

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE GUNMAKER AND THE MONK

The time at which we open our story is midwinter and toward the close of the seventeenth century. Russia had passed through the long and bitter ordeal of national night. The Tartar yoke had been worn till the very bones of the nation were galled, and when this was thrown off civil dissensions and insurrections commenced. The Poles and Swedes plundered the country, and amid general tumult and confusion some half dozen men were clamoring for the throne. At length a few patriotic citizens, pledging everything they held dear on earth to the cause of freedom from this curse of anarchy and headed by a noble prince and a humble, patriotic butcher, made a bold stand to save the country. Moscow was retaken, and Michael Romanoff was chosen czar, and this illustrious family still occupies the imperial throne. And now the day of Russian greatness dawned, but the sun was not fairly up and the broad light opened not upon the empire until Peter came to the throne.

In the department of the Sloboda, the suburbs of Moscow, and very near the river Moskwa stood a humble cot, the exterior of which betrayed a neatness of arrangement and show of taste that more than made up for its smallness of size. Nor was it so very small, in fact, but only in contrast, for near at hand about it stood many large, shabby, dirty looking structures that overlooked the grim cot, as bleak mountains may look down upon a verdant hill. And within this cot was as neat as without. The two apartments in front, one of which was only used in winter, were furnished not only with neatness, but with a fair show of ornament and luxury. Back of these were a large cooking and dining room and two small bedrooms, and back still from these were an artisan's shop and other outbuildings. The shop was devoted principally to the manufacture of firearms. Some swords and other edged weapons were made here upon special application.

The gunmaker now stood by his forge watching the white smoke as it curled up toward the throat of the chimney. He was a young man, not over three and twenty, and possessed a frame of more than ordinary symmetry and muscular development. He was not large—not above the medium size—but a single glance at the swelling chest, the broad shoulders and the sinewy ridges of the bare arms told at once that he was master of great physical power. His features were regular, yet strongly marked and eminently handsome. His brow, which was full and high, was half covered by the light brown curls that waved over it, while his eyes, which were of a bright, brilliant deep gray in color, lent a cast of genius to the intellect of the brow. His name was Ruric Nevel. His father had been killed in the then late war with the Turks, and the son, leaving his mother properly cared for, went to Spain soon after the bereavement. There he found work in the most noted armories, and now, well versed in the trade, he had returned to his native city to follow his calling and support his mother.

Near by stood a boy—Paul Peepoff—a bright, intelligent lad, some 15 years of age, who had bound himself to the gunmaker for the purpose of learning the art. His hair and his eyes were darker than his master's, and if he possessed not so much sound intellect he certainly possessed an unwonted degree of keen, quick wit and unswerving integrity.

The sun had been some time below the horizon, and the only light of any consequence that made things partially visible within the shop came from the dull blaze of the coals on the forge, as Paul ever and anon bore down upon the brake that moved the bellows. Suddenly Ruric started back from the forge as his mind broke from the deep reverie into which he had fallen, and, having bade his boy to see that matters were properly disposed for the night, he turned toward the door and was soon in the kitchen, where his mother had supper all prepared and set out.

Claudia Nevel was a noble looking woman, if the impress of a noble, generous soul can be called such, and the light of her still handsome countenance was never bright-

er than when gazing upon her boy. She had seen the snows of 50 winters, and if they had left some silver upon her head and some age marks upon her face the sunshine of full as many summers had left her with a thankful, loving heart and a prayerful, loving soul.

"It is snowing again, faster than ever," remarked Paul as he took his seat at the table.

"Ah!" returned Ruric, resting his knife a few moments while he bent his ear to listen to the voice of the storm. "I had hoped 'twould snow no more for the present. The snow is deep enough now. And how it blows!"

"Never mind," spoke the dame in a trustful, easy tone; "it must storm when it listeth, and we can only thank God that we have shelter and pray for those who have none."

"Amen!" responded Ruric fervently.

After this the trio remained some minutes silent, seeming to be busy in listening to the storm notes that came pealing about the cot. The wind was high, and the snow was now dashing upon the windows with a dreary, melancholy sound. The meal was at length eaten and the table set back, and shortly afterward Paul retired to his bed. It was his wont to retire early, for he rose early to build the fires and prepare for the labors of the day.

