

The Gunmaker of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

"...sire?" repeated the duke. "Did he not, Stephen Urzen?"

"No, sire," replied the man. "The count is or was your superior."

"What say you, sir lieutenant?"

"I trembled for this was addressed to him. He knew that the duke was anxious to crush his spirit and he feared to draw the sword upon his head. But a happy thought came to his aid."

"Sire," he said, "I would rather be judged of that for your own sake. And how am I to do this?"

"Ruric Nevel's skill be tried before you. If I mistake not, he has some good swordsmen near his palace. There is Demetrius, the best swordsman in the city."

"What, my master at arms?"

"Yes, sire."

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

"Never mind, sire. You could do it."

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

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

"And will you take a turn with me at the swords?"

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

"By my soul," cried the emperor, "we'll have some diversion out of this trial. What ho, Ruric! Light up the chamber. Let the lamp be lighted, for we want to see now. Send Demetrius here to let him bring his rounded edge."

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

Demetrius soon came, and under arms he carried the swords. They were of the common size, but with sharp 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 trial of your skill. Here is a man whose power there is some doubt. Mind you, it is all in kind. 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 he knew not in an instant that he had a no-man to deal with. And those who were men were not much unlike in their opinion. Demetrius was an atom the more, but Ruric showed the more.

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

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

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

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

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

clapped his hands and shouted bravo with all his might.

By and by Ruric's eye grew more intense in its sparkling fire. His opponent saw it, but he could not tell what it meant. The youth was about to risk the most daring feat of all he knew. Steadily burned his eye, and his lips were set like steel. At length he saw that the Greek was playing for a thrust, and he lowered his point. Demetrius saw the chance, and, drawing his arm quickly back, he made the thrust with all his power. He was sure now he had won, for there was no earthly way in which his point could be struck either down or up. But see! With a gliding motion, a motion almost imperceptible, Ruric raises his sword, and the other slides along upon its side, and the other point, instead of touching his breast, is caught in the cross guard of his haft. Then, quick as lightning and with all his might, Ruric bends his elbow downward with the whole weight of his massive shoulder and throws his wrist upward. On that instant the Greek sees and feels what meant that strange fire of the eye. He feels his point caught, but before he can close his grasp more firmly the haft is wrenched from his hand. It strikes the vaulted ceiling with a dull clang and, descending, is caught fairly on the hit by Ruric Nevel.

For a moment all is still as death in that chamber. Ruric is the first to break the silence. He advances to the Greek, and as he hands back both the swords he says:

"Demetrius, remember your promise. I know you are a brave man, for I can see it in your forgiving glance. You will not like me the less for this."

"By heaven, no!" the noble Greek cries, dropping both the swords and extending both hands, which the gunmaker grasped. "I honor you, I love you."

Peter Alexiowitz, the impetuous emperor, then in the zeal and fire of youth, leaped from his standing place and caught Ruric by the hand.

"By St. Michael," he cried earnestly and loudly, "you stand clear of all blame, for full well do I know that had you so desired you could have slain Conrad Damonoff at your first thrust."

"Sire," returned the youth, now speaking tremulously, "twice did I disarm the count and yet spare him. And when in my rage I broke his weapon in twain to bring him to his senses he seized a second sword."

"Sir duke, spoke the emperor, turning toward Olga, who stood trembling with rage and mortification, "you see you must have labored under a mistake. You can retire now. Not a word, sir!"

With a quivering lip and a trembling step the duke left the apartment, and after him went Stephen Urzen.

"Now, Ruric Nevel, if you leave Moscow without my consent you do so at your peril. I would not lose sight of you. You are at liberty."

In an hour more Ruric was upon his mother's bosom. He told her all that had happened, all but the last words of the emperor. He did not tell her of those, for he knew not whether they boded him good or evil.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MASK FALLS FROM THE VILLAIN'S FACE.

It was about two weeks after the events last recorded that Rosalind Valda sat in her own apartment with Zenobie for her companion. It was in the afternoon, and a severe storm was raging without.

