

The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

[CONTINUED.]

Thus speaking, Ruric went to his desk, and upon the bottom of the missive he had received from the count he wrote:

Dear Alaric—I send this to you by the same hand that bore it to me, and you are hereby empowered to act for me as you may deem proper. I shall be governed strictly by your arrangements.

Having written this, he showed it to Urzen and asked him if he would bear it to the lieutenant. An affirmative reply was given, and then, simply folding the note in the opposite way from the original fold, the gunmaker superscribed it anew to the lieutenant and handed it to his visitor. Urzen took it, and, with a stiff bow, but without speaking, he turned and left the place.

That evening about 8 o'clock a sledge drove up to Ruric's door, and Alaric Orsa entered the house. He called the youth aside and informed him that the arrangements had all been made.

"Damonoff is in a hurry," he said, "and we have appointed the meeting at 10 o'clock tomorrow forenoon. It will take place at the bend of the river just beyond the Vaska hill."

"And the weapons?" asked Ruric. "Swords," returned Orsa. "The count will bring his own, and he gives you the privilege of selecting such a one as you choose."

"I thank you, Alaric, for your kindness thus far, and you may rest assured that I shall be prompt."

"Suppose I call here in the morning for you?" suggested the visitor.

"I should be pleased to have you do so."

"I will, then. I shall be along in good season with my sledge, and we will both reach the ground together."

Thus it was arranged, and then Orsa took his leave.

When Ruric returned to his seat by the fireplace, he noticed that his mother watched him narrowly and with more than ordinary interest. He had once made up his mind that he would say nothing to his mother about the affair until it was over, but as the time was set and the hour drew nigh his mind wavered. When it was over, where might he be? But he was cut short in his reflections by the voice of his parent.

"Ruric," she said, and her voice trembled while she spoke, "you will pardon me for prying into your affairs, but I cannot hide from myself that something of more than usual moment is the matter with you. Why are these men calling to and fro? And why are you so thoughtful and moody? You know a mother's feelings, and you will pardon a mother's anxiety."

"Surely, my mother," the youth returned, gazing up for a moment and then letting his eyes droop again. At length he resumed, "I had made up my mind to tell you all ere you spoke."

There was something deep and significant in Ruric's tone, and his mother quickly caught the spark.

"What is it?" she tremulously uttered, moving her chair nearer to her child's side.

"Listen," the young man said. And thereupon he detailed the circumstances attending the visit of the Count Damonoff to his shop. Then he told of his own visit to Rosalind and its result and then of the visit of Stephen Urzen.

"And now, my mother," he added without waiting for any reply, "you know it all. You see how I am situated. Remember, our nation has reached its present point by successful war. The soul of the nation is built upon military honor, and since our noble emperor has opened the way of advancement of the lowest of his subjects who are brave and true the coward is looked upon with disgust upon all hands. Yet, my mother, I would have you speak."

For some moments Claudia Nevel was silent. But at length she said, while a tear glistened in her eye:

"I have given one loved being up to my country's good. Russia took my husband from me, and I could ill afford now to lose my son. Yet rather than one stain should rest upon his name I would see him dead before me. Oh, Ruric, you know whether dishonor would rest upon you were you to refuse this challenge."

"I will speak plainly, my dear mother," returned the youth in a tremulous tone, for his parent's kindness had moved him. "In my heart I should feel perfectly justified in refusing this meeting for no

But were I to back out now from this I should never meet another generous look in Moscow. Every one would point the finger of scorn toward me, and the word coward would ring always in my ears. It may be a false state of things—I feel that it really is so—but how can I help it? It is the curse of all great military epochs. Battle alone makes heroes, and so all must measure their honor by the force of their arms. The count carries even now upon his brow the mark of my blow, and all will say he has a right to demand satisfaction, though I know that he provoked the quarrel on purpose. I cannot refuse him on the ground of station, for he is above me in that. I must meet him."

