

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

(CONTINUED.)

Ah, those who know not what true forgiveness is know not the holiest emotion of earth!

Ruric had left his sledge at a neighboring inn, and as soon as he gained the street he bent his steps that way. He had gone half the distance from the residence of the count to the inn and was just upon the point of crossing the street when he heard his name pronounced by some one behind him. He stopped and looked around and saw a man approaching him.

It was too dark to distinguish faces plainly even at a usual conversational distance, yet Ruric was not long in concluding that the man who had thus hailed him was a stranger. He was a medium sized man and so closely enveloped in his bonnet and pelisse that his form and features would have been hidden even had it been lighter than it was.

"Did you speak to me?" asked the youth as the man came up.

"Yes, sir. Is your name Ruric Nevel?"

"It is."

"Then you are wanted a few moments at the residence of a lieutenant named Orsa."

"Alaric Orsa?" asked Ruric.

"The same."

"But he does not live here in the Kremlin."

"He is here now, at any rate, and would see you."

"But you said he was at his residence," suggested our hero, who was fearful that some evil might be meant for him.

"I know nothing to the contrary, sir," the stranger returned promptly. "All I can say is Alaric Orsa has fallen upon the ice and hurt himself severely and upon being informed that you were near by with a sledge he asked that you might be sent for."

"Been hurt, has he?"

"Yes, sir."

"Badly?"

"I believe no bones are broken, but he is so badly sprained that he cannot walk."

"Ah, then perhaps he wants me to carry him home."

"I can't say as to that, sir. They only sent me to find you. I don't know the man myself."

There was something so frank in the statement this made that Ruric believed it all honest, and he stood no longer in doubt.

"I will go," he said. "But lead the way quickly, for I have no time to waste."

"I will lead as fast as you will want to follow," answered the man.

And thus speaking he turned back, and, having gone some dozen rods by the way they had both come, he turned down a narrow street which led toward the river. Half way down this he went, and then he turned again—this time to the left—and thus Ruric found himself in a narrow, dark lane, within which the snow was deep and almost untrodden.

"Look ye," cried the youth, stopping as he found himself over knees in snow. "I think we have gone about far enough in this direction."

"This is the shortest way," said the stranger guide apologetically. "I did not think the snow was so deep here. But it's only in the next street."

"Then on you go."

Again the stranger started, and Ruric followed on. The lane was a crooked one, and more than once the youth had another inclination to stop. He had no direct fear, but yet he had some just grounds for doubt. Had he not seen what had been attempted against the count he might have had no such doubts now, but as it was he thought that if one attempt had been made to ruin him through the emperor's displeasure by the man who was now trying to murder the count it would not be at all improbable that some more effective plan should be adopted toward him. He was pondering thus when they came to a cross lane full as narrow as this, into which the guide turned.

"Look ye once more, sirrah!" cried the youth, now stopping short.

"Do you call this a street?"

"Yes, sir, and on this street we shall find the man we seek. It is only a short cut from where he is to the inn where your horse is, so you won't have to retrace these dubious ways. Only a little farther, sir."

"But I don't like this."

"Why, bless you, sir, if you wish

to go direct to the inn where your horse is this will be the nearest way."

"Well, on you go."

And on they went, now slipping on the ice, now in the snow to their knees, and anon stumbling along over frozen huddles and deep holes. At length the guide stopped and opened a small gate which was fixed in a high, thick brick wall. Ruric hesitated here again. He had no weapon of any kind. If he had had even a pistol or a sword, he would have cared not. But he did not show his thoughts to his guide. The gate opened with a creak upon its rusty hinges, and by the dim starlight the youth could see an open court beyond, and farther still a house of some kind loomed up.

"This place seems not to be used much," remarked Ruric as he saw the snow in the court was trodden but little, only one or two tracks being visible from the gate to the house.

"Ah—yes—you said—what?"

"I said this place didn't seem to be used much," the youth repeated, though he was sure the fellow heard the first time.

