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THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By
SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

which tells us we have done a good act."

The dark monk reached forth and took the youthful artisan's hand, and, with more than ordinary emotion, he said:

"You touch the harp strings of the soul with a noble hand, my son, and if any deed of kindness can give me joy it will be a deed for you. We may meet again, and until then I can only say, God bless and prosper thee."

With these words the monk turned away, and ere Ruric could command presence of mind enough to follow him he had gone from the house. The youth wished to say something, but amid the varied emotions that went leaping through his mind he could gather no connected thoughts.

After the monk was gone Ruric returned to his bench and resumed his work. He asked his boy if he had ever seen the strange man before, but Paul only shook his head and answered dubiously.

"What do you mean?" the gunmaker asked, gazing the boy in the face. "Do you think you have seen him before?"

"I cannot tell, my master. I may have seen him before and I may not. But surely you would not suppose that my memory would serve you better than your own."

Ruric was not fully assured by this answer. He gazed into Paul's face, and he fancied he detected some show of intelligence there which had not been spoken. But he resolved to ask no more questions at present. He had asked enough, he thought, upon such a subject, and he made up his mind to bother himself no more about it, feeling sure that if his boy knew anything which would be for his master's interest to know it would be communicated in due season. So he applied himself anew to his work, and at noon the pistols were finished.

Toward the middle of the afternoon, just as Ruric had finished tempering some parts of a gun lock

the back door of his shop was opened, and two men entered. They were young men, dressed in costly furs and both of them stout and good looking. The gunmaker recognized them as the Count Conrad Damonoff and his friend Stephen Urzen.

"I think I speak with Ruric Nevel?" said the count, moving forward.

"You do," returned Ruric, not at all surprised by the visit, since people of all classes were in the habit of calling at his place to order arms.

The count turned a shade paler than before, and his nether lip trembled. But Ruric thought that might be the result of coming from the cold into a warm place. However, he was soon undeceived, for the count's next remark was significant: "You are acquainted with the Lady Rosalind Valdaï?" he said.

"I am," returned Ruric, now beginning to wonder.

"Well, sir," returned Damonoff, with much haughtiness, "perhaps my business can be quickly and satisfactorily settled. It is my desire to make the Lady Rosalind my wife."

Ruric Nevel started at these words, and he clasped his hands to hide their tremulousness. But he

was not long debating upon an answer.

"And why have you come to me with this information, sir?" he asked.

"You should know that already. Do you not love the lady?"

"Upon my soul, sir count, you ask me a strange question. What right have you to question me upon such a theme?"

"The right that every man has to rare the way for his own rights," replied Damonoff sharply. "But if you choose not to answer let it pass. I know you do love the lady, and

now I ask you to renounce all claims to her hand."

"By St. Paul, sir count, your tongue runs into strange moods of speech! I renounce all claims to Rosalind Valdaï's hand! Was't so you meant?"

"Aye, sir, precisely so."

"Perhaps you will inform me what claims I may have upon the lady," Ruric returned, with some tremulousness in his tone, for the very subject was one that moved him deeply.

"Ruric Nevel, you shall not say that I did not make myself fully understood, and hence I will explain." The count spoke this as speaks a man who feels that he is doing a very condescending thing, and in the same tone he proceeded:

"The Lady Rosalind is of noble parentage and very wealthy. My own station and wealth are equal with hers—my station, at all events. She may possess the undivided right to more property than I do; but that matters not. I love her and must have her for my wife. I have been to see the noble duke, her guardian, and he objects not to my suit, but he informed me that there was one impediment, and that was her love for you. He knows full well, as I know, and as all must know, that she could never become your wife; but yet he is anxious not to interfere too much against her inclinations. So a simple denial from you to the effect that you can never claim her hand is all that is necessary. You understand me, I trust. We seek this only for the fair lady's own good. Of course you must be aware that the duke would never consent to her union with you, and yet he would wish to have your denial to show to Rosalind when he announces his decision. I have a paper here all drawn up, and all that will be necessary is simply your signature. Here. It is only a plain, simple avowal on your part that you have no hopes nor thoughts of seeking the hand of the lady in marriage."