"Then," said the mother in a low, calm tone, but with much effort, "you shall not feel that your mother would thwart your design. If your own good judgment says so, then go. If they bring your body to me in the stern grasp of death, I shall pray for the soul that has gone and shall hope to meet you in the home of the redeemed. If you come back to me alive, I shall thank God that you are spared. But, alas, the joy will be clouded with the thought of blood upon your hands and the knowledge that my joy is another's grief."

"No, no, my mother," cried Ruric quickly and earnestly. "I will not have a fellow being's blood upon my hand if I can avoid it. Only to save my own life will I take his. He has done all this himself—all, all. The quarrel was his own, and the first blow was his. The challenge is his, and now is not the responsibility his also?"

"It is, my son, so far as he alone is concerned. If you have a responsibility, it must be to your own soul. But tell me, has not the emperor made some new law touching this practice of dueling?"

"Yes, but only the challenger is responsible. The party challenged is held free from blame in the eyes of the law."

"Then I shall interpose no more objections," said the mother. She tried to speak hopefully, but she could not hide the fearful sadness of her heart. "Could fervent prayer avert the blow it should not fall, but I can only pray as one without power."

A long time after this was passed in silence. Both the mother and son seemed to have something upon their minds which they wished to say, but dared not. But the former at length overcame her reluctance.

"Ruric, my son," she said, keeping back the tears that struggled for utterance in their silent speech, "is there any little word you would leave—any matter of moment?"

"No, no," the boy answered, speaking calmly by effort. "I am yours, and all is yours. But I shall not fall."

"Ah, be not too confident, my son. Let no such assurance lead you to forget your God. I have heard of this count. It was he who slew Rutger, and Momjako, too, he slew in the duel. He is an expert swordsman and surely means to kill you if he can."

"I am aware of that, my mother. But do you know that we are all prone to overlook our own powers when pondering upon the feats of others? I may be pardoned for assuring you that the only man who has ever yet overcome the count at the sword play was one of my own scholars. While in Spain I practiced with some of the best swordsmen in the kingdom. But, listen, I will send one word. For yourself I can tell you nothing which you do not know. But yet you may see Rosalind. If you do, tell her—But you know my soul. You can tell her as you please. But I shall not fall."

It was now late, and ere long Ruric kissed his mother and then retired to his bed.

And the widow was left alone. With her eyes she followed the retreating form of her beloved son, and when he was gone from her sight she bowed her head and sobbed aloud. When she reached her humble couch, she knelt by the side thereof and poured forth her pent up soul to God. When her head had pressed the pillow, she tried to hope, she tried to fasten one hope in her mind, but she looked only into the night. Not one ray of light reached her struggling soul. She opened her eyes of promise in vain, for she looked into a gloom so utter that out of its depths loomed only the blackness of despair.

Sleep on, Ruric. But oh, couldst

thou know how thy fond mother's heart is racked there'd be no sleep for thee!

CHAPTER V. THE DUEL.

On the following morning Ruric was up betimes, and at the breakfast table not a word of the one all absorbing theme was uttered. After the meal was finished the gunmaker went out to his shop and took down from one of the closets a long leathern case in which were two swords, both of the same make and finish, only different in size. They were Toledo blades and of most exquisite workmanship and finish. Ruric took out the heavier one, which was a two edged weapon with a cross hillock of heavily gilded metal. He placed the point upon the floor, and then, with all his might, he bent the blade till the pommel touched the point. The little steel sprang back to its place with a sharp clang, and the texture was not started. Then he struck the flat of the blade upon the anvil with great force. The ring was sharp and clear, and the weapon remained unharmed.

"By St. Michael, Paul, Moscow does not contain another blade like that. Damascus never saw a better."

Thus spoke the gunmaker to his boy as he balanced the beautiful weapon in his hand.

"I think you are right, my master," the boy returned, who had beheld the trial of the blade with unbounded admiration. "But," he added, "could you not temper a blade like that?"

"Perhaps if I had the steel. But I have not. The steel of these two blades came from India and was originally in one weapon, a ponderous two handed affair belonging to a Bengal chieftain. The metal possesses all the hardness of the finest razor, with the elasticity of the most subtle spring. My old master at Toledo gave me these as a memento. Were I to mention the sum of money he was once offered for the largest one you would hardly credit it."

