

# The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And yet," said Ruric, "I have seen weaker men than myself who would overcome me easily or, at least, who might overcome me."

"But they were not in this city," suggested Orsa, with a peculiar shake of the head.

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

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

The widow sat in her great chair by the fire. She was pale and anxious. Her brow was supported by her hands, and at every sound from without she would start up with a frightened expression and listen. At length the sound of bells struck upon her ear. They came nearer and nearer, and they stopped at her door. She would have arisen, but she could not. With her hands clasped she bent eagerly forward and listened with a frantic interest. Soon the door opened. Surely no one but he would enter without

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And afterward received a title," added Peter.

"Yes, sir," returned Ruric. "And the gunmaker is this captain's son?"

"Yes, sir," returned Ruric. "And methinks Valdaik left a child."

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, sir," returned Ruric. "But how was it?"

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

"This is a serious affair," said the emperor, who had not failed to note the astonished look of the surgeon while the duke was telling his story. "It is most serious, sir, and surely the ruffian should be at once executed."

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

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

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

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

"Then you may bring him in."

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

"This is the man, sir," Olga said as he led his companion forward. The emperor gazed upon Urzen a few moments in silence and then said:

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

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

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

"Ah, yes. Then you know all about the affair?"

"Yes, sir," answered Urzen. "Then tell me about it."

"First, sir," commenced the man, casting a sort of assuring glance at the duke, "the count went to the gunmaker's shop to get him to—"

vel, and now the fellow has presumed thereupon several times to insult her of late with his disgusting familiarity. She dared not remonstrate with him for fear of violence, so she referred the matter to me. The count has been anxious to win her for a wife, so I thought him not an improper person to send on the delicate mission. Accordingly I wrote a sort of promise in the form of a voluntary assurance pledging the signer not to make himself familiar with the lady any more. And at the same time he received the assurance that his presence was very disagreeable to the person mentioned. This I supposed he would sign at once, and as the count aspired to her hand I deemed it no more than right that he should render her this service. Now, sir, this gentleman may continue."

Thus bidden Urzen resumed:

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

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

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

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

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

"Sir, thy bearing is bold."

"Why should it not be, sir, when I stand before one whom I honor and respect and do not fear?"

So spoke Ruric calmly and with peculiar dignity.

"Not fear?" repeated the autocrat sternly.

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

"Insolence!" uttered the duke. The emperor looked up into his face, and he added:

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

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

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

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

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

"Sire," interposed the duke, "he mistakes your mind," broke in the emperor, with an authoritative wave of the hand, "we will hear nothing about the lady here. Why did you strike the count?"

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

(Continued on page seven.)

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