"Ah, yes—the usual entrance is the other way, by the sledge path."

"And where is that?" Ruric asked, not being able to see any such path.

"Oh, it's around on the other side."

By this time they had reached the door of the house, which our hero could now see had an old, dilapidated appearance, and the guide pushed the iron knocker with zeal. Ere long a man made his appearance with a lantern in his hand.

"Ah! Has the gunmaker come?" the latter asked.

"Yes," returned the guide.

"Well, I'm glad he's here, but I don't believe Orsa is fit to move," said the first speaker. And then, turning to Ruric, he said:

"But I'm glad you've come, sir, for the lieutenant wishes to see you very much. This way, sir."

This was all so frank and prompt

that the young man began to think he had been a fool for being frightened. He followed the man with the lantern into the hall, and from thence down a long flight of stairs into a basement. The latter did not give much light, but it was sufficient to reveal the fact that the house was an old one and not a large, for Ruric could see even upon the opposite side of the hall, which looked out of doors. As he reached the foot of the stairs he found himself upon a brick floor, and he saw the walls were of stone. A little farther on a door was opened, and this led to a small apartment, within which was a fireplace and a good fire burning.

"There, good sir," said the second guide, "if you will wait a few moments I will go and see how the lieutenant is."

As soon as Ruric was left alone he looked about him. The room was of moderate size for a small house, and the idea of inhabiting the cellars was a common one in Moscow during the winter season. The windows, two in number, were close up to the ceiling and very small and were patched with pieces of board in two or three places. Ere long the man came back, and with him came three others, one of whom the youth recognized as the individual who had conducted him to the house.

"Orsa will see you, sir," said he with the lantern.

Ruric arose to follow him, the other three men approaching the fire as though they would remain there. He had reached the door and passed through into the room beyond when he thought he heard footsteps behind him. It was a sliding, shuffling sound, and he turned his head to see what it was. As he did so he received a blow which staggered him and which would have felled an ordinary man to the floor. He gathered himself quickly up, but before he could fairly turn about he received a second blow, heavier than the first, which brought him upon his knees. In an instant all four of the men were upon him, and he could see that they had ropes in their hands with which to bind him. With all his might he threw the fellow who held his right hand back against the wall, and another he sent in an opposite direction, and in a moment more he would have been upon his feet, but just at that instant a noise was suddenly slipped over his head, and

as the rope tightened about his neck he was drawn back upon the brick floor again.

"Now, resist any more, and we'll choke you as sure as fate!" cried the man who had held the lantern and now had a hold upon the rope.

"Oh," groaned Ruric, while the massive cords worked like cables in his arms and shoulders, "give me a fair chance! Let me up and free—then lock your doors, if you please!"

"No, no, good sir," replied the ruffian, with a wicked smile. "We know your power, and we are not disposed to test it further. We have had trouble enough already. Shall we?"

The man stopped speaking, for at that moment another noise was slipped down over Ruric's head, and ere he could avoid it it had been drawn tightly about his arms. He was now at the mercy of his captors, and, having rolled him over upon his breast, they proceeded to secure his arms behind him, which, being done, they bade him to rise. Of course he could have no desire to lie there upon the cold bricks, and he got upon his feet as well as he could.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, I will conduct you to your own apartment," said the leader of the gang.

"But wherefore is this?" the gunmaker gasped, rendered almost speechless with the mingled emotions of surprise and anger. "Why have you done this? Whose hirelings are ye that ye thus waylay and seize upon an honest man who has done no harm to any of you?"

"Never mind that now, sir," the ruffian coolly answered. "Suffice it for you to know that you are safe for the present."

"But will you not tell me what this is for? There is some intent."

"Yes, and come with me and you shall see. Come."

Thus speaking, the man turned once more, and, having picked up his lantern, he moved on, while the others, taking Ruric by the arms, followed after. The prisoner made no resistance now, for he knew that it would be useless. At a short distance another flight of stairs was reached.