"How much?" asked Paul, with a boy's curiosity.

"It was a sum equal to about 700 ducats."

"And yet he gave it away?"

"Aye, for its price was but imaginary, while its worth to him was only commensurate with the good it did him. If he told the truth, he loved me, and these he gave me as a parting gift as the best patterns I could wish for when making such."

After this Ruric put up the small sword, and then he gave Paul a few directions about the work, promising to be back before night. The faithful boy shook his head dubiously as he heard this promise, but he said nothing, and shortly afterward Ruric went into the house. Just then Alaric Orsa drove up to the door.

Ruric was all ready but putting on his bonnet and pelisse. His mother was in the kitchen. He went to her with a smile upon his face. He put his arms about her and drew her to his bosom.

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back." He said this and then kissed her.

"God keep—and—"

It was all she could say.

Ruric gazed a moment into her face, then he kissed her again, and again he said:

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back."

He dared not stop to speak more. Gently seating his fond mother upon a chair, he turned and hurried from the place. In the hall he threw on his pelisse and bonnet, and then he opened the door and passed out.

"Have you a good weapon?" asked Orsa as the horse started on.

"I have a fair one. I think it will not deceive me," returned Ruric.

"I asked," continued Orsa, "because Damonoff prides himself upon the weapon he wears. It is a German blade, and he thinks he can cut in twain the blade of any other weapon in Moscow with it."

"I have a good weapon," Ruric said quietly, "and one which has stood more tests than most swords will bear." And after some further remarks he related the peculiar circumstances attending the making of the sword and his possession of it.

At length they struck upon the river, and in half an hour more they reached the appointed spot. The day was beautiful. The sun shone brightly upon the glistening snow, and the air was still and calm. The sharp frost of the atmosphere served only to brace the system up, and Ruric threw open his pelisse that he might breathe more freely. He had been upon the ground but a few minutes when the other party came in sight around the head of the river.

As soon as the count and his second arrived and the horses had been secured the lieutenant proposed that they should repair to the building which was close at hand. This was a large open boathouse which was unused and deserted in the winter, and it was proposed to go in there

because the reflection of the strong sunlight from the bright snow was calculated to blind and blur the eye. "Ha! What means that?" uttered Orsa as he saw a sledge just turning the bend of the river with an officer in it.

"It is only a surgeon," replied Damonoff. "I would not cut a man's flesh without giving him a fair chance to survive it."

"And then you may find him serviceable to yourself, eh?" suggested the lieutenant.

"Of course. There is no telling what may happen."

In a moment more the new sledge came up, and Ruric recognized its inmate as an army surgeon whom he had seen before, though he knew not his name.

"Now for the old boathouse," cried Urzen.

"Aye," added Damonoff. "Let us have this business done, for I would be back to dinner. I dine with Olga today, and a fair maiden awaits my coming."

"Notice him not," whispered Orsa, who walked close by Ruric's side. "That is one of his chief points when engaged in an affair of this kind. He hopes to get you angry and so unhinge your nerves."

"Never fear," returned the gunmaker. "Be sure he only brings new danger to himself, for such efforts will find their point in the muscle of my arm."

The party halted when they reached the interior of the rough structure, and the count threw off his pelisse and drew his sword. Ruric followed his example.

"Sir count," the latter said as he moved a step forward, "ere we commence this work I wish all present to understand distinctly how I stand. You have sought this quarrel from the first. Without the least provocation from me you have insulted me most grossly, and this is the climax. So, before God and man, be the result upon your own head."

"Out, lying knave!"

"Hold," cried the surgeon, laying his hand heavily upon the count's arm. "You have no right to speak thus, for you lower yourself when you do it. If you have come to fight, do so honorably."

An angry reply was upon Damonoff's lips, but he did not speak it. He turned to his antagonist and said:

"Will you measure weapons, sir? Mine may be a mite the longest. I seek no advantage, and I have one here of the same length and weight as my own. You wish it?"

