

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

(CONTINUED.)

"But will he die?" Ruric asked, kneeling down by the fallen man's side.

"I cannot yet tell," the doctor said, at the same time wiping the blood away, which was flowing freely.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk. "This is the best time, for the place is not yet inflamed, and while he is thus insensible he will be free from pain."

The surgeon at once saw the truth and propriety of this, and he proceeded to act upon the suggestion. Having selected a probe which appeared applicable, he examined the wound. Ruric watched him eagerly and with a painful expression.

"I do not think this wound is mortal," the surgeon reported as he carefully felt his way along the course the steel had taken. "It has passed below the right lung and only severed some of the smaller blood vessels. I think, with proper care, he may recover."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Ruric, with his hands clasped.

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen. "You were ready enough to accept his challenge."

"Aye, else you would have called me coward," returned the gunmaker, with a flashing eye. "Had I refused to meet him that fatal wound would have met me at every turn. I knew that such a man as he was no scope for me at any game where strength of arm and sleight of hand were required. So I meant to disarm him and then give him up his life, believing that such a move would end the combat. You know how I labored to spare him. But I could not. Yet I would not have the life of a fellow being, a countryman, upon my hands in such a quarrel. My father died fighting for his country, and so would I die if my death must come from the hand of man. But to die thus would be a curse upon my name, and to inflict such death upon another would be a curse in my memory."

"I believe you, my son," the monk said. "Only if the count dies you should not allow such feelings as you mention to overcome you. In no way are you to blame for this."

"True, father. You speak truly," added the surgeon. "The young man has acted most nobly, and no blame can be attached to him."

Ruric seemed somewhat relieved by these assurances, and, having seen the count's wound dressed and assisted in bearing the insensible form to the sledge, he took Alaric's proffered arm and proceeded to his own team.

"Who is that monk?" asked the lieutenant as they entered their sledge.

"I only know that he is called Vladimir," returned Ruric. "I have only seen him once before. Have you ever seen him ere this?"

"Yes; several times about our barracks. He has been there when some of our poor fellows have been sick and dying. He seems to be a good hearted man and, I judge, quite intelligent."

"I agree with you there," our hero said. "I think he is a good man, but there is nevertheless a mystery about him which I cannot solve. His countenance is familiar to me, and yet I cannot tell where nor when I have seen him."

"Aye," added Alaric quickly and eagerly; "that is precisely the case with me. I am very sure that I have seen that man under different circumstances. And others of our company have thought the same."

The two men watched the movements of the monk while they thus spoke, and they noticed that he entered his sledge and drove off toward Borodino.

"Ruric," said the lieutenant after they had ridden some little distance and at the same time gazing wonderingly into his companion's face, "you handle the sword like a magician. By my soul, I'd give all I own at this present moment, my commission and all, if I could handle the sword as you can."

"I do understand the weapon passing well," returned the youth modestly, "but I have worked hard to gain the science."

"Ah, 'tis not all science," the officer added. "That wondrous strength of yours is a host in itself."

"And yet," said Ruric, "I have seen weaker men than myself who could overcome me easily or, at least, who were not in this city."

"True, Alaric. I am not in the habit of mentioning my own powers, but yet I may say that there is no man in Moscow who is my superior in the use of any sort of offensive arms."

The lieutenant readily admitted the truth of this, and then the conversation turned upon the subject of the count and the course he had pursued with respect to the event which had just transpired. This conversation lasted until they reached the door of Ruric's residence, and, having thanked his friend for his kindness and expressed the hope that at some time he might have

opportunity to return some adequate favor, the gunmaker entered the house.

The widow sat in her great chair by the fire. She was pale and anxious. Her brow was supported by her hands, and at every sound from without she would start up with a frightened expression and listen. At length the sound of bells struck upon her ear. They came nearer and nearer, and they stopped at her door. She would have arisen, but she could not. With her hands clasped she bent eagerly forward and listened with a frantic interest.

Soon the door opened. Surely no one but he would enter without knocking. She started to her feet. The inner door opened. A male form stood before her.

"Mother!"

"Ruric! My boy! Safe?" She tottered forward and sank upon the bosom of her noble son, and while she wound her arms tightly about him she murmured her thanks to God.

By and by the widow became more calm, but still there was an earnest, eager look of fear upon her face. Ruric saw it, and he knew well what it meant.

"Mother," he said, "the count is not dead."

"Nor wounded?" she uttered quickly and eagerly.

