

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

(CONTINUED.)

At this command two of the attendants moved to the back side of the room, where they unhooked a stout chain from the wall, and as they allowed it to slide through their hands a curious piece of machinery descended directly in front of the table. It consisted of a stout bar of iron which was suspended midway upon the chain and there rested parallel with the ceiling. Upon each end of this bar were straps of iron armed with springs and screws. At a motion from the monk the prisoner was led back till he stood directly beneath the bar, and then his arms were seized and raised up. He struggled some and cursed more, but he was soon overcome. The iron bands were passed around his wrists, and connected with these were two small cups which were slipped over the thumbs. After these had been firmly secured the chain was tightened, and the fellow's hands were raised far above his head. There were two results produced by tightening the chain. It not only tended to draw the thumbs back upon the wrists, but it also twisted the thumb, the two cups being armed with filiclike teeth within and closing tightly upon the flesh.

"Now, sir," spoke Vladimir lowly and deeply, "I am going to ask these questions again, and you will do well to answer them truly. Will you tell me where Ruric Nevel is?"

"I don't know."

"Will you tell me where you saw him last?"

"I haven't seen him since he fought the duel with Damonoff."

"Beware!"

"I have not."

"Mark me, I have had you watched, and I know that you have seen Nevel within these three days. This I know, so I have no hesitation in the course I am about to pursue. Once more, where is Ruric Nevel?"

The man hesitated now, but his answer was still the same. He would not tell.

Vladimir made a motion to the two men who stood by the wall, and they gave a pull upon the chain.

"O God!" gasped the prisoner as the painful twist and wrench came upon his thumbs.

"Will you answer?"

"How can I? How can I?"

"By speaking what you know."

"I know nothing."

Another signal was made to the men at the chain, and they pulled again; another groan from the prisoner, but no other response.

Another signal and another pull.

"Mercy!" shrieked the poor wretch, quivering with pain.

"Will you answer?"

"I don't know."

"Then we must try again."

"No, no; O God, no more!"

"But you must answer."

"I don't know."

"Then you must have forgotten, and such treacherous memories need starting up."

As Vladimir thus spoke he waved his hand again.

"O God, have mercy! Oh-o-o! Save me! Save me!"

"Save yourself."

The wretch was in torment now without ceasing. Nearly the whole of his weight bore upon his wrists and thumbs, and the latter were drawn over almost to the wrist. But he would not answer. He had a deeper fear than this. He feared to break the horrid oaths by which he was bound to the scheming priest.

One more pull upon the chain, and the man's feet were clear of the floor. His whole weight now bore upon his thumbs, and he groaned in the agony of torture. He bore it a few moments, but his coward soul could bear no more.

itation, one single moment, and then the miserable wretch gave up.

"He's in the bathhouse."

"Ha! Where?"

"In the old bathhouse near the river on the Tula pass in one of the vaults!"

"Very well. Let him down."

The chain was slackened up, and Frederic Viska was once more upon his feet. He trembled yet, for there was pain in his arms.

"Now carry him out," ordered Vladimir, "and bring the other one in."

In a few moments more Lesko Totma was before the strange tribunal. He trembled fearfully, for he had been where he could hear his companion's groans without hearing what he said.

"Lesko Totma," spoke the monk in a low, deep tone, "we have given you time for thought, and mayhap you have your memory brightened by this time. Now, where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I don't know."

"Ah, you still forget, eh?"

"I never knew."

"A most strange forgetfulness. I must confess. Let the interpreters be adjusted."

"Oh, mercy! Don't murder me!"

But no notice was taken of his cries. The straps and conical cups were adjusted and the chain drawn tight. At the first turn of the self-acting screw the fellow shrieked. It was not so much with the present pain as with the fear of what was to come. The very presence of the place, so dark and dismal, had more effect upon his mind than had upon his companion.

At a second pull of the chain he groaned and begged for mercy. He had heard of this dark place, and he fancied that men who came there seldom went away alive.

"Hark ye, base wretch," the monk said, "if you do not tell me where the young gunmaker is I'll have you torn limb from limb. Another pull, there!"

As the wrench came again the villain fairly shouted with pain.

"Oh, let me go! Let me go! I'll tell all!"

"Then tell. You leave not this place alive until you have told."

"He is—O God! He is—in the old bath!"

"Where?"

"The duke's bath, on the pass of Tula!"

"Whereabouts there?"

"In the lowest, farthest vault Oh, spare!"

Vladimir waved his hand, and the quaking wretch was freed from his torture.

"Now conduct them both to the dungeons and lock them up. They must not run at large for the present. Let them be secure."

"No, no," cried Viska, who had been brought back. "You were to let me go if I told you."

