

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

[CONTINUED.]

"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!"

"You 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.

"Sign!" he hissed.

"Fool!" uttered Ruric, unable longer to contain himself in view of such stupid persistence. "Do you seek a quarrel with me?"

"Seek? I seek what I will have. Will you sign?"

"Once more—no!"

"Then, by heavens, you shall know what it is to thwart such as me! How's that?"

As these words passed from the count's lips in a low, hissing whisper he aimed a blow with his fist at Ruric's head. The gunmaker had not dreamed of such a dastard act, and he was not prepared for it, yet he dodged it sufficiently to escape the mark upon his face, receiving the blow lightly upon the side of his head. But he stopped not to consider now. As the count drew back Ruric dealt him a blow upon the brow that felled him to the floor like a dead ox.

"Beware, Stephen Urzen!" he whispered to the count's companion as that individual made a movement as though he would come forward. "I am not myself now, and you are safest where you are."

The man thus addressed viewed the gunmaker a few moments, and he seemed to conclude that he had better avoid a personal encounter, for his fists relaxed and he moved to the side of his fallen friend and assisted him to his feet.

Conrad Damonoff gazed into his antagonist's face a few moments in amazement. His face was ashen pale, his whole frame quivered. Upon his forehead there was a livid

the skin was not broken. "Ruric Nevel," he said in a hissing, maddening tone, "you will hear from me! The mad spirit of a vengeance such as mine cannot be trifled with!"

And with this he turned away. "Paul," said the gunmaker, turning to his boy after the men had gone away, "not a word of this to my mother. Be sure."

## CHAPTER III.

That night Ruric Nevel had strange fancies while waking and strange dreams while sleeping. Long and deeply did he ponder upon the strange business which had called Count Conrad to his shop, and in no way, under no light, could he get any reason from it. Why he, a youth who had never spoken with the proud duke save once on common business and who was so far down in the social scale should have been thus called upon to give a virtual consent to the bestowal of Rosalind Valda's hand, was beyond his ken. He was but a poor artisan, she a wealthy heiress and a scion of nobility, and she was under the legal guardianship of the duke, whose word, so far as she was concerned, was law. And again, Conrad Damonoff was a count and reputed to be wealthy. To be sure, he was somewhat dissolute, but then, a majority of his contemporaries were the same. Now, if this count loved the lady Rosalind and had asked for her hand and the duke was willing he should have it, why had this extraordinary proposal been sent to the poor gunmaker?

Ruric asked this question of himself a hundred times. He would be glad and lay down all the premises in his mind, and then he would try to make the deduction, but no reasonable one could he arrive at. One thought clung to him like a dim specter at night, which hope would make an angel and which fear would paint a demon. Could it be possible that Rosalind had told her love for him and that the duke would pay some deference to it? He tried to think so. Hope whispered that it might be so, but fear would force itself in and speak in tones so loud that they could not be misunderstood. Finally the youth resolved upon the only reasonable course. He concluded to let the matter rest, so far as his own surmises were concerned, until he could see Rosalind, and that he was determined to do as soon as possible.

On the following morning, as he was preparing for breakfast, he saw Olga, the duke's pass by and strike off into the Borodino road.

"Now," thought he, "is the time for the visit to Rosalind." And as soon as he had eaten his breakfast he prepared for the visit. He dressed well, and no man in Moscow had a nobler look when the dust of toil was removed from his brow and garb.

"Paul," he said, entering the shop where the boy was at work, "I may be back at noon. At any rate, such is my intention, and if either of those men calls who were here yesterday you may tell them so."

"But," returned the lad, "if they ask me any questions?"

"Answer them as you think best."

"And if they should ask me if you would fight?"

"Tell them that I hold my life as too dear to sell to such as they."

"But surely, my master, the count will challenge you."

"I think he will. And," added Ruric as an entire new thought came to his mind, "mayhap he came here to create a quarrel to that end. By my soul, I think he did."

"I am sure of it," said Paul.

A moment Ruric's frame quivered with suppressed passion. Then he said:

"Let them come, and if they come, or if either of them comes, while I am gone, tell them, or him, that I am their very humble servant in all things reasonable."

Paul promised, and then the gunmaker turned away. In the hall he threw on his heavy fur pelisse, and, having reached the nearest hostelry, he took a horse and sledge and started off for Kremlin, within which the duke resided.

Within one of the sumptuously furnished apartments of the palace of the Duke of Tula sat Rosalind Valda. She was a beautiful girl, molded in perfect form, with the full flush of health and vigor and possessing a face of peculiar sweetness and intelligence. She was only

19 years of age, and she had been twelve years an orphan. Her hair was of a golden hue, and the sunlight loved to dwell amid the clustering curls. Her eyes, which were of a deep, liquid blue, sparkled brightly when she was happy, and when she smiled the lovely dimples of her cheeks held the smile even after it had faded from her lips. There was nothing of the aristocrat in her look—nothing proud, nothing haughty—but gentleness and love were the true elements of her soul, and she could only be happy when she knew that she was truly loved. She liked respect, but she spurned that respect which only arms at outward show, while the heart may be reeking with vilest sensualism.