"Yes; badly. But, listen, I could not help it." And thereupon he related all the circumstances connected with the combat. When he had concluded, his mother pondered a few moments, and then she said:

"Surely, my son, I will try to suffer nothing from this, even should the wicked man die. In all you acted upon the defensive. From the first he has only been intent on attacking you, and on the battlefield he would have killed you if he could."

"Most surely he would, mother. Aye, he would not have hesitated to stab me in the back could he have gained the opportunity. He was mad beyond all self control, and his eagerness to kill me was only equalled by his chagrin at being overcome by one whom he had hoped easily to conquer."

After this Ruric went to his shop, but Paul manifested no great emotion upon beholding him.

"You seem to take it as a matter of course that I should return alive and well," said the gunmaker, with a smile.

"Why, of course," returned the boy composedly. "What would a score of such men as he be to you? Conrad Damonoff told a sword before Ruric Nevel? No. I only smiled when I heard his challenge. I should have as soon thought of being anxious about your return from a marten hunt."

Ruric smiled at his boy's peculiar eagerness of expression, but he felt a degree of pride in his words nevertheless.

It was toward the latter part of the afternoon that Ruric was somewhat startled by seeing some of the imperial guard approaching his house, and ere long afterward his mother came to him, pale and trembling, and informed him that he was wanted by the emperor's officers.

"Oh," she groaned, with clasped hands and tearful eyes, "they will take you from me now!"

"Fear not, my mother," the youth confidently returned. "The emperor will not blame me when he knows all the particulars. But come, let us go in."

Ruric found the officers, three of them, in the kitchen, and he asked them if they sought him.

"We seek Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker," replied the leader.

"I am the man, sir. May I know what is wanted?"

"And who wants me?"

"Who should want you but the emperor?"

"Oh, they will not take my noble boy from me!" cried Claudia, catching the officer by the arm. "Tell our good emperor that Russia has taken my husband from me; that he fell in his country's cause. Tell him my boy was not to blame."

"Hush, mother," interposed Ruric. "Fear not yet."

"Come," said the leader. "It is growing late, and Peter will not brook delay."

"But they will not harm him!" the mother frantically cried, clinging now to her son.

"No, no, my mother. Rest you easy here until I return." And then, turning to the guard, he added, "Lead on, and I will follow."

"Now rest you easy, my dear mother." And with these words Ruric gently set her back into her chair and then hastened out after the officers. In the entry he put on his bonnet and pelisse and then followed his conductors out to the street, where stood a double sledge, with two horses attached.

"You seem to look upon the killing of a Russian nobleman as a very small affair," said one of the officers after they had started on their way.

"Is he dead, then?" Ruric quickly asked.

"The doctors think his case a critical one. But that is not the thing you would have killed him if you could."

"No, no. By heavens, 'tis not so! All who were present will swear that I tried to spare him."

"Very well," returned the officer. "We shall see about that when we come to the palace. Perhaps you may go clear; but, upon my soul, I would not willingly occupy your place."

Ruric cared not to argue the point with those who knew nothing about the circumstances, so he remained silent during the rest of the ride. It was near sundown when they reached the imperial palace, and Ruric was conducted at once into the emperor's presence.

The Emperor Peter was in one of the smaller audience chambers, sitting at a large table covered with purple velvet heavily wrought with gold, and upon either hand stood some of his private attendants. He was a young man, not yet so old as Ruric by some three years, but his face already wore a mature look. His frame was solid, but not large, being rather slight than otherwise in physical bulk. His dress betrayed negligence and carelessness and was in marked contrast with the rich garbs of his attendants. Such was Peter of Russia, yet a youth, small in frame and careless of those graces which go to make up the sum of court life, but still able to bear the affairs of a great nation upon his shoulders. Within that head worked a mighty brain, and in that bosom beat a heart thirsting more for the good of Russia than for self or kindred.

Ruric saw Stephen Urzen and the surgeon there, and he also saw the Duke of Tula there. He met the duke's eye, and a peculiar sensation of fear ran through his mind as he saw the stern, threatening expression that rested upon Olga's face.

"Sire," spoke the leader of those who had conducted the prisoner thither, "Ruric Nevel stands before you."

"Ah," uttered Peter, casting his eagle eye over the forms before him. "Nevel, advance."

With a bold yet modest step Ruric advanced to the table, and, with a low bow, he awaited the emperor's pleasure. There was a shudder perceptible in the frames of those who wished the prisoner well, for well they knew their mighty ruler's iron will and sternness of legal purpose.