"Not free, sir," said Vladimir.

"But you have no right to hold me thus. I am nearly dead with pain now where you have torn my hands in pieces. By the—"

"Silence, dog! My authority here is my power. My right is my might. I have you, and I will keep you. Were I to let you go I might not have the power to catch you again, as legal officers could. Lead them off, and then we'll turn our attention to the duke's bath!"

## CHAPTER XV.

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE DUKE'S BATH.

Ruric Nevel could keep no account of time. Darkness, and darkness only, dwelt with him in his prison house—darkness so utter that the only effect of opening the eyes was the nervous reality of the motion. In fact, 'twas lighter with the eyes closed than with them opened, for when tightly closed there were peculiar fantastic shapes floating in the imagination, and even this was a relief. And then there was a sort of kaleidoscopic succession of colors when the lids were tightly pressed that seemed grateful to the nerves and gave variety to the mind. But when the eyes were open only a cold, impenetrable blackness was present, within which there were no shapes, no forms, save the one form of utter chaos.

Ruric felt sure he had been there four days, and at times it appeared longer than that. Food and drink had been brought to him thrice, and he was now without both. His strength had not yet left him, though there were pains in his limbs and a chilling sensation about the

heart. He had broken the rope from his arms on the first day of his confinement, and he had brought to overcome the man who hopped him food and drink and thus make his escape, but no human being had yet come in to him. His food had been passed in through a small wicket.

"And this is the end of life!" he murmured to himself as he paced slowly to and fro across the dungeon. "Thus ends all the hopes of youth, and here the prayers of a lifetime must close in one last hope—one hope of heaven when earth has passed away! My mother, no farewell can reach thee from the lips of thy son. He will lie down in the dark slumber of death, and thou shalt not know his resting place! And thou, loved one, thou fondly cherished, wildly worshipped being—thy smiles can shine no more for me! Oh, Rosalind, would that I could see thee but once—that once more I might press thee to my bosom and bid thee remember me when I am gone! Had I never seen thee I might not be here now! And yet, O God, for life itself I would not wipe away the written story of that holy love from my heart!"

The thought of Rosalind came heavily upon him. All else he could give up in a higher hope than that of earth, but for her he held a strange fear. She would be another's.

"And must it be so?" he continued after some minutes of painful reflection. "Alas, she will be nothing to me hereafter! My mother will know another! And yet she may carry the old love with her always. She may never forget it. Oh, could I but once!"

He stopped suddenly, for he heard a footfall in the low passage close by the dungeon. He listened, and he heard more. There were several feet, and soon he heard voices. He moved back to the extremity of the vault and listened. The feet stopped, and the sound of grating iron, like the drawing of a bolt, was heard. Soon afterward the door was opened, and the light from a lantern flashed into the place. For a few moments the prisoner was blind by the sudden transition, but by degrees he overcame the difficulty and was able to look up.

The first object upon which his eyes fell was the humpbacked priest, Savotano. There were four others behind him, but Ruric noticed them not yet. He saw before him the man whom he believed to be the instrument of his suffering, and with one bound he reached him and felled him to the floor.

"Hold!" cried one of the others, one who held the lantern. "We have come to conduct thee out from here."

"Ha! Say yes?"

"Most surely we have."

"Then stand aside and let me go."

"Just as you say. The doors are open, and you may go. You may follow us, or you may go in advance."

"Then lead on," returned Ruric, "and I will follow."

"As you say."

Thus speaking, the man assisted the priest to his feet and led him out from the cell. In a few moments more the others went out also, and Ruric prepared to follow. He heard the priest cursing, but he noticed that one of the others led him off. The youth stepped forth into the passage, but he did not place the fullest confidence in what he had heard. He reached the foot of the stairs, and the others were nearly up. He started to follow them and had nearly gained the top when a quick, lightning-like shadow flitted before him. He would have started back, but 'twas too late. There came a blow upon his head, and with a dull, crashing sensation, he sank down. He realized that he was turned over and that a rope was being lashed about his arms.

But the prisoner had not been fully stunned. He returned to consciousness as they lifted him to his feet, and his first impulse was to try to force his bonds asunder, but this he could not do. He gazed up now, and he found only two men with him, and they wore masks upon their faces. They were stout, powerful men, and their very bearing was murderous, and his heart sank within him.

"Come," said one of them. "You'll go with us. We won't force you if you'll walk."

"But where?" asked the youth.

"What mean you?"

"You'll see when you get there. But there's no time to waste, so come."