"Now, Zenobie," spoke the beautiful maiden, "we have a moment alone, the first since morning. And now tell me about that black monk. What did he say his name was?"

"Vladimir."

"Ah, yes. I have heard his name, and if I mistake not he is a sort of mysterious being."

"He is, my mistress, and I am just as confident that I have seen him before as I am that I have seen you before."

"How? Seen him before?"

"Yes."

"But where?"

"Ah," returned the young girl, with a dubious shake of the head, "there is the mystery. For the life of me I cannot tell. He knew me—he knows everybody—and yet he has not been long in the city if one might judge from his conversation."

"But what did he stop you for?"

"Where was it?" asked Rosalind eagerly.

"It was in the church he stopped me—in our Church of St. Stephen.

He was at the altar, and he beckoned to me as I rose to come out. I went to him, and he asked about you."

"About me?"

"Yes, and about Ruric Nevel."

"And what about us?" the maiden asked, blushing.

"He asked me if I thought you loved the young gunmaker. He was so kind and he appeared so anxious to know and then he seemed to take such an interest in Ruric that I could not refuse to answer him."

"But what did you tell him?"

"I told him you did love Ruric. I told him how you had been children together and how you would now give your hand to him sooner than to the proudest noble in the land. He asked me some things about the duke, but I would not tell him. When I must tell of evil if I tell the truth, I will not speak if I can properly avoid it."

"You were right, Zenobie. You were very right about this last part, but you should not have told all you know concerning Ruric and me."

"I hope I did nothing wrong. Oh, I should be proud to acknowledge my love for such a man."

"Aye, and so I am, my little sprite. I love Ruric with my whole soul and would be proud to give him my hand this day, but that is no reason why you should tell of it."

"Surely, my mistress, I meant no harm," the young girl cried eagerly.

"Hush, Zenobie. I do not blame you; only I would have you careful."

"And I would be careful. But, oh, you could not have resisted him. He drew it from me almost ere I knew it. He put his questions in such a strange manner that I could not speak without telling what he wanted to know. He did not say, 'Does she love Ruric Nevel?' but he took it for granted that such was the case, and then ere I was aware of it he had made me say so. But he surely does not mean you harm, nor does he mean harm to Ruric. He is a good man, I know."

"I wish I could see him," returned Rosalind half to herself.

"You cannot mistake him if you ever do see him, my mistress. He is a strange looking man, and, then, he dresses differently from most of our church officers. He dresses all in black—today it was in black velvet. But his shape is his most striking characteristic. He is the fattest man in Moscow. His belly shakes when he laughs, and his chin seems to sink clear out of sight. He would be a funny man and would make me laugh if he did not puzzle me so."

"And did he ask you about anything else?"

"No; only he asked me if I knew how the duke stood with the emperor, and I told him I thought he stood very well. Then he said he had heard that they had had some dispute concerning the duel between Count Damonoff and Ruric. But I told him I guessed that had resulted in no estrangement, for the duke was as much at court as ever. And after that he told me about the duel, as he was there and saw nearly the whole of the affair."

And Zenobie went on and told all that the monk related about Ruric's bravery, and Rosalind listened now attentively and eagerly. It was a theme that pleased her. The attendant saw how gratefully the account came upon the ears of her mistress, and she closed the recital with some opinion of her own wherein Ruric Nevel was held up as a pattern after which all men who wished to win the love of woman should be made.

But before any answer could be made by Rosalind the door of the apartment was opened, and the duke entered. He smiled very kindly as he bowed to his ward, and then, with a wave of his hand, he motioned for Zenobie to withdraw, and after the attendant was gone he took a seat close by his fair charge. The maiden looked up into his face, and, though there was no serious look there as yet, still she could plainly see that he had something of more than usual importance on his mind. She shuddered as she gazed upon him, for she could not help it. There was something in the look of the man—a sort of hidden intent, which came out in his tone and glance; a deep meaning, something which he had never spoken, but which was yet manifest—that moved her thus. What it was she could not tell. It was the prompting of that instinct of the human soul which may repel an object while yet the working mind detects no harm.