Rosalind sat there in the apartment which was hers for her own private use, and she was sad and thoughtful. One fair hand supported her pure brow, while with the other she twisted the ends of the silken sash that confined her heavy robe. Thus she sat when the door of her apartment was opened and a young girl entered. This newcomer was a small, fair creature, bright and quick, with that raven hair and those large dark eyes of dreamy light which bespeak the child of a Moslem blood. Her name was Zenobia, and she was now about 16 years of age. Rosalind's father had placed her up on the battlefield from which the Turks had fled, and being unable to find any claimant, he had brought her home, then almost an infant. And now she was Rosalind's attendant and companion. She loved her kind and gentle mistress and would have laid down life itself in her service.

"How now, Zenobia?" asked Rosalind as she noticed the girl hesitate.

"There is a gentleman below who would see you," the girl replied.

"Tell him I cannot see him," said Rosalind, trembling.

"But this is Ruric Nevel, my mistress."

"Ruric!" uttered the fair maiden, starting up, while the rich blood mounted to her brow and temples.

"Oh, I am glad he has come! My prayers are surely answered. Lead him hither, Zenobia."

The girl departed, and ere long afterward Ruric entered the apartment. He walked quickly to where Rosalind had arisen to her feet, and, taking one of her hands in both his, he pressed it to his lips. He had had a well formed speech upon his lips when he entered the room, but 'twas gone now. He could only gaze into the lovely face before him and murmur the name that sounded so sweetly to his ears. But the emotions of his soul became calmer at length, and then he spoke with more freedom.

"Lady," he said after he had taken his seat, "you will pardon me for this visit when you know its cause, and you will pardon me, too, if I speak plainly what I have to speak."

"Surely, sir."

"Oh, call me Ruric. Let us at least not forget the friendship of childhood."

"Then I am not a lady," said Rosalind, smiling.

"No, Rosalind."

"Ah, Ruric!"

"As we were in childhood," whispered the youth.

"In all but years," returned Rosalind in the same low tone.

"And I may wear the same image in my heart?"

"I cannot cast it from mine if I would."

"The image of childhood, dear Rosalind?"

"Aye, save that it has grown to manhood, dear Ruric."

What more could he ask for love? He had not aimed at this confession so soon, but he put it not from him now. He gazed a moment into the fair maiden's smiling eye, and as he saw the liquid tear gathering there and the happy smile working its way about the rosy lips and away in the joyous dimples he opened his arms and clasped the fondly loved one to his bosom.

"Oh, I am not deceived in this!" he murmured. "Speak, dearest one."

"I cannot forget the love of the happy times ago," the noble girl replied, gazing up through her happy tears. "Oh, how many and many an hour have I prayed to God that those days might return and that the one true heart of earth I loved might be mine once more. Ruric, why should I hide the truth or why set it aside? To me thou art all in all. I have no one else to love and none to love me else save the noble girl who brought you hither. I can tell you no more."

Happy Ruric! Happy at that moment, forgetting all else but the love that gleamed out upon him then, he clasped the cherished object ardently to his bosom.

But the moments flew on, and at length his mind came to the subject of his visit.

"Rosalind," he said, holding one of her fair hands in his grasp, "you know the Count Conrad Damonoff?"

"Aye," returned the maiden, with a shudder. "He is here very often, and he has forced himself upon my companionship when, if he had

sense, he must have known I liked it not."

"He is a suitor for your hand, is he not?"

"He was, but he is not now."

"Not now?" repeated Ruric, with surprise. "What mean you?"

"Why, simply that he has asked the duke for my hand and that he was answered in the negative."

"Did you hear the duke answer him so?"

"No; but so the duke assured me he had done. But what mean you?"

"I will tell you. Yesterday the count came to my dwelling accompanied by Stephen Urzen. He had a paper drawn up by the duke's own hand in which I was made to say, or, rather, by which the writer said, that he declaimed all pretensions to your hand and that he wished not to marry you; that he freely gave you up, meaning to seek within the sphere of his own social circle some companion when he wished. And thus I was asked to sign."

"By the count?"

"Yes, by the duke's orders."

"Oh, it cannot be!" uttered the fair girl, trembling.

"And he further assured me that the duke had requested him to obtain my signature thereto, so that he might receive your hand without impediment."

"So that the count might receive my hand?"

"Yes."