"What could the prisoner do? His hands were firmly bound behind him, and his great strength availed not a bit. He knew that he could not resist, so he simply bowed his head in token of submission and prepared to follow his conductors. But they left him not to follow at will. They took him by either arm and thus led him away. He remembered the room into which he had been first conducted on the evening of his capture, but he was not detained there. From here a long corridor led off to where a wing of the building had been partly torn away, and they soon came to a large circular apartment, in the center of which was a deep basin where in years gone by people had been wont to bathe. The walls looked grim and ragged by the feeble rays of the lantern, and the chill wind came moaning through the cracks and crevices in the decaying masonry.

"There," spoke one of the guides as he set his lantern upon the top of a broken column. "We will stop here."

The words were spoken in a sort of hushed, unmerciful tone, and Ruric felt them strike fearfully upon him. He gazed upon the man who had spoken, and he saw that he was preparing to throw off his possessive, which he had thus far worn. As soon as this was off he moved to where his companion stood and commenced whispering.

Could Ruric mistake longer? What reason but one could there have been for bringing him to such a place? To the left, where the basin had once emptied itself, there was a dark, deep, cavity-like place, at the mouth of which a heap of rubbish had collected. What a place in which to hide a dead body! So thought Ruric. But he was startled from the dark reverie by a darker reality.

One of the men had taken a club, a long, heavy bludgeon which the youth had not before seen, and was just balancing it in one hand while he spat upon the other.

"You will not murder me here in cold blood!" uttered Ruric, starting back.

The stout ruffian clutched the club in both hands, but made no verbal answer.

"Speak! For God's sake answer me!" the prisoner exclaimed, starting back another pace. "Do you mean to murder me?"

"Why," answered the man with the club in a cool, offhanded manner, "since you are so anxious to know, I'll tell you. You will do within a minute."

"And will you take the life of one who never harmed you? Hold! If money be your object—"

"Stop!" interrupted the villain. "You can't argue us out of it in that way. You've got to die, and the sooner you get the sooner you'll get over it. You won't suffer a bit if you don't go kicking up a fuss. There, now. If you hadn't bothered me 'twould have been all over by this time."

Oh, what would Ruric have given at that moment for the use of one of his arms! But that was beyond praying for. Yet he had his feet. He said nothing more, but he allowed the man to come within a few yards of him, and then he prepared for the only means of defense he had. The huge club was raised, and at that moment Ruric saw that the other man also had a club. He knew then that they had been concealed there until now.

"Hark!" uttered the second villain just as his companion had raised his club. "What noise is that?"

"I suppose they're coming to see if we've finished the job," returned the other, "and, by the saints, we ought to have done it ere this. But they shall find it done!"

The ponderous club was raised again, and, with a quick, decisive movement, the man advanced. Ruric made a movement of the body as though he would bow his head for the stroke. Every nerve and muscle of his frame was set for the trial, and for the instant his heart stood still. Quick as thought his body bent—his right knee was brought almost to his chin—and then, with all the force he could command, he planted his foot in the pit of the assassin's stomach. The effect was electrical. The wretch bent like a broken stick and sank down without a single sign of life.

The second man uttered an oath and sprang forward with uplifted club, but Ruric easily dodged the blow, and then, as the thought for the first time flashed upon his mind, he darted to where the lantern stood and overturned it. He had noticed an open passage close at hand which seemed to lead to some sort of a dressing room, and, guided by his memory alone, for it was now dark as Erebus there, he glided swiftly into it. When he knocked over the lantern, he had upset column and all, and just as he reached the passage he heard a heavy fall, and he knew that his enemy had stumbled over the fallen column. He heard the curses, loud and deep, which dropped from the lips of the baffled man as he picked himself up, and in a moment more he was edified by a conversation between the two, for villain No. 1 had revived, though the tone of his voice plainly indicated that he had a severe pain still lingering with him.

"Michael, Michael!" groaned No. 1, and as he spoke Ruric could hear him scrambling up on his feet.

"Hi, Oriel!" returned No. 2.

"Have you dropped him?"

"No!" cried Michael, with a curse which we do not choose to trans-

scribe. "He's a perfect devil!"

"But where's the lantern?"

"He put it out."

"But you ought to have knocked him down, you clown."

"So had you."

"Me? Why, he kicked me over."

"Well, he dodged by me and kicked over the lantern."

"But where is he now?"

"He's gone. Hark! Ha, I guess they've caught him. Don't you hear?"

"Yes; they've caught somebody."

"And of course it's him. He went that way. Let's go and find him!"

He did not finish the sentence, for at that moment a voice came up in thunder tones, and it said:

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"Good God!" gasped villain No. 1. "What is that?"

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"By the living gods, that is not from any of our men!" uttered the second ruffian. "Ha, they are coming this way!"