"I am well satisfied as it is," replied Ruric.

"Then take your ground. Are you ready?"

"I am!"

The two swords were crossed in an instant, with a clear, sharp clang.

There was some contrast between the two combatants, but not much apparently. The count was a little taller, and Ruric was somewhat heavier. But to a close observer there was a peculiar contrast in the bearing of the two men. That breast swelling out so nobly and those massive shoulders, made for the seat of physical power, were Ruric's alone to possess. Yet Conrad Damonoff was accounted a strong man. In the athletic sports of the court club he had few superiors and not many equals. But Ruric Nevel had never shown his strength there.

Now, for the first time, that contemptuous look passed from the count's face. As his eye caught his antagonist's position, as he noticed the calm, dignified, quiet ease of every limb and as he caught the deep, mystic fire of those expressive eyes he knew that he had no common amateur to deal with.

At length Conrad Damonoff started back, and a quick cry escaped his lips. His antagonist's point had touched his bosom. It had pressed against his heart and had not been driven home. Well he knew that his life was his no longer, for the gunmaker had gained it and spared it.

"You fence well," he gasped, struggling to regain his composure.

"You are not a novice," returned Ruric calmly, at the same time allowing his point to drop.

"Come on," the count uttered, now gathering all his energies for another effort.

And again the weapons were crossed. This time Damonoff was more guarded. Before he had been impelled by his own assurance, but now he was forced to regard his opponent's power. Ruric quickly found that the other was more careful than at first, and he carried his own point accordingly. At the twelfth stroke the count made a feint to the left, then at the throat, and then, with a quick, lightning-like motion, he brought his point to his antagonist's heart. But his meaning had been read from the first by Ruric. The youth caught the motion of the eye, and he saw that his heart was the place looked to. His own movement was almost instinctive. He received his antagonist's sword midway upon his own blade, then moved his arm quickly forward and caught the point under

his cross guard; then, with all his power, he wrenched his arm upward and backward, and the count's sword went flying across the building. It struck the opposite wall with a dull clang, and the next instant it was half buried in the snow.

"Fear not, sir," said Ruric as the count started back, with both hands raised. "I never strike an unarmed man."

Damonoff's arms fell to his side, and a deep blush of shame mantled his face.

"By St. Paul," cried the surgeon, "your life is forfeited, sir count, and now you should be satisfied."

"No, no," the discomfited man exclaimed, starting up with rage and mortification. "That was but a slip. 'Twas a false step, a cowardly feint. I am not overcome."

"But, man of mortality, even now your life is Nevel's. He may run you through now if he chooses."

"But he has not," the count cried, springing to where his sword had fallen and snatching it up.

"Sir count," here spoke Ruric calmly, but with marked contempt, "you should not blame me for what I have done, for thrice have you tried to break my sword."

"Then try it again!" Damonoff returned. "Take my sword again if you can."

"Perhaps not," our hero retorted. "But be sure your sword shall be used no more after this day."

"Ha! Brag not, but strike. If you can—"

The conclusion of the sentence was drowned by the clash of steel.

At the second stroke the count made another furious thrust at his antagonist's heart. Ruric sprang quickly aside, and with the whole power of his good right arm he struck Damonoff's blade close to the haft and broke it in twain.

"My other sword, my other sword!" the count shouted, now blinded by absolute madness. "Oh, give me my other—"

"Hold!" cried both the surgeon and Stephen Urzen in concert. "You are mad, Conrad."

"Mad? Oh, I shall be mad! Where is my sword?" the reckless man yelled, casting the bladeless pommel down.

"But will you not listen one?"

"Away, I say! Shall I give up because my sword is broken? By the gods, the weapon deceived me. Where is the other?"

"Deceived thee, Conrad?" repeated the surgeon sarcastically. "By the Holy Ghost, had thy head but received a hundredth part of the blow 'twould not be upon thy shoulders now!"