## CHAPTER VII. A STARTLING TRIAL.

In order to understand the circumstances under which Ruric was brought before the emperor it will be necessary to go back a few hours. The autocrat had occasion to send for the surgeon, Kopani, who had attended at the duel, and as he was some time in answering the summons he was questioned when he did come concerning his tardiness. His answer was that he had been attending the Count Damonoff.

"And what ails the count?" asked the emperor. "He was well yesterday."

"Yes, but he met with an accident today."

"Look ye, Kopani," the young ruler cried, who saw in an instant that something unusual had happened, "think not to conceal anything from me. What is it, now?"

"Sire, I meant not to hide anything from you. The count has been engaged in a duel."

"Hah! Was he challenged?"

"No, sire. He was the challenger."

last war with the Turks. He rose from the ranks under Feodor and was one of the bravest of the brave."

"Captain Nevel. Ah, yes. I remember now. He and Valдай were the two who first mounted the ramparts at Izium. So the old dispatches read."

"Yes, sire. Poor Nevel was shot a month afterward while leading his brave company against a whole squadron of Turkish infantry, while Valдай came home and got a colonel's commission."

"And afterward received a title," added Peter.

"Yes, sire."

"And this gunmaker is this captain's son?"

"Yes, sire."

"And methinks Valдай left a child?"

"He did, sire; a daughter, who is now with Olga. She is his ward."

"Yes, yes. And the count fought a duel with young Nevel and got beaten, eh?"

Before the surgeon could answer a page entered the chamber and announced that the Duke of Tula wished to see his imperial master.

The emperor directed that he should be admitted, and ere long afterward the proud duke entered the apartment. He was a tall, stout man, with light hair and blue eyes, and not far from five and forty years of age. His bearing was haughty, though he was forced to a show of respect now that he was before his master.

"Sire," spoke the duke after the usual salutations had passed, "I have come to demand justice at thy hands. My young friend the Count Conrad Damonoff has been most brutally murdered."

"Hah! Say ye so, Olga?"

"Yes, sire."

"But how was it?"

"Thus it was, sire. On the day before yesterday I sent the count with a message to one Ruric Nevel, who is a gunmaker in Sookol. He went as I wished, and while there the gunmaker, who is a huge fellow, provoked a quarrel and knocked the nobleman down. Of course the count was offended, and as the ruffian threatened to repeat the offense and as he furthermore grossly insulted a noble lady whom the count held most dear he could hardly help challenging him. The fellow accepted the challenge and has succeeded by the most cowardly maneuvering in inflicting upon him a mortal wound."

"This is a serious affair," said the emperor, who had not failed to note the astonished look of the surgeon while the duke was telling his story.

"It is most serious, sire, and surely the ruffian should be at once executed."

"But did you not say that the count challenged him?"

"I did, sire, but you must remember that it was an instinct of self preservation with the noble count. The fellow would have undoubtedly murdered him had he not taken this course."

"Were you present at the duel, my lord?"

"No, sire, but I have a friend without who was present."

"Then you may bring him in."

The duke departed, and when he returned Stephen Urzen bore him company.

"This is the man, sire," Olga said as he led his companion forward.

The emperor gazed upon Urzen a few moments in silence and then said:

"You were present at this duel, were you not, sir?"

"I was, sire," the man answered, bowing low.

"And he was at their first meeting also, sire," interposed the duke.

"Thus bidden Urzen resumed:

"The noble count was desirous, sire, that I should accompany him, and I did so. Upon reaching the man's shop we found him at work upon a gunlock, I think. He received the note, but refused to sign it. The count urged him to sign in mild, persuasive language until the fellow became insolent. Then he used some stronger terms, and I think he made some threat of what he would do if his insults to the lady were repeated, and thereupon the gunmaker struck him a furious blow in the face and knocked him down. I cannot remember all the threatening language which the fellow used, but it was fearful."

"And how about the duel?" asked the emperor.

In answer to this Urzen went on and related what he had prepared on the subject, and it need only be said that the report was about on a par with what we have already heard. He even went so far as to swear that the count had tried repeatedly to compromise matters after the conflict had begun, that he begged of Nevel to give up the battle, but that the latter, thirsting for the young nobleman's blood, kept hotly, madly at it.

It was at this juncture and without referring to the surgeon that the emperor sent for Ruric, and, having learned that a lieutenant of the Khitigorod guard was present at the duel, he sent for him also. Orsa arrived first and was present when Ruric came.

And now Ruric Nevel stood before his emperor. Peter gazed upon him for some moments, and then he said:

"Sir, thy bearing is bold."