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"There is but one place," returned Oriel. "Here in the little drawing room. Come, let's find it. Oh, curses on that gunmaker's head! If he be not the very devil, then he's a bound partner of his. Have you found the entrance, Michael?"

"No. It's near you somewhere. Can't you—Ha! In, in!"

At that moment the glare of a flaming torch flashed through the gloom of the place, and the two villains stood revealed. A dozen stout men, all well armed, appeared in the only passage by which they could escape, for to have fled into the drawing room of which they had spoken would avail them nothing.

"Ho, villains!" shouted Vladimir, the monk, raising his flaming torch high above his head with his left hand, while in his right he waved a heavy sword. "Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"Here, here!" cried our hero, starting forward into the larger room.

"What! Safe—alive—well?" uttered Vladimir.

"Aye, my noblest of friends. But, oh, cast off this accursed bond from my arms. It cuts into the flesh."

The rope was quickly taken off, and then the youth embraced his deliverer. No questions were asked there. Only a few sincere thanks were uttered, and then attention was turned to the two villains, who yet stood trembling near them. They had not attempted an escape, for the way was blocked up. They were quickly secured, and then the party turned away from the place, and as they went Ruric gave the monk an account of the manner in which he had been entrapped and of the events which had transpired since.

"Merciful heavens!" ejaculated Vladimir as Ruric closed his account of the manner in which he had overcome the two men who had thought to murder him. "It was a narrow escape."

"But I might not have escaped without your coming," the youth said, "for they would surely have found me. With my hands lashed behind me as they were I could not have escaped."

"True, true," returned Vladimir thoughtfully. "It was a narrow chance. But it is over now."

"And how gamed you the knowledge of my whereabouts?" asked Ruric.

"I'll explain it to you when we have time. But did I understand you to say that the humpbacked priest was there?"

"He came to my dungeon with the rest, and 'twas he that I knocked down. Have you not found him?"

"No; we have seen nothing of him. We found two men in the hall, and that was all."

The place was searched all through for the priest, but he could not be found, and when Vladimir was assured that the arch villain had made his escape he prepared to leave the building. The prisoners, four of them, were led out first and taken away by the monk's followers.

When Ruric reached the street, the stars were all out, and the cool, frosty air struck gratefully upon his brow. He turned toward his mysterious companion, and under the grateful impulse of the moment he stopped. He raised his hands toward heaven, uttered one fervent sentence of thanksgiving to God and then moved on again.

## CHAPTER XVI.

THWARTED, BUT NOT SUBDUED.

It was long after midnight, and yet the Widow Nevel had not sought her bed. She was now pacing to and fro across her kitchen, and the boy Paul sat nodding in his chair. Suddenly the woman stopped, and Paul started up.

"Do you think that message was a false one?" she asked, looking the boy in the face.

"I don't know," he returned. "If he came from the black monk, as he said he did, then I think he spoke the truth."

"Oh, they would not have de-

ceived me."

"No, my mistress; I am sure they would not."

"But it is very late."

"Hark! There are bells."

The widow heard them, and, with a wildly fluttering heart, she sank into a chair.

"They have stopped in front of the house," uttered Paul, whose ears were bent.

"Go, go—open!"

Paul started. The widow heard the door opened, and she heard voices in the hall. In a moment more the inner door was opened, and she looked up. She saw a manly form; she heard the magic word "Mother!" trembling upon the air. With one low cry of joy she started to her feet, and in the next moment she was clasped to the bosom of her son.

"Did I not tell you I'd bring him back to you?" cried Vladimir, rubbing his hands with joy.

"Oh, God bless you, sir!" the widow murmured, gazing through her tears into the monk's face.

"So, so," returned the strange man. "The blessing of an honest soul is reward enough for one night, so I'll take myself off for the present."

"No, no," cried Ruric. "You'll remain here till morning."

But the monk could not be prevailed upon so to do. He had business to attend to, and he could not stop, and he hurried away as quickly as possible to avoid the thanks that were showered upon him.

After Vladimir was gone Ruric sat down and related to his mother all that had occurred since that day on which he left her to go and see the count. She trembled fearfully as he related the diabolical attempts that had been made upon him, and when he had concluded she sat for a few moments like one in a painful trance.

"And do you think," she said at length, while a cold shudder ran through her frame, "that the Duke of Tula was the cause of all this?"

"I am sure of it, my mother."

"Then you are not safe yet."

"But I shall see the emperor."

"I have seen him, my son."

"Ah! And what said he?"

"Why, he said if we could find out who had done you harm he would punish them. Then I asked him, 'Suppose it was a duke?' and he said in that case he should have to look into the matter. Oh, I fear he would not dare to punish the powerful Olga."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

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