But she was not to remain in the dark much longer. The evil one was loose, and his bonds of restraint were cast off. He had marked his prey, and the meshes were gathering about it. "Rosalind," the duke said in a tone which he meant should have been easy and frank, but which nevertheless was marked strongly with effort, "there is some talk among the surgeons now that Conrad Damonoff may recover."

"Oh, I am glad of that!" the fair girl uttered earnestly.

"Yes, I suppose so," resumed Olga, eyeing her sharply. "But you

have no particular care for him, I presume?"

"For—the count?"

"Aye; it was of him I was speaking."

"No, sir. I care only for him as I care for all who need to become better ere they die."

"Aha, yes!" said the duke, biting his lip, for in his own mind he had the frankness to acknowledge that he was about as needy of virtue as was the count. "But," he resumed, with a faint smile, "you never loved the man?"

"No, sir," the maiden answered, gazing up into her guardian's face, with an inquisitive look.

"So I thought, so I thought." As Olga thus spoke he smiled again and moved his chair nearer to Rosalind.

"I am well aware," he resumed, "that your affections have not as yet been set upon any one who is capable of making a proper companion for you through all the ups and downs of life."

Rosalind's eyes drooped beneath the steady gaze of the speaker, and her frame trembled. But ere she could make any reply the duke went on:

"My dear Rosalind, I have come now upon a business which I may justly call the most important of my life. I have not approached this subject lightly nor with overzeal, but I have come to it through careful consideration and anxious study."

Here the duke stopped and gazed into Rosalind's face. She met his gaze, and her eyes drooped again. She trembled more than before, and a dim, dreadful fear worked its way to her mind.

"Rosalind," the nobleman continued, "when I was but 19 years of age, I was married with a girl whom I loved. She lived with me four short, happy years. In that time we were blessed with two children, but they lived not long to cheer us. And then my beautiful wife died, and the world was all dark and drear to me. I thought I should never love again. Time passed on, and you were placed in my charge. When you first came, I loved you, and I wondered if you were to take the place of the children I had lost. But you grew quickly up. Your mind was expanded, and your heart was large. I found that I could not make a child of you, and then I sat down all alone and asked myself what place it was you had assumed in my heart. Can you guess the answer, Rosalind?"

"As a little child," answered the maiden, trembling violently.

"No, no, sweet one! I pondered, and I studied, and I examined myself carefully, and I found that the memory of my departed wife was fast fading away before the rising of another one just as pure and just as holy. Now do you understand?"

"No, no! Oh, no!" the maiden uttered in a frightened whisper.

"Then listen further," continued the nobleman in a low, earnest tone and with a strange fire in his deep blue eyes. "As your charms of both mind and person were gradually developed I came to look upon you with new feelings, or, I should say, with the old feeling more fully developed. I looked around me. I saw my sumptuous palace without a legitimate female head. In my parties I had no companion to assist and guide me, and in my loneliness I had no mate to cheer and enliven me. I wished not that such should be the case. At length my eyes were opened, and I saw plainly the spirit that was moving upon my soul. I looked upon you, and I knew that I had found the woman who was to give me joy once more. Rosalind, I love you truly, fondly, and I would make you my wife. Now you can not fail to understand me, can you?"

Rosalind gazed up into the face of her guardian, and she was pale as death.

"You do not mean—oh!"

It was a deep, painful groan, and the fair girl clasped her hands toward the man before her.

"Hold!" he said almost sternly. "I am not trifling now. I am not only serious, but firm in purpose. When you were placed under my charge, your father bade me do as I would, and now I would make you my wife. The Count Damonoff was the first who came for your hand, and had he been a proper man, and had you loved him, I should have interposed no objections, but you did not love him, and that affair is past. Now I lay my claim upon you, and my fortune and title I lay at your feet."

