

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

(CONTINUED.)

"I suppose you don't want him put where he can get off and come back here."

"No. Finish him while you are about it."

"But, mind, it must be done so that in no possible way suspicion can fall upon me. You must contrive some way so that suspicion shall be led at once to some apparent point and there baffled."

"Leave me alone for that, my lord. I can call help if I want it."

"Are there not places in the city where a body can be hidden—where it may be so disposed of and never be found?" asked the duke as the thought came to his mind.

"Never mind," returned the other, with a confident nod of the head. "If I meddle with the matter, it shall be well done."

"Very well. I'll trust it with you."

For a few moments after this there was a dead silence, during which only the moaning of the wind could be heard. But at length the duke started up, and, with sudden energy, he said:

"Ah, Savotano, there is one thing I came night forgetting. You have heard of this strange monk—Vladimir his name is."

"Aye, and I have seen him too. You mean that huge lump of human fat?"

"Yes. And now tell me who and what he is. He was at the duel, and I know he has been here to my house. Who is he?"

"You've secured me there, my lord, for I can tell you no more about him than I can about the man in the moon. In short, no one seems to know him, save that he is a monk of some Roman order and named Vladimir. He has been here only a few months, as near as I can find out, and yet I think I know what his business is, or, at least, why he's here."

"Ah, you suspect?"

"Yes, and if my suspicions be correct we could have him taken care of at any moment."

"Explain."

"Why, I think he is a spy of the pope, sent here from Rome to learn something of our emperor's plans."

"But he has not visited the imperial palace."

"Oh, yes, my lord; he has been there several times, and once the emperor himself was obliged to send him out of the audience chamber."

"But have you any particular reasons for thinking him a spy from the pope?"

"Why, he is a Romish monk, and he hangs about the most important places in our city. Even the circumstance I have just related—his trying to remain in the audience chamber while private business was going on and having to be ordered out by the emperor—is some ground for suspicion. I mean to watch him at all events."

"That's right," returned the duke. And then, after a moment's thought, he added: "I do not see why he should be around after every petty duel that may be fought if he is a spy from Rome, and, besides, I have heard one or two persons say that they were sure they had seen him before."

"Oh, that may be only the result of some strong resemblance which he bears to some one else. I am sure he was never here before—not in Moscow."

Again the humpbacked priest was cautioned about the work he had in hand, and, having promised over and over again to be very careful, he took his leave.

And Olga, duke of Tula, was left alone with his own thoughts. Better for him had that wicked priest been his executioner. Better for him had he been upon the count's bed, racked with dying pains. Better for him had he been a poor gunmaker, so he had been honest. Oh, better for him had he been the meanest beggar that walked the earth than what he was! But he did not realize this. He had a goal ahead, and he tried to overlook the black, dreadful gulf that yawned between him and it.

## CHAPTER X. A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

The news went out that the Count Conrad Damonoff must die. A few days before the best surgeon in Moscow said he would recover, but that same surgeon said he would die. A strange change had

but, rather, a consuming of vitality. He was failing fast, and no art of medicine could revive him. Some thought he must be bleeding inwardly, but others knew better than this, because in that case there would be some outward symptoms. The wound itself was healing, but the disease was not. The physician and the priest were now in daily, and the former almost in hourly, attendance. The surgeon was Kopani, and the priest was the humpbacked Savotano.

Thus lay the count upon his bed, weak and faint, but at present almost free from pain, and an old woman was his only attendant, the priest having just left. It was just after noon. The dying man had just taken a powerful stimulating draft, though it was against the injunctions of the priest, as he said that by such means the invalid might die bereft of sense and thus lose his hold upon salvation. He had just taken this draft when there was a low rap upon the door. The woman arose to answer the summons. She conversed a few moments with the girl who had knocked, and when she returned to the bed she announced that Ruric Nevel wished to enter.

"Let him come in," whispered the count.

"But—"

"Never mind," he interrupted as the woman commenced thus to expostulate. "Let him come in. By heavens, if he is my enemy let me see him! It may serve to arouse me."