But the count was beyond all reason. In his madness he saw not that his sword had been broken on purpose. He did not see that he had been at his antagonist's mercy. But his friends saw it all.

"Ha! Whom have we here?" cried Alaric, whose eye had caught a dark form at the entrance of the old building.

It was Vladimir, the monk.

"How now? What seek ye here?" asked Urzen as the fat, burly monk waddled toward the party.

"I heard the clash of arms, my son, as I rode by, and I stopped to see what it was. Surely where the work of death is going on a child of the holy church of God may come."

"Aye," cried the count. "Come in and welcome, but meddle not. Now, my sword, where is it?"

Reluctantly Urzen brought forward the second sword, but ere he gave it up he said:

"Beware, Conrad. You had better—"

"Peace, babbler!" the excited fool hissed, snatching the weapon and then turning quickly upon the gunmaker.

Thus far Ruric had remained silent, but he felt it his duty to speak now.

"Sir count," he said in a tone so stern and authoritative and with a look so commanding that the other was held in abeyance by it, "I must speak one word. You have provoked a quarrel with me, and you have challenged me. I have no fear of death when duty calls for my life, but I would not die thus, nor would I slay a fellow being thus. Six separate times today since our swords first crossed have I spared your life."

"Liar!"

"—and twice have I had you before me unarmed," Ruric continued without noticing the interruption. "I had hoped this would have shown you that I sought not harm to you and, furthermore, that you were no match for me at this kind of work."

"Out, fool!" yelled Damonoff, now fairly frothing with rage. "If you dare not cross swords again, say so, but do not crawl off like a coward!"

"One word more," uttered Ruric, paling for an instant beneath the unmerciful insult of the senseless tongue that assailed him, and he stood proudly erect while he spoke, "before these men here assembled, and before God I swear that thus far I have spared you, but my own life may be the forfeit if I trifle with you more. So now beware. You

have sufficient warning."

Perhaps the count really overlooked the facts of which Ruric had spoken. In his ungovernable rage he may have fancied that 'twas only accident that had worked against him. However, he started forward once more and made a furious lunge at his antagonist.

"Now," he gasped, "play your best, for my sword's my own."

But Ruric spoke not. He saw that the count was stronger than before—for his rage seemed to give him a maniac's power—and that he was earnest only for life or death. He struck quickly and furiously, and his movements were strange and unprecedented. He threw up all rules of exercise and cut and thrust only in wild madness. Twice Ruric came nigh being run through. He lost all run of his opponent's play and quickly saw that he must put a stop to the conflict or run the risk of leaving a childless mother in his home to see that day's sun sink.

"Will you give over?" he asked as he struck the count's point down.

"Never! Submit to such as you? Bah!"

A few moments more the conflict lasted. One more opportunity he had at Damonoff's heart, and he spared him. All present saw it save the madman.

"Fool!" uttered the monk, who trembled from head to foot with excitement, his huge belly shaking like a bag of jelly. "Will you throw away your own life, Ruric Nevel? Shall I tell your mother you left her of your own will?"

This mention of his mother called the last lingering doubt from Ruric's mind. Again he struck the opposing point down, and then he pressed his own point upon the count's bosom. He avoided the heart—he tried to avoid the vitals—but he threw his arm forward, and his glittering blade passed through the fool's body. With an expression of pain upon his features he started back and rested his reeking point upon the trodden snow. The count came furiously on again, but he struck wildly and at random, Ruric merely warding off his blows, until finally his arm sank. On the next moment his sword fell from his nerveless grasp, and he sank, fainting, back into the arms of his attendants.

CHAPTER VI.

BEFORE THE EMPEROR.

"Is he dead?" asked Ruric, starting quickly forward.

"Hold, my son," uttered the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm. "Surely you have nothing to fear. It was none of your work, no more than if you had run your sword to the heart of a wild beast that had attacked you."

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth. "I was careful of that. I would have struck him upon the head with the flat of my sword, but I feared I might break his skull."

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time. "He has only fainted from the shock of the blow, coupled with his own fears and passions."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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