"Why should it not be, sire, when I stand before one whom I honor and respect and do not fear?" So spoke Ruric calmly and with peculiar dignity.

"Not fear?" repeated the autocrat sternly.

"No, sire. Peter of Russia is not a man to be feared by those who love and honor him."

"Insolence!" uttered the duke.

The emperor looked up into his face, and he added:

"Now, sire, you can see for yourself some of his traits of character."

"Aye," returned Peter. "I see. They are wonderful. I knew not that among my artisans there were men of such boldness."

The duke knew not how to interpret this, and he moved back a pace.

"Now, sir," resumed Peter, turning to the gunmaker, "how dared you strike a Russian nobleman?"

"I did not, sire. Conrad Damonoff came to my shop, and he brought me a paper in which I was required or ordered to relinquish all claims to the hand of—"

"Sire," interposed the duke, "he mistates."

"Never mind," broke in the emperor, with an authoritative wave of the hand, "we will hear nothing about the lady here. Why did you strike the count?"

"Because, sire, he descended from his station and struck me. He threw away the shield which should protect the nobleman and struck me without provocation."

"And then you knocked him down?"

"I did, sire."

"And perhaps you would have done the same to me."

"Sire," answered the youth quickly, "when Damonoff tried by threats to make me sign his paper I told him there was but one man on earth at whose order I would do that thing. The man who has the right to command shall never have occasion to strike me."

There was something in this reply and more in the tone and bearing of him who spoke it that made the duke tremble. He saw plainly that the emperor's eyes sparkled with admiration as they rested upon the gunmaker.

"But now about this duel," resumed the emperor. "How dared you take advantage of the count in the conflict?"

"Advantage, sire?" repeated the youth in surprise.

"Aye. Did he not, Stephen Urzen?"

"He did, sire," replied the man thus addressed.

"And which of the two do you call the best swordsman?" Peter asked.

"What, my master at arms?"

"Yes, sire."

"Why, he is the best swordsman in my empire. I think our young adventurer would fare badly in his hands."

"Never mind, sire. You could judge."

"Why," said Peter, with a smile, "Demetrius handles the count as I would a mere child."

"Sire," spoke Ruric modestly, but yet frankly, "it were surely no disgrace to be overcome by your tutor."

"And will you take a turn with him at the sword?"

"Yes, sire, if so it please you."

"By my soul," cried the emperor, leaping up, "we'll have some diversion out of this trial. What ho, there! Light up the chamber. Let every lamp be lighted, for we want sight now. Send Demetrius here and tell him to bring his round edged sword!"

Both the duke and Urzen stood aghast at this new turn, but they dared not interfere, for they saw that their imperial master was all excitement now to see a trial of skill at that science which, above all others, he tried to make his officers learn. But then they had one hope—Demetrius might overcome the gunmaker so easily that Peter should not see his real power.

Demetrius soon came, and under his arm he carried the sword. They were of the common size, but with round edges and points on purpose for play. The master at arms was a powerfully built man and possessed a splendid form. He was a Greek by birth and was now retained by the emperor as a teacher of the sword exercise.

"Demetrius," said Peter, "I have sent for you to entertain us with a show of your skill. Here is a man about whose power there is some dispute. Mind you, it is all in kindness. Ruric Nevel, take your weapon."

The youth stepped forward and extended his left hand for the sword, and the right hand he extended for the other to grasp. It was taken warmly, for the Greek saw in an instant that he had a noble man to deal with. And those two men were not much unlike in form. Demetrius was an atom the taller, but Ruric showed the more muscle.

The night had come on, but the great lamps were all lighted, and the room was as bright as day.

"Sir," said Ruric, addressing the Greek, "this is none of my seeking, though I confess that for a long while I have longed to cross a playful sword with you. I play well."

"I like you," the Greek returned bluntly and kindly, "and if you beat me I will not like you less. I can afford to be beat once, seeing that thus far I have never been since first I offered to fence."

"Come, come," cried Peter, who was impatient for the entertainment, "let's see the opening. Now, stand aside, gentlemen."

Like twins stood those swordsmen as their weapons crossed with a clear, sharp clang. The Greek led off carefully, and Ruric as carefully warded every stroke. Then the former assumed a guard, and Ruric led off in turn. Ere long the swords clashed with sharper ring, and soon sparks of fire flew out from the clanging steel. Louder and louder grew the clang, and quicker and quicker grew the strokes. The thrusts were made with skill and force, but as yet neither had been touched.

The emperor was in ecstasy. He clapped his hands and shouted bravo with all his might.

(To be continued.)

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