"And what is to become of my estate?" the maiden asked quickly and meaningly, for the thought flashed upon her.

"Why—we'll have the two united," returned the duke, with some hesitation.

"No, no!" Rosalind cried. "You will not do this! Oh, spare me from such a fate!"

"Spare thee, girl—spare thee from becoming the wife of one of the most powerful noblemen in the empire? You must be crazy."

"My guardian," spoke the fair girl, now looking her companion

steadily in the face, "you only ask this to try me. When you know that such a union would make me miserable forever, when you know it would cast out all the joys of life and extinguish the last hope of peace from my soul, you surely will not press it."

"Rosalind Valda, I have resolved that you shall be my wife. Mind you, this is one of the firm, fixed purposes of my soul, and those who know the Duke of Tula best know that he never gives up a purpose once fixed in his mind. You cannot mistake me now."

Slowly the stern fact dawned upon Rosalind's mind. There had been a lingering hope that he might be only trying her to see if she loved him or if she would willingly become his wife. Awhile she remained with her head bowed and her bosom heaving with the wild emotion thus called up. But at length she looked up and spoke.

"Sir," she said faintly, but with marked decision, "you cannot make me your wife."

"Ah! And why not?"

"Because I will never consent."

"Ah! Say you so?"

"I do, and I mean it."

"Ha, ha, ha! You know little of my power if you think you can thwart me in my purpose. I tell thee, as sure as the God of heaven lives, you shall be my wife."

"No, no! Before heaven I protest against such unholy union. You cannot have my heart, and such a union would be but foul mockery."

"Oh! Now you come to the point. I can't have your heart, eh? Perhaps your heart is given to the gunmaker?"

Rosalind's eyes flashed in an instant. The words of the duke were spoken sneeringly and contemptuously, and they jarred upon the young girl's soul.

"Aye," she quickly uttered, and boldly, too, "I do love Ruric Nevel, and he is worthy of my love."

"Now, my pretty ward," resumed Olga in a tone of peculiar irony, "you have spoken as I hoped you would speak—plainly and to the point. So I can answer just as plainly. Know, then, that Ruric Nevel can never be your husband. He stands charged with a horrid crime, and the emperor only waits to see whether the count recovers or not ere he awards the punishment. The gunmaker is forbidden on pain of death to leave the city. So you may cast him from your thoughts as soon as possible."

"What crime is Ruric accused of?" the maiden asked.

"Of murder."

"In wounding the count?"

"Yes."

"Oh, how can you bring your tongue to such speech? You know the noble youth was not to blame in this affair. He was—"

"Hold, Rosalind. I want no argument on this question. You have heard what I have said, and be assured that I mean it. I had hoped you would receive my proposal with more favor, but I did not enter into the plan until my mind was all made up and the thing all fixed. You will become my wife within one month!"

"I will flee to the emperor," gasped Rosalind.

"You will not leave this palace again until you are the Duchess of Tula!"

"I will never speak the word that is necessary to make me your wife—never! At the altar, if you be by my side, my lips shall be sealed, and no power on earth shall loose them!"

"Do you mean this?" whispered the duke.

"As God lives I do!"

"Then mark me"—the stout, dark nobleman gazed fixedly into the maiden's face as he spoke, and in his look and tone there was a fiendish expression that could not be mistaken—"I shall do all in my power to make you my lawful wife. If you refuse me, you shall be beaten with the knout in the market place, where all may see the ungrateful girl who refused the heart and hand of the noble Duke of Tula. Aye, and after thou art beaten thou shalt be cast into the streets for dogs to bark at. Dost hear me, Rosalind Valda?"

With one deep, soul dying moan the poor girl sank down, shivering and pale. The duke caught her as she fell, and, having laid her senseless form back upon the couch, he strode from the apartment.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MASK FALLS LOWER DOWN AND REVEALS THE HEART.