"Down here?" uttered Ruric, with a shudder.

"Of course. You'd freeze up here."

These words struck harshly upon the youth's soul, for it meant that he was to be detained in this lonesome place.

At the bottom of these stairs they came to a vaulted passage, at the end of which was a door. This was opened, and Ruric was led through into the place beyond. He cast his eyes quickly about, and he found himself in a narrow apartment, the walls and floor of which were of stone and the roof of brick, the latter being arched. In one corner was a couch, and upon it were some old skins.

And here the youth was to be left. His guide simply pointed to the low couch and then turned away. Ruric asked a question, but it was not answered. In a few moments more the heavy door was closed upon him, and he was in total darkness. He sought the couch, and, with a deep groan, he sank down.

## CHAPTER XII.

A CONFERENCE AND HOW IT WAS INTERRUPTED.

Rosalind Valdar and Zenobie were together in their sitting room, and the former had been weeping. She looked paler than when we saw her before, and her brow was heavy. Smiles no longer crept about the dimples of her cheeks, and her eyes had a sad, mournful look. Her face plainly showed that she had suffered much.

"My dear mistress," urged the faithful Zenobie, throwing her arms about Rosalind's neck and drawing her head upon her bosom, "weep no more. Oh, there must be some hope! Surely God will not suffer such an unholy work to be done."

"Ah, Zenobie," returned the fair maiden in a fluttering, melancholy tone, "where can I look for hope?"

"I say in God. You have told me we must look to him, and I have believed you. Have you not always been good to God?"

"I have been as good as I knew how, though I have sinned."

"How sinned? Oh, my mistress, if you have sinned, then who is pure? Tell me."

"We all sin, Zenobie. It is our nature."

"So I have often heard, but I hardly think you have sinned. What have you done which you know to be wrong?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Then how have you sinned?"

"Ah, Zenobie, we all do things which we ought not to do. But yet I mean to do as near right as I can."

"Then leave the rest with God. Oh, when poor mortals do as near right as lies in their power, surely they may leave the rest with God without fear. And now, if God is just, as you tell me, why should he allow the wicked duke to triumph

over you? What justice would there be in that when you are all goodness and he is sin itself?"

Rosalind was puzzled. She had tried to teach her attendant to love and honor God, and she had so far succeeded that Zenobie understood all the principles of Christianity and embraced them gladly and joyfully. But now how should she make this point understood? How should she reconcile this apparent injustice with God's universal mercy and justice?

"Can you not tell me?" the young girl asked again. "Why should God allow such a thing? You say he is all powerful and can do what he wills."

"Zenobie," returned the maiden after pondering for awhile, "you do not look at the subject in a proper light. God does not operate by petty, individual decisions, as an emperor does. It sees that certain laws are necessary for the good of mankind, and not a single law of all his code is there but is very good. Last night your head ached, and you suffered, and, of course, you had violated some natural law. It was your own fault. And so this suffering which is now come upon me is the result of a violation of one of God's laws."

"Ah," cried Zenobie eagerly, "but you are the one who suffers while another violates the law. In my case I did both and do not complain."

"But listen," pursued Rosalind, with a brightening countenance, "with the true idea had come to her mind. It would not be just for a person to enjoy all the good of a law and leave others to suffer all the evil God has established in us a social nature, and through that part of our nature come the sweetest of our earthly enjoyments. Such a law—the law of sociality—must be universal, and if men break that law they must suffer, and the only just way in which God could shield me from suffering would be to release me from the effects of the law. Then I should be a poor, lonesome outcast, forced to live all my days alone like a barren rock upon the top of some bleak mountain. But I would rather live among people and enjoy the companionship of my fellows. I have freely accepted the boon, and now, when its evils come, I must suffer. Had God's intent been followed out there would have been no suffering. It is not his fault that the duke sins. Do you understand me?"

"I don't know," murmured the young girl dubiously.