"But the duke assured me only yesterday that I should be troubled no more with the count. May there not be some mistake?"

"There can be no mistake on my part. The instrument was in the duke's own hand."

"But you did not sign it?"

"Ask me if I took my own life—if I made a curse for all I loved!"

"It is strange," the maiden murmured, bowing her head a few moments. "And yet," she added, looking up into her companion's face, "I do not think the duke would be treacherous."

"He may be," answered Ruric. "He knows how lightly our noble emperor holds empty titles, and perhaps he fears if this matter came to the imperial ear and you should claim the right to marry with whom you pleased Peter would grant your prayer, hence he wished to get my claim set aside so that he may have a clearer field in which to move. Do you know how the duke's affairs stand at present?"

Rosalind thought awhile ere she answered, and then, while a startled expression came to her face, she said:

"Ruric, I do remember now that between the duke and young Damonoff there is some matter of dispute. There is some question of property."

"Ah!" uttered the youth earnestly. "How is that?"

"Why, as near as I can understand it, there was a dispute between the duke and the elder Damonoff concerning the ownership of Drotzen, the estate on the Don, in Kaluga, and since the father's death Conrad has maintained his family claim. You know the duke and the old count married sisters, and this estate belonged to them."

"And now," suggested Ruric, "may not the duke mean to compromise this matter by giving your hand to the count and taking Drotzen in exchange?"

"Oh, I cannot think so!" the maiden returned earnestly. "The duke would not do that. He is kind to me, I am sure. He loves me as though I were his own child. I know he does, for in a thousand ways he has shown it. He is mindful of my comfort and anticipates my every want. No, no; if he is deceiving any one, he must be deceiving the count."

Ruric started at the new suspicion flashed upon him. Had the duke sent Damonoff upon that mission on purpose to get him into a quarrel? "By my soul," thought the youth to himself, "the duke knows that I have taught the sword play, and he knows that the count would in this match for me. So he thinks in this subtle manner to make me an instrument for ridding him of a plague!" But the youth was careful not to let Rosalind know of this. He knew she would be unhappy if she knew that a duel was likely to come off between himself and the count.

After some minutes of comparative silence Ruric touched upon a point which lay very near his heart.

"Rosalind," he said, taking both her hands in his own, "there is one point upon which we have never spoken, and I know you would have me speak plainly and candidly. You know my situation. My father and your father fought side by side, but my father fell, while yours returned to his home. For his eminent services your father received a title and a noble estate from the grateful Peter, while my father was only forgotten; hence our stations are now widely different. Yet I am not poor. No other man in the empire can compete with me in the manufacture of arms, and from my labor I derive a handsome income. You

know it all. And now, if other obstacles were removed, would you give me your hand and become mine for life?"

"Aye, Ruric," the noble girl answered, with beaming eyes and a joyful expression of countenance. "Were you reduced to the lowest estate of poverty, so long as your generous, pure soul was free I should only be the more anxious to lift you up. Oh, my love knows only the heart whereof it is secured, and for my future of joy I ask only the truth of my husband's love."

"Bless you, dearest!" Ruric murmured, clasping the fair being to his bosom. And for a long while Rosalind's head lay pillowed upon the shoulder of the man she so truly, fondly loved.

That was not the time for bringing forward doubts and fears. Ruric had many questions in his mind concerning the impediments that stood in the way of their union, but he kept them to himself now. At length he arose to take his departure, and he simply said as he drew the maiden to his side:

"You will not allow the duke to give your hand away?"

"Never, Ruric."

"If he asks you for your hand to bestow upon any of his friends, you will tell him—"

"That my heart is not mine to give and that my hand cannot go without it."

"Oh, bless you, Rosalind, bless you! God keep and guard you ever."

There was one warm, ardent pressure of lip to lip, and then Ruric Nevel turned away and was soon in the open court. Here he entered his sledge and then drove to the barracks in the Khatagorod, where he inquired for Alarie Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard. The officer was quickly found, and as he met Ruric his salutation was warm and cordial. He was a young man, not over five and twenty, and one of the finest looking soldiers in the guard.

"Alarie," said the gunmaker after the first friendly salutations had passed, "I may have a meeting with Conrad, Count Damonoff. He has sought a quarrel—insulted me most grossly—aimed a blow at my head and I knocked him down. You can judge as well as I what the result must be."

"Most assuredly he will challenge you!" cried the officer excitedly.

"So I think," resumed Ruric calmly. "And, now, will you serve me in the event?"

"With pleasure."

"I may refer his messenger to you?"

"Yes, surely. And how shall I act? What will you do?"

"Knock him down again under the same provocation."

"I understand. You wish to retract nothing?"

"No. Listen; I will tell you all since I seek your aid."

And thereupon Ruric related all that had occurred at the time of the count's visit to his shop.