It was early evening ere Zenobie entered the apartment of her young mistress. As she opened the door she found all dark within. She moved into the room, and shading her candle with her hand, she gazed about. The wind still howled fearfully without, and the snow came driving against the windows. When the girl had reached the extremity of the place, she called her mistress's name, and she was answered by a low groan from the couch in the corner. Thither she hastened, and there she found her mistress.

"Rosalind—my mistress!" she cried, kneeling down.

"Who is it?" the maiden asked, starting up and gazing frantically around.

"It is I, Zenobie. Say, my dear, good mistress, what is it? What is the matter? What has happened?"

With a quick movement Rosalind put her attendant away and sat up, and, having gazed about her for some moments, she murmured:

"Where am I? Who is here?"

"It is I, Zenobie. You are in your own chamber. Come, you are cold here."

Without resistance the maiden suffered herself to be led to the place where the heated air came up from the furnace below, and there she sat down.

"What is it?" again asked Zenobie eagerly. "What has happened?"

Rosalind bowed her head upon her hands, and after some moments of thought she looked up. She was very pale, and a fearful tremor shook her frame.

"Zenobie," she uttered in a low, strange whisper, "ask me no more now. I am not well. Oh, ask me no more now."

"My mistress," returned the faithful girl, placing one arm about Rosalind's neck, "you know what you may tell me and what you may not. But whom will you trust if you trust not me? Oh, give me your love, and if I can serve you let me do so."

"I would trust you with life itself," the maiden returned, "and some time you shall know all that has happened here, but not now—not now. Oh, I cannot speak it now!"

"Say no more, my mistress; only let me serve you. You will have some refreshment—something to eat."

"You may bring me some wine, Zenobie."

And thereupon the young girl hastened away.

In the meantime the duke was in his private room below. He was pacing to and fro across the floor, with his hands behind him, and his brow was dark and lowering. Ever and anon he would stop near the door and listen and then proceed. At length there came a rap upon the door, and the duke said, "Enter."

It was a priest who entered the apartment—a small, deformed man, somewhere about 50 years of age. His face was very dark, his features sharp and angular, his eyes dark and sunken deep into his head, his brow heavy above the eyes, where the shaggy brows hung over, but sloping back from thence, leaving the points where phrenologists locate benevolence and veneration deficient and flat. Upon his shoulders he wore a huge, ungainly hump, and all in all, he was just such a man as a timid person would shun. His name was Savotano. The duke had been the means of getting him into the church, and in consideration thereof he had bound himself to do the duke's evil work. But this is not all.

Some years before there had been a murder in Moscow, and Savotano did the bloody deed. It was a work of pure vengeance. Olga had him apprehended, but he was not brought to justice. The duke found him to be a shrewd, unscrupulous wretch, willing to serve those who would pay him well and ready to let himself then to any one who could save his life. Olga was a man of plots and schemes. He fancied that such a man as Savotano might be of use to him, so he proposed to save him if he would serve his benefactor. The villain was glad enough to accept the proposition, and the bargain was made. Could Savotano enter the church and assume the sacred garb he might in many cases work to better advantage. The wretch readily agreed to this, too, and through Olga's powerful influence he gained a place in the church. He knew that the duke held his very life, and he failed not to serve him. His clerical robes shielded him from much suspicion, and, moreover, the place gave him additional advantages to work at his diabolical trade. His salary from the government was sufficient for his support, while an occasional sum from his master enabled him to enjoy many of those luxuries which were denied to most of his brethren. Olga feared not to trust this man, for the fellow had nothing to gain by betrayal, but everything to lose.

And such was the man who now entered the duke's private room. He entered with a bold air, for, though he was somewhat in the duke's power, yet there was a peculiar satisfaction in knowing that when he fell the noble lord must fall with him, part way at least. Brethren in crime cannot count much upon respect.

"I have come, my lord," the priest said as he shook the snow from his robe and then took a seat by the furnace pipe.

"And how is the count?" asked Olga.

"He is recovering, I am sure."

"Does Kopani say so?"

"Yes. He says he will have him out within a month."

"(To be Continued.)"

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