"But, see," resumed Rosalind, "you choose to exercise your special nature, and of your own accord you mingle among your fellows. Do you not see that thus you are enjoying one of God's richest blessings—the blessing of sociality, friendship and love?"

"Yes, I see."

"Well, so far God is good in having given you that power for such enjoyment?"

"Yes, I see."

"Yes, now, under that law, when my father and mother died I found a friend in the duke and here have found a home. But circumstances have changed. The duke has become wicked in thought—he wants more money—and he will prostitute a power which in obedience of God's law would be good to my ruin. Now, God cannot save me without rendering to pieces one of his most powerful laws and one which is meant for a universal good. The moment he does that he destroys that principle of human dependence whence flow those most holy virtues of love, friendship and charity. He must act by universal laws and not by partial rules and individual exceptions. So as long as I can enjoy the blessings of social life I must be subject to the evils of treachery and social wickedness. Do you not understand now?"

"I see, I see," the girl murmured thoughtfully.

"Aye, Zenobie," the mistress added, while a holy light shone upon her countenance, "God has made us subject to ills here. But look beyond the grave, and how bright it is with hope! I have a father and a mother there. Oh, in all my misery, even in the worst state to which the bad duke can reduce me, I would not change places with him. You seemed to intimate that God would see me suffer and yet let the duke triumph. Triumph? Oh, Zenobie, for what would you have that man's heart in your bosom and his soul in your keeping?"

"I would rather die!" the girl cried, while a cold shudder ran through her frame.

"Then, you see, he does not go clear. Oh, how blind and simple are those who imagine there can be pleasure in sin!"

This opened a new theme to Zenobie's mind, and she pondered upon it a long while. But by and by she came back to the theme from whence they had started, and in pursuance thereof she said:

"My mistress, are you sure the duke will persist in this?"

"Aye, Zenobie; I know he will," Rosalind answered, while the old shudder came back to her frame and the old grief to her soul.

"And have you no hope?"

"Only one—in Ruric. He may help me."

"Oh, I hope he can! He is a noble man."

Rosalind answered with a look of gratitude, and Zenobie proceeded:

"Where is the titled lord more noble than he? Oh, were I to choose a husband now and he was free and I was in your position I'd choose Ruric Nevel before all the emperors of earth."

"So would I," returned the fair maiden.

"If I were a countess, as you are, oh, how I should love to make such a husband a count!"

"But no marrying him would not make him a count. Were he a count and I like what he is now in station his marrying me would give me the title. But we poor women do not have that power."

"Well, then, we should so much more have the right to choose our own husbands."

Rosalind made no oral answer, but her look showed that she sympathized with the sentiment.

"My mistress," at length spoke Zenobie again, this time in a low whisper, "why may we not leave this place?"

Rosalind started as though she had heard the speech of a spirit, and for a moment a look of hope gleamed upon her face. But it quickly passed away.

"Alas, where should we go?"

This was a part of the plan which Zenobie had not thought of, and ere she could make any reply one of the female domestics entered the apartment and announced that a woman wished to see her young mistress. Rosalind asked who it was, but the girl could only tell her that it was a middle aged woman and very good looking. The young countess bade Zenobie go down and conduct her up. Ere long afterward the attendant returned, and with her came Claudia Nevel. Rosalind had not seen the good woman for over a year, but she knew her at once, and, starting up from her seat, she bounded forward and embraced her warmly.

"Ah, Aunt Claudia, I am glad you have come! You will let me call you Aunt, as I did in those happy times long gone by?"

"Aye, sweet Rosalind," returned the widow, imprinting a warm kiss upon the fair white brow.

The countess noticed the strange sadness of the woman's tone, and then, for the first time also, she noticed the sadness of her look.

"Aunt Claudia, you look sad," she said, while a chill dread struck to her own heart.

"Aye," the widow uttered, as though she were afraid to venture the question she wished to ask; "I have been very sad because I have had a terrible fear. Has—has not Ruric been here?"

"When?" uttered the maiden, catching the whole fear now.

"Within these three days."