Ruric drew his chair close up to the fireplace, and, leaning against the jamb, he bowed his head and pondered again. This had become a habit with him of late. Sometimes he would sit thus during a whole hour without speaking or even moving, and his mother did not interrupt him, as she supposed he might be solving some mechanical problem that had arisen to bother him. But these fits of thought had become too frequent, too lengthy and too moody for such a conclusion, and the good woman was forced to believe that they were caused by something more remote than the business of the forge or the lathe. The youth now sat with his brow resting upon his hand and his eyes bent upon the hearth. For half an hour he had not moved, and his face wore an anxious, troubled look.

"Ruric, my son," spoke the mother at length in a low, kind tone, "what is it that occupies your thoughts so much?"

The young man started and turned his gaze upon his mother.

"Did you speak to me, my mother?" he asked after having recalled him mind to things about him.

"Yes, my boy," she said, "I did speak to you. I asked you what it was that occupied your thoughts."

"Oh, nothing, nothing," Ruric answered after some moments of hesitation. "I was only thinking; that was all."

"I know you were thinking, and I know that was all at the time, but of what, Ruric? Come, hide no secrets from your mother. I have noticed you of late, and I know you are changed. That old smile is gone from your face, and sometimes I have feared the gladness has gone from your heart. I have seen you bent in thought over your work when I knew that of your work you were not thinking, and I have seen you burned in deep thought when you should be reading or conversing with me."

"Have I, then, offended you, my mother?"

"No, no; oh, no, my noble boy. Never did such a thought enter my mind. If I have been made uneasy thereby, it was only in love for thee and the fear that thou wert not so happy as in the past. Will you not tell me all? Oh, I hope my boy fears not to trust his mother with his thoughts."

As she spoke thus she moved her seat close to where Ruric sat and placed her hand upon his arm.

"Tell me, my boy," she added in a low, persuasive tone, "what it is that dwells thus upon your mind."

Ruric reached out and took his mother's hand, and, having gazed for some moments into her face, he said:

"Surely, my mother, I have nothing in my soul that I would hide from thee. If I have kept my thoughts to myself with unseemly silence, it has been because I feared you would laugh at me if I told you of them."

"Ah, no, my son," the mother replied almost reprovingly. "Nothing that could claim such deep and absorbing consideration from a mind like yours would move me to deri-

sion. Speak plainly, and be sure of my sympathy."

A few moments more the youth gazed silently upon his mother, and then he answered:

"All this thought has been of one person—of Rosalind Valdaï."

Claudia Nevel started as she heard that name, and for the while the color forsook her cheeks.

"What, my dear boy, what of her have you thought?" she asked tremulously.

"What but for one thing could I think, my mother? You have seen her?"

"Yes, Ruric."

"And you have marked the grace, the loveliness, the soul given beauty of the noble girl?"

"I know that she is beautiful, my son, and also that she is good; at least so I think."

"Then what but love could move me with deep thought of her? Oh, my mother, I do love her! I love her with the whole strength of my heart and soul."

"Alas, my Ruric, she will never dare love thee."

"You know not that," the youth quickly replied, his eyes burning deeply and his open brow flushing. "Did I not know she loved me, be sure I would never have allowed my thoughts such range. We were children together, and even then we loved. Fate has dealt differently by us in the years that have passed since those childhood times, but yet I am sure that her love for me is not changed, save as increasing age must change all the emotions of our nature into deeper, stronger lights and shades."

"But think, my boy; you a mere artisan, she the off-spring of nobility and the ward of a duke—a stern, cold, proud aristocrat, who looks upon our station only as harsh masters look upon their beasts of burden. I fear you will find little else but misery in such a course of thought."

"At least, my mother, I will see Rosalind, and if she loves me as I love her, and if she would accept my hand."

"Hush, my boy. Do not cherish such hopes. Why should she mate with thee when the richest nobles of the land would kneel for her hand?"

"Hold!" cried Ruric, starting to his feet, his handsome face flushed and his bright eye burning. "Speak not thus—at least not now. I hate 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, opened it, but the blast came whirling 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 discov-

ering 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 silver, 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 juling 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 about here."

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 knew not but that you might enlighten me. I have surely seen you somewhere."

"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 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 save 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 mean?"

"Aye, sir, precisely so."

"Perhaps you will inform me what claims I may have upon the lady," Ruric returned, with some remulousness 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 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."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]