So the woman went to the door again, and soon afterward Ruric Nevel entered the apartment. He stepped lightly, noiselessly, to the bedside, but it was some moments ere he could distinguish objects by the subdued light of the object. By and by, however, he overcame the difficulty, and he started back in horror as he beheld the features of his adversary. How pale and sunken! How deathlike and ghastly! The count noticed the movement, and he noticed the look.

"Count Damonoff," spoke the gunmaker in a low, solemn tone, "a few days since I heard that you were recovering, and I thanked God. But today they told me you were dying, and I have come to ask that I may take your hand ere you pass away from earth. As God is my Maker and my Judge, I would rather he down here and die for you than have you pass away with a curse of me upon your soul or on your lips. Forgive me for what I have done and never again will I engage in such a wicked work. For my own life, it is my country's and my mother's and I have no right to throw it away, and my antagonist's life is the sacred property of God, which I have no right to touch but in self defense. Forgive me."

Slowly and heavily moved the dying man over, and then he extended his thin and wasted hand.

"Ruric," he said, and his voice was stronger now, for the potion was working. "I am glad you have come—very glad—for I have wished, above all else of earth, to see you. I could not send for you, for I knew not how you might come. I have been all wrong in the things that have passed betwixt thee and me. I was mad and a fool. I blame you not, but rather do I thank you for your kindness through all the scene. Oh, I forgive you with all my heart. And now tell me that I am forgiven."

"Forgiven?" repeated Ruric, with a trembling lip, still holding the count's hand within both his own. "Oh, would to God I could call you back to life! Forgiven? Oh, God, who reads all hearts, knows how humble, how sacred, is my forgiveness to you! Could I call you back, could I wipe out the past from my memory, I could die content."

"Enough," returned the count warmly. "This was my holiest wish, though pride has kept back its utterance. Oh, I feared you would gloat over my death—that you would be glad when I was gone."

"No, no! I should have been a monster then!"

"There are many such. And yet I wronged you by the thought. But I could not help it."

A moment more passed in silence, and then the invalid resumed:

"There is one reason why I should like to live—I should be prepared for a better life. Since death has come—since I have known that he stood waiting by my bed—I have wondered at the evil life I have led, and I have thought that if the dark

man But 'tis too late now. The die is cast. Yet I have some joy in this. You have shed a happy light upon my dying hour. God bless you!"

Ruric's feelings were easily moved, and there was something in the deep solemnity of this occasion that started his heart to a tender mood, and the last words of the dying man flowed the cup. He bowed his head, and, covering his eyes with one hand while he held in the other the hand of Conrad, he wept freely and silently.

"At this moment the woman arose and left the room."

"She's gone," said the count after he had recovered somewhat from the deep emotions which had been stirred within his own soul. "Sit down here beside me."

Ruric obeyed the request, and after he had seated himself he gazed sadly into the sick man's face.

"Say, Ruric," the count asked, while an eager look overspread his face, "was true what Kopani told me—that you overcame Demetrius the Greek with the sword?"

"I did," the youth replied in a whisper.

"But you did not disarm him? You did not fairly take his sword from him?"

"I did, Conrad."

"My soul, is it possible? And where have you been all your life?"

"In Moscow and in Spain."

"And yet obscure?"

"Never mind that now," interposed Ruric. "I have something of more interest. Do you—But you will pardon me for what I may say, for I assure you I mean it all for your good?"

"Speak on," said Conrad, at the same time running his eyes almost anxiously over the gunmaker's nobly developed breast and shoulders.

"Then, first, I have just come from the lady Rosalind— Ah, I meant not—"

"Go on. I may have felt a pang at the mention of that name, but I know she loves you, and were I strong at this moment as ever I'd relinquish all claims of her to you. So fear not."

"Thank you, sir count, for this. But I was remarking, I am not long from her presence, and between us both we have suspected some dark things. Do you think the duke was really your friend?"