As the count spoke he drew a paper from the bosom of his marten doublet, and, having opened it, he handed it toward the gunmaker. But Ruric took it not. He drew back and gazed the visitor sternly in the face.

"Sir count," he uttered in a tone full of noble indignation, "what do you suppose I am? Do you mean to tell me that Olga, duke of Tula, has commissioned you to obtain such a renunciation of me?"

"Stephen," spoke the count, turning to his companion, "you heard the instructions the duke gave me this morning?"

"Aye," returned Urzen, directing his speech to Ruric; "I did hear, and you have stated the case plainly."

"I may be as much surprised as yourself," resumed the count haughtily; "at this strange taste of the duke. Why he should seek this signal from you I can only imagine upon his desire to call up no regrets in the bosom of his fair ward. He knows that she was once intimate with you and that she now feels a warm friendship for you. For her sake he would have this signal from you."

"But how for her sake?" asked Ruric.

"Why," returned Damonoff, "do you not see? Rosalind in the simplicity of her heart may think that you—a—that you might claim her love and out of pure principle grant it to you simply because you were the first claimant."

"But I never claimed her love," said Ruric warmly. "If she loves me, she loves me from her heart. With the noble duke I never spoke but once, and then he came here for me to temper his sword. If you would marry with the lady, do so, and if you seek help in the work seek it from those who have some power in the matter."

"You mistake, sir," uttered the count hotly. "I seek not power now. I only seek a simple word from one who may have some influence, even as a beggar, having saved the life of a king, may, through royal gratitude, wield an influence. Will you sign the paper?"

Now, all this seemed strange to Ruric, and he knew that there was something behind the curtain which he was not permitted to know. He knew the proud and stubborn duke well enough to know that he never would have sent such a message as this but for some design more than had yet appeared. In short, he could not understand the matter at all. It looked dark and complex, and its face was in direct conflict with the nature of the man from whom it now appeared to have emanated. Ruric pondered upon this a few moments, and he made up his mind that he would on no account yield an atom to the strange demand thus made upon him.

"Sir count," he said calmly and surely, "you have plainly stated your proposition, and I will as plainly answer. I cannot sign the paper."

"Ha!" gasped Damonoff in quick passion. "Do you refuse?"

"Most flatly."

For a few moments the count gazed into Ruric's face as though he doubted the evidence of his own senses.

"It is the duke's command," he said at length.

"The Duke of Tula holds no power of command over me," was the gunmaker's calm reply.

"Beware! Once more, I say, sign this paper!"

"Let but waste your breath, sir count, in speaking thus. You have my answer."

"By heavens, Ruric Nevel, you'll sign this!" the count cried madly.

"Never, sir!"

"But look ye, sirrah, here is my whole future of life based upon my hopes of union with this fair girl. Her guardian bids me get this paper of you ere I can have her hand. And now do you think I'll give it up so easily? By the saints of heaven, I'll have your name to this or I'll have your life!"

"Now your tongue runs away with you, sir count. I have given you my answer. Be sure that only one man on earth can prevail upon me to place my name upon that paper."

"And who is he?"

"I mean the emperor."

"But you will sign it!" hissed Damonoff, turning pale with rage.

"Here it is—sign! If you would live—sign!"

"Perhaps he cannot write," suggested Urzen contemptuously.

"Then he may make his mark," rejoined the count in the same contemptuous tone.

"It might not require much more urging to induce me to make my mark in a manner not at all agreeable to you, sir," the youth returned, with his teeth now set and the dark veins upon his brow starting more plainly out. "You have come

upon my premises, and you have sought your purpose. You now have your answer, and for your own sake, for my sake, I beg you to leave me."

"Not until your name is upon this paper!" cried Damonoff, shaking the missive furiously and crumpling it in his hand.

"Are you mad, sir count? Do you think me a fool?"

"Aye, a consummate one."

"Then," returned Ruric, with a curl of utter contempt upon his finely chiseled lip, "you need have no further dealings with me. There is my door, sir."

For some moments Conrad Damonoff seemed unable to speak from very anger. He had surely some deep, anxious purpose in obtaining Ruric's name to that paper, and to be thus thwarted by a common artisan was maddening to one who based all his force of character upon his title.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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