"Good," uttered Alarie as the gunmaker finished. "He must challenge you, and then you'll punish him. He's too proud now. He can handle some of his hlytops who associate with him, and perhaps he thinks he can do the same when he comes out among the harder men. But never mind, I will be punctual and faithful."

Ruric reached home just as his mother was placing the board for dinner. He often went away on business, and she thought not of asking him any questions.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE CHALLENGE.

In the afternoon Ruric retired to his shop, where he went at work upon a gun which had been ordered some days before. As yet he had said nothing to Paul concerning the affair of the day before since his return from the Kremlin. He asked him now, however, if any one had called.

"Only the monk," returned Paul, without seeming to consider that there was anything very important in the visit.

"Do you mean the black monk—Vladimir?" asked the young man, starting.

"Yes, my master. He called here about the middle of the forenoon. He wanted one of the small daggers with the pearl haft."

"And did you let him have one?"

"Certainly. He paid me 4 ducats for it and would have paid more had I been willing to take it."

"And did he make any conversation?"

"Yes. He asked me why the Count Damonoff came here yesterday."

"Ha! How did he know of their visit?"

"He was waiting at the inn for a sledge when he overheard the count and his companion conversing upon the subject."

"And did he ask you any questions touching the particulars?"

"Yes—many."

"And how answered you?"

"I told him the whole story, from beginning to end. I found that he knew something of their purpose

from what he accidentally overheard, and, rather than have him go away full of surmises, I told him all."

"Of the message too?"

"Yes, my master. I told him all that happened, from the showing of the paper which the duke had drawn up to the departure of the angry man."

"And what did the monk say?"

Ruric asked very earnestly.

"Why, he said he knew the count and that he was a proud, reckless fellow and worth but little to society; that was all. He did not seem to care much about it anyway; only he said he should have done just as you did and that every law of justice would bear you out. He had more curiosity than interest, though I am sure all his sympathies are with you."

"Very well," returned Ruric. "It can matter but little what the monk thinks about it, though I would rather have him know the truth if he must know anything, for I would not be misunderstood."

"He understands it all now, my master, and I trust you are not offended at the liberty I took in telling him."

"Not at all, Paul; not at all."

Here the conversation dropped, and the work was resumed in silence. It was past 3 o'clock when Ruric's mother came and informed him that a gentleman in the house would speak with him.

"Is it Stephen Urzen?" asked the youth.

His mother said it was.

"Then bid him come out here."

Claudia retired, and in a few moments more the gentleman made his appearance.

"Ruric Nevel," he said, bringing very stiffly and haughtily, "I bring a message from the Count Damonoff."

"Very well, sir," returned the gunmaker proudly. "I am ready to receive it."

Thereupon Urzen drew a sealed note from his pocket and handed it to Ruric, who took it and broke the seal. He opened it and read as follows:

Ruric Nevel! An insult of the most aggravating nature has for the time leveled all distinctions of caste between us. Your blood alone can wash out the stain. I would not murder you outright, and in no other way but this can I reach you. My friend, the bearer of this, will make all arrangements. If you dare not meet me, say so, that all may know who is the coward. Damonoff.

When Ruric had read the missive, he crushed it in his hand and gazed its bearer some moments in the face without speaking.

"Will you answer?" asked Urzen.

He spoke more softly than before, for he saw something in the gunmaker's face which he dared not provoke.

"Are you acquainted with Alarie Orsa, a lieutenant of the guard?"

"Yes, sir; I know him well."

"Then let me refer you to him. He will make all necessary arrangements, and I shall hold myself bound by his plans. I trust that is satisfactory."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you and I need have no more to say."

"Only on one point," said Urzen, with some little show of confusion. "You are the challenged party, and you will have the choice of weapons. The count has not mentioned this—mind you, he has not, but I as his friend deem it no more than right to speak of it—I trust you will choose a gentleman's weapon. In the use of the pistol or the gun he is not versed."

"While you imagine I am," said Ruric, with a contemptuous curl of the lip, for he knew that the man was lying. He could see by the fellow's very looks that Damonoff had commissioned him to broach this matter.

## [TO BE CONTINUED.]

### LORD OF ALL.

Lord of all, to thee we raise  
Hearts of joy and songs of praise;  
All thy gifts we thankful own,  
Bending round thy awful throne.  
  
Spacious heaven and earth and sea  
Turn our serious thoughts to thee;  
All declare thy boundless might,  
Bailing all by day and night.  
  
Guard our varied path of life;  
Cheer its gloom, subdue its strife;  
Chase each tempting foe away,  
Seeinging fair to betray.  
  
Let thy grace be ever near;  
Fill our souls with holy fear;  
Make us know thy saving love,  
Then to rise and rest above.