The count started, and a strange gleam shot from his eyes.

"Go on," he uttered.

"Then listen. Before you ever came to my shop the duke had solemnly promised Rosalind that she should receive no more trouble from you—that you would claim her hand no more."

"Do you know this?"

"I do."

"But it cannot be. Why should he have sent me on that mission to you?"

"I had taught one of his officers the sword exercise, and he knew I was your superior in strength and the use of the weapon."

"Well, go on," whispered the count nervously and anxiously.

"Why, he thought very likely that we should not meet on such a question without a quarrel. He knew your natural impetuosity and my strength of arm and hoped you would fall."

"But—go on!"

"His estate is running out, and he wants the whole of Drotzen."

"Ah, I see it now!"

"The duke had proposed himself for Rosalind's hand," resumed Ruric. "He says he has loved her long, and he will force her to marry him if he can, though he breaks her heart."

"My God!" gasped the count, fairly starting up to a sitting posture. "How blind I have been! By my soul, he never was cordial, never kind!"

Ruric gently laid the sick man back, and then he said:

"From all that I can see and understand, the proud duke meant to get all your wealth and all of Rosalind's."

The count spoke not yet. He lay with his eyes closed and groaned in agony at the strange revelations that were breaking in upon him.

But, see! Why starts Ruric so suddenly, and why does he turn so pale? Why do his hands tremble, and why is his brow bent so eagerly?

"What is it?" asked the count, startled by the strange event.

"Hold!" whispered Ruric in a frantic tone. "You were recovering once!"

"From this wound?"

"Yes."

"Yes. I was getting well fast, and the doctors said I should be stout and well in a month. But suddenly this change came on. Let's see. On Friday morning I felt the first relapse."

"The very time!" gasped Ruric to himself.

The count moved his head forward and would have caught his companion by the hand if he could.

"For God's sake, Ruric, what is it?"

"As I came this way I saw a humpbacked priest pass out from

this house?" said the gunmaker interrogatively.

"Yes, yes," returned the count, speaking shortly and quickly. "It was Savotano. He has attended me. The duke recommended him."

"And was he here Thursday night?"

"Thursday? Ah, yes; he watched with me that night."

"And has he been in attendance since?"

"Yes—every day. But why do you ask? Say, what is that meaning upon your face? What is it?"

"At this moment the door of the apartment was quietly, noiselessly, opened, and Kopani, the surgeon, entered the place.

"Ha!" cried Ruric, starting toward him and grasping him by the arm. "Your patient is poisoned! A deadly poison has been given him, and it is even now eating his life away!"

"Impossible!" gasped the surgeon, straining his eyes to see plainly who it was that spoke to him. "Ah!" he uttered as he became somewhat used to the gloom of the apartment. "Is it you, sir?"

"Aye, but mind not that now. Cannot you do something for the count? He has been poisoned."

"It cannot be!"

"By the hopes of my salvation," cried Conrad Damonoff, starting up to a sitting posture, "he speaks the truth! That accursed priest! Oh, Olga, Olga, I never dreamed that thou wast mine enemy!"

"But what is it all?" the surgeon asked, gazing first upon Ruric and then upon the count. "Speak, some one!"

"Tell him," groaned Conrad.

"Listen," said the gunmaker. "I have my suspicions. But, mind you, they are founded on facts, and the facts are these: The Duke of Tula is well nigh free from the possession of property. His half of Drotzen is all mortgaged, and he wants the other half. That other half he cannot have while Damonoff lives. The duke, too, has sworn that Rosalind Valdar shall be his wife, so he would have her property also. This humpbacked priest is Olga's tool. It was Olga that led him into the church, and it was Olga who freed him more than once from deserved punishment. Last Thursday evening he was with the duke in private council, and he came from thence directly to this place. Now you can judge for yourself."

The surgeon started slightly, and then he bowed his head. A few moments he remained thus, and then he leaped up and clasped his hands.

