatory nod, and shortly afterward the youth asked:

"Do you belong here in the city, good father?"

"Aye, at present I do," the monk returned. And then, with a smile, he added: "I suppose you would like to know whom you have thus received. My name is Vladimir, and my home is wherever I may chance to be on God's heritage. At present I am residing here in Moscow. There, could you ask me to be more frank?"

Ruric smiled, but he made no direct reply. He was too deeply interested in the face of the monk to enter with much eagerness into conversation. At length the guest asked if he could be accommodated with some sleeping place, and, having answered in the affirmative, the youth lighted another candle and conducted him to a chamber which was located directly over the kitchen and which was very well warmed by means of several iron tubes

that connected with the furnace below.

"Mother," uttered Ruric as soon as he had returned to the kitchen, "who is that man?"

"How should I know?" the woman replied.

"But have you never seen him before?" Ruric asked in an earnest, eager tone.

"I cannot tell, my son. His face most surely calls up some strange emotions in my mind, but I think I never saw him before."

"And yet he seems familiar to me," the son resumed. "Those eyes I surely have seen before, but to save my soul I cannot remember when nor where."

And so Ruric pondered, but to no avail. After he had retired to his bed he lay awake and thought of the strange face, and all through the night his dreams were but startling visions of the black monk.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE PROCEEDING.

When Ruric came down in the morning, he found the monk already there and breakfast nearly ready. But little was said during the mealtime, for the monk seemed busy with thoughts of his own, and Ruric was too much engaged in studying the strange man's features and pondering upon the various doubts and surmises that had entered his mind. After the meal was over the monk accompanied the gunmaker to his shop, and there he spent some time in examining the quaint articles of machinery that were used in the manufacture of arms.

Ruric was engaged in finishing a pair of pistols, and for some minutes the monk had stood silently by his side watching his movements. At length the youth stopped in his work and laid the pistol down.

"Excuse me, good father," he said rather nervously, at the same time gazing his visitor in the face, "but I must ask you a question. Where have I seen you before?"

"How should I know?" the monk returned, with a smile.

"Why," resumed Ruric, with some hesitancy, "I know not but that you might enlighten me. I have surely seen you somewhere."

WIRES DOWN

The "old has-been" plug operator whom Otto left in charge of the Western Union office when he was obliged to make a trip to San Francisco, has fallen down already. He managed to worry through after a fashion until yesterday afternoon; then he let the line rest somewhere between Fairview and Sitkum, and the result is that we have no "press" for this issue.

If Otto had been here, we are confident that this wouldn't have occurred; but some people would hoodoo most anything.

"And are there not hundreds whom you have seen in this great city, aye, thousands, whom you might recognize as you recognize me?"

"Ah, it may be so, but not like this. There may be a thousand faces I would recollect to have seen, but not one of them would excite even a passing emotion in my soul. But your face calls up some powerful emotion, some startling memory of the past, which bothers me. Who are you, good father? What are you? Where have we met before? Was it in Spain?"

"No," said Vladimir, with a shake of the head. And then, with a more serious shade upon his face, he added: "Let this pass now. I will not deny to you that there may be some grounds for your strange fancies, but I assure you most assuredly that until last night I never came in direct companionship with you before—at any rate, not to my knowledge. You have acted the good Samaritan toward me, and I hope I may at some time return the favor."

"No, no!" quickly responded the youth. "If you return it, then it will be a favor no more. I have only done for you what every man should do to his neighbor, and so far from needing thanks for my services I would rather give them for the occasion, for I know of no source of joy so pure and pleasurable as that feeling in the soul

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