"Just then. Day before yesterday he was here—in the forenoon."

"And I have not seen him since!" the poor woman groaned.

"Not seen him? Ruric gone? Oh, where, where?"

"He said he was going to see the Count Damonoff when he left here," interposed Zenobie, who joined in the grief.

"Aye, so he told me," returned the mother. "I have been there, and they have not seen him since that evening. The surgeon who attends the count went out to the inn where Ruric put up his horse, and the animal was still there, his owner having not called for him."

"O God, have mercy!" ejaculated the young countess in a paroxysm of grief.

At this moment there came a rap upon the door, and Zenobie went to answer the summons. It was the black monk, Vladimir, who thus demanded admittance. At any other time both Rosalind and Claudia might have been started by the strange visit, but now they instinctively hailed his coming as a source of hope.

"Ladies," spoke the fat monk, approaching the spot where they stood and bowing very low, "you will pardon this unseemly method of gaining admission here, but I had no other choice, for I feared the duke would refuse me did I apply to him. I have come to learn, if possible, where Ruric Nevel may be."

The widow tried to answer, but instead of speaking she burst into tears. Rosalind struggled a moment with the deep emotions that stirred within her, and she, too, fell to weeping. Zenobie was obliged to answer.

"Good father," said she, "we here are after the same knowledge. His poor mother has come here to try if she might find some clew to the noble youth, and thus did my mistress gain the first intelligence that he was gone. Pray, good sir, do you

know anything about him? What have you heard?"

Both Claudia and the young countess now raised their heads, for they would hear what reply the monk could make.

"I only know that he is missing," Vladimir replied. "A little while ago I called upon the sick count, and there I learned that Ruric Nevel had mysteriously disappeared, and I learned also of the noble purpose for which he visited the count."

"Aye," interposed Claudia, with sudden energy; "he went to try to gain the count's forgiveness. I don't think they spoke falsely there. I don't think any there would wish him harm from any lingering revenge."

"No, no!" returned the monk. "His mission thither was most nobly fulfilled. So far from cherishing any spirit of revenge is the count that he will ever bear for Ruric the holiest gratitude of his soul."

"Do you think so?" the widow asked hopefully.

"I know it," was the monk's assured reply. "But," he continued, relapsing into perplexity, "I cannot imagine what has become of him. But, hold! My dear child, is there not a humpbacked, ungainly priest who sometimes visits your guardian?"

This was addressed to Rosalind, and a fearful tremor shook her frame as she heard it, for its import was at once apparent.

"Do you suspect?"—She had started forward and grasped the monk's arm as she thus commenced, but she could not continue. The thought she would have uttered was terrible.

"Go on," whispered Vladimir, bending his head low down so as to catch her very thoughts if they left her lips. "What would you say?"

"Oh, I ought not, and yet I know his soul is capable even of that." Thus much the fair countess murmured to herself, and then she gazed up and spoke to the strange man before her.

"Do you suspect my guardian?"

"Do you suspect him?" the monk returned.

"Oh, I know not what to think!"

"But listen," resumed Vladimir earnestly. "I would know all that you know, and then perhaps I can assist you. Fear not, for as true as God lives I mean to save Ruric if I can, and if I can but gain a clew to him now I can surely save you both. Trust me, for I possess a wondrous power for the good of those who trust me. Now, what end could the duke have in view in wishing for Ruric's removal? I know what he had in view in concocting the duel—it was the death of Damonoff and the undivided possession of Drotzen. Now, answer me, what does he aim at now?"

In spite of all doubts Rosalind found herself trusting the monk. There was an air of conscious truth and power in his look and tone that won upon her.

"Good father," she returned after a few moments' thought, "the duke has sworn by a most fearful oath that he will have me for his wife!"

"Ha!" uttered the monk, starting back a pace and clinching his hands. "Does he mean that?"

"Oh, most truly he does!" the young countess replied, and she spoke more firmly now, for there was something in the sudden energy of the monk's exclamation that gave her hope.

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