"By the living God of all things," he cried, "it is, it is! There is no burning up, as I thought, of icy, wintry fire, but the hellish work is from a human hand! Hold! I know the symptoms! I know them now. Be quiet, Conrad. It may not yet be too late."

As the surgeon spoke he hastily opened a small leather case he carried with him, and from thence he took a powerful emetic. The woman was sent for, and when she came she obtained warm water. The potion was given, a small quantity at a time, at intervals of about five minutes until the desired effect was produced. A strange mass of stuff was thrown up, and Kopani took it to the light and examined it. Most of it was of dark, brownish color, but with streaks of yellow and coarse blotches of red and green. The yellow substance was of a mucous formation, while the red and green seemed to more liquid.

"Is poison!" the surgeon said. "And it has been administered in small quantities."

"And cannot something be done?" asked Ruric eagerly. "Oh, save him if you can! Save him, and I'll bless you ever! You can—oh, say you can!"

The surgeon caught the youth by the hand. There was something in this noble spirit that moved him, and he knew now that all must have been forgiven between the two men.

"I'll try," he said. "I have antidotes with me. By heavens, all is not lost yet!"

"Then hasten," urged Ruric, half crazed beneath the weight of the great discovery which he had thus helped to make.

"Be not uneasy. I will see that he suffers not for want of human skill!" And as the surgeon thus spoke he moved to the sideboard and mixed an antidote. But he did not give it until the invalid had vomited all he could.

"Hold!" cried Ruric as the surgeon took up the wine to mix the antidote with. "Touch not a thing here. Perhaps the villain has poisoned them all!"

"So it may be," Kopani said, setting down the bottle. He then turned to the woman, who had remained standing by the fire like one in a trance, and asked her to bring a fresh bottle of wine. She quickly obeyed, and when she was gone Kopani took all the articles upon the table and set them on one side. He would not throw them away, for he meant to analyze them.

When the woman returned, Ko-

pani mixed the new potion and administered it, and ere long afterward the count fell asleep.

"Ruric Nevel," said the surgeon as soon as he was sure the invalid would sleep, "will you remain here awhile? I wish to go and analyze some of these things. I have only to go to the academy. I will be back in an hour at the furthest."

The gunmaker gladly consented to this, and, having gathered up the vials and the wine bottle and concealed them beneath his pelisse, the surgeon left.

Ruric Nevel was happier now, for hope was with him while he prayed that God might spare the unfortunate count.

## CHAPTER XI. AN ASTOUNDING AFFAIR.

Half an hour had the gunmaker sat by the side of the sick man's bed when he was aroused from the reverie into which he had fallen by the gentle opening of the door. He turned and beheld a human form emerging from the narrow, dark entryway. As it came into the room the watcher started, for he beheld the humpbacked priest, Savotano.

"Who is here?" the arch fiend whispered, shading his eyes and trying to peer into the gloom.

"Sh!" uttered Ruric. "The count is asleep."

By this time our hero had so far overcome the first emotion caused by the villain's entrance that he could be calm.

"And who is this?" the priest whispered, moving nearer to the bed. "Ha! The gunmaker!"

"Yes," replied the youth, watching every look and movement of the fellow most closely.

"You are in a strange place, I should say," Savotano whispered, not looking the young man directly in the face, but casting upon him a sidelong glance, as though he dared not look direct.

"Speak not too loud, sir priest," said our hero, determined to enter into no conversation with the man if he could avoid it. "Do not awaken the count, for he is very faint and weak."

And then Ruric had another reason. He feared if Damonoff should awake that the strange discovery they had made might be revealed, and, of course, he wished not that the villain should yet know how well he was understood.

"But why are you here?" pursued Savotano, who seemed determined to know. "I am this poor man's spiritual comforter, and I surely have a right to know wherefore is the presence of one bearing the peculiar relations toward him which are sustained by you."

Ruric's first impulse was one of disgust and wrath, but he managed to keep it to himself.

"Sir priest," he returned, moving his chair noiselessly nearer to the visitor, so that his whisper might not disturb the sleeper. "I heard that the count was dying, and I would not have him die without first forgiving me for all that I had done."

"And has he done it?"

"He has."

"And why do you remain here? Where is his attendant?"

"She is out somewhere. The count has had a strange fit—a startling spasm—and I feared if he had another the woman could not manage him alone."

"Ah!" uttered Savotano. "A spasm?"

"Yes, a most strange one, as though something were at his heart, as though his brain were on fire and his whole system shaking."

The priest turned his head away, but Ruric saw plainly the exultant look which rested there. There was no mistaking any more. That one look—for Ruric saw it—was proof enough.

"Well, well," the misshapen villain said, "I will call again when he is awake. I would not have him die and I not by him."

Thus speaking Savotano arose and moved toward the door. His step was eager, and his every look betrayed some anxious purpose. He stopped as he reached the door and looked back, but he did not speak. Ruric was afraid he might go to the sideboard to look at the medicine, but he did not. He simply cast one more glance at the watcher and then left the room.

In half an hour more the surgeon returned. His face wore a clear, emphatic expression, and his movements were all quick and prompt, as though each one was for the purpose of announcing some self evident decision.

"Well," he uttered, with a quickly drawn breath, "we have put the medicines to a test." And then he leaned back and looked into Ruric's face.

"And what did you find?" the young man asked.

"Just what we expected. We have detected arsenic in three of the medicines which the count had taken. But this poison is not alone. There is much opium in the wine, even so that we could smell it

when our suspicions guided us. The poison has been most artfully fixed. The priest must have one of those recipes which have been used by scientific poisoners, for no physician in Moscow could have concocted the deadly poison."

"But wherein was it so wondrously peculiar?" asked Ruric, with interest.

"Why, in this: Arsenic was the principal poisoning agent, but that alone would produce symptoms which any physician would know at once. In this case there was something present which overcame all the outward signs of the poison and only let it eat upon the vitals. I know not the secret, though I know there is such a one. Had it not been for your fortunate suspicions the count would have died from the effects of the wound. The poison was working silently and surely, without pain and without outward sign different from the usual sinking of the worn and fainting body. But I have hopes now. The villain must not know that we have discovered him. We will let the thing run for the present."

Kopani was not a little surprised when he found that the priest had been there during his absence, but before he could make any further remark the count awoke. He felt very faint, but that strange sickness of the stomach was lessened. The surgeon prepared some suitable diluents, and, having called in the woman, he gave directions that they should be given in large quantities, and also directed her to prepare some strong barley water for the patient to drink as he wanted beverage.

All the vials were replaced upon the sideboard and then refilled with liquids somewhat like those they had before contained. But the nurse was directed not to use them. Everything that her patient was to take she was to keep under her own charge in the kitchen, and she was to be most particularly cautioned against allowing the priest to gain anything from her. But Kopani meant to be sure on that score. He had a little business to transact, and then he was coming back to spend the night himself by the count's side. He meant at all events that the poisoner should have no more opportunity to exercise his diabolical science upon the sick nobleman. He promised the count that he should have safe and competent watchers thereafter.

It was fairly dark now, as Ruric could see by raising the curtain and looking out. He had no idea it was so late. Time had passed without his notice. He moved to the side of the bed and took the invalid's hand.

"I must go now," he said. "But if you are willing I will come again."

"You will come," uttered Conrad in reply, returning the grasp of the hand with all his feeble power. "Oh, you must come often now. I hope I shall live. Perhaps I shall. If I do, I shall owe my life to you. And God knows—for the feeling is even now firm in my soul—that I will always remember how you saved me, and I will never think, never, of the sad blow you struck me. Come—come to me when you can, for now—now—as God lives, I speak the truth—now I love you!"

"God bless and keep you!" murmured Ruric in a husky, tremulous voice. And with these words, coming from the very depths of his soul, he turned away and left the room. He heard the voice of the count as he moved toward the open door and thanked God that 'twas a blessing which fell upon his ears.

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