

The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

Thus spoke the gunmaker to his boy as he balanced the beautiful weapon in his hand.

"I think you are right, my master," the boy returned, who had beheld the trial of the blade with unbounded admiration. "But," he added, "could you not temper a blade like that?"

"Perhaps if I had the steel. But I have not. The steel of these two blades came from India and was originally in one weapon, a ponderous two handed affair belonging to a Bengal chieftain. The metal possesses all the hardness of the finest razor, with the elasticity of the most subtle spring. My old master at Toledo gave me these as a memento. Were I to mention the sum of money he was once offered for the largest one you would hardly credit it."

"How much?" asked Paul, with a boy's curiosity.

"It was a sum equal to about 700 ducats."

"And yet he gave it away."

"Aye, for its price was but imaginary, while its worth to him was only commensurate with the good it did him. If he told the truth, he loved me, and these he gave me as a parting gift as the best patterns I could wish for when making such."

After this Ruric put up the small sword, and then he gave Paul a few directions about the work, promising to be back before night. The faithful boy shook his head dubiously as he heard this promise, but he said nothing, and shortly afterward Ruric went into the house. Just then Alaric Orsa drove up to the door.

Ruric was all ready but putting on his bonnet and pelisse. His mother was in the kitchen. He went to her with a smile upon his face. He put his arms about her and drew her to his bosom.

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back." He said this and then kissed her.

"God keep—and"—

It was all she could say.

Ruric gazed a moment into her face, then he kissed her again, and again he said:

"God bless you, my mother! I shall come back."

He dared not stop to speak more. Gently seating his fond mother upon a chair, he turned and hurried from the place. In the hall he threw on his pelisse and bonnet, and then he opened the door and passed out.

"Have you a good weapon?" asked Orsa as the horse started on.

"I have a fair one. I think it will not deceive me," returned Ruric.

"I asked," continued Orsa, "because Damonoff prides himself upon the weapon he wears. It is a German blade, and he thinks he can cut in twain the blade of any other weapon in Moscow with it."

"I have a good weapon," Ruric said quietly, "and one which has stood more tests than most swords will bear." And after some further remarks he related the peculiar circumstances attending the making of the sword and his possession of it.

At length they struck upon the river, and in half an hour more they reached the appointed spot. The day

touched his bosom. It had pressed against his heart and had not been driven home. Well he knew that his life was his no longer, for the gunmaker had gained it and spared it.

"You fence well," he gasped, struggling to regain his composure.

"You are not a novice," returned Ruric calmly, at the same time allowing his point to drop.

"Come on," the count uttered, now gathering all his energies for another effort.

And again the weapons were crossed. This time Damonoff was more guarded. Before he had been impelled by his own assurance, but now he was forced to regard his opponent's power. Ruric quickly found that the other was more careful than at first, and he carried his own point accordingly. At the twelfth stroke the count made a feint to the left, then at the throat, and then, with a quick, lightning-like motion, he brought his point to his antagonist's heart. But his meaning had been read from the first by Ruric. The youth caught the motion of the eye, and he saw that his heart was the place looked to. His own movement was almost instinctive. He received his antagonist's sword midway upon his own blade, then moved his arm quickly forward and caught the point under his cross guard; then, with all his power, he wrenched his arm upward and backward, and the count's sword went flying across the building.

It struck the opposite wall with a dull clang, and the next instant it was half buried in the snow.

"Fear not, sir," said Ruric, with the count started back, with both hands raised. "I never strike an unarmed man."

Damonoff's arms fell to his side, and a deep blush of shame mantled his face.

"Of course. There is no telling what may happen."

In a moment more the new sledge came up, and Ruric recognized his inmate as an army surgeon whom he had seen before, though he knew not his name.

"Now for the old boathouse," cried Urzen.

"Aye," added Damonoff. "Let us have this business done, for I would be back to dinner. I dine with Olga today, and a fair maiden awaits my coming."

"Notice him not," whispered Orsa, who walked close by Ruric's side. "That is one of his chief points when engaged in an affair of this kind. He hopes to get you angry and so unbalance your nerves."

"Never fear," returned the gunmaker. "Be sure he only brings new danger to himself, for such efforts will find their point in the muscle of my arm."

The party halted when they reached the interior of the rough structure, and the count threw off his pelisse and drew his sword. Ruric followed his example.

"Sir count," the latter said as he commenced this work I wish all present to understand distinctly how I stand. You have sought this quarrel from the first. Without the least provocation from me you have insulted me most grossly, and this is the climax. So, before God and man, be the result upon your own head."

"Out, lying knave!"

"Hold," cried the surgeon, laying his hand heavily upon the count's arm. "You have no right to speak thus, for you lower yourself when you do it. If you have come to fight, do so honorably."

An angry reply was upon Damonoff's lips, but he did not speak it. He turned to his antagonist and said:

"Will you measure weapons, sir? Mine may be a mite the longest. I seek no advantage, and I have one here of the same length and weight as my own if you wish it."

"I am well satisfied as it is," replied Ruric.

"Then take your ground. Are you ready?"

"I am!"

The two swords were crossed in an instant, with a clear, sharp clang. There was some contrast between the two combatants, but not much apparently. The count was a little taller, and Ruric was somewhat heavier. But to a close observer there was a peculiar contrast in the bearing of the two men. That breast swelling out so nobly and those massive shoulders, made for the seat of physical power, were Ruric's alone to possess. Yet Count Damonoff was accounted a strong man. In the athletic sports of the court club he had few superiors and not many equals. But Ruric had never shown his strength there.

Now, for the first time, that contemptuous look passed from the count's face. As his eye caught his antagonist's position, as he noticed the calm, dignified, quiet ease of every limb and as he caught the deep, mystic fire of those expressive eyes he knew that he had no common amateur to deal with.

At length Count Damonoff started back, and a quick cry escaped his lips. His antagonist's point had

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his friends saw it all.

"Hal! Whom have we here?" cried Alaric, whose eye had caught a dark form at the entrance of the old building.

It was Vladimir, the monk.

"How now? What seek ye here?" asked Urzen as the fat, burly monk waddled toward the party.

"I heard the clash of arms, my son, as I rode by, and I stopped to see what it was. Surely where the work of death is going on a child of the holy church of God may come."

"Aye," cried the count, "Come in and welcome, but meddle not. Now, my sword, where is it?"

Reluctantly Urzen brought forward the second sword, but ere he gave it up he said:

"Beware, Conrad. You had better—"

"—pace, babbler!" the excited fool hissed, snatching the weapon and then turning quickly upon the gunmaker.

Thus far Ruric had remained silent, but he felt it his duty to speak now.

"Sir count," he said in a tone so stern and authoritative and with a look so commanding that the other was held in abeyance by it, "I must speak one word. You have provoked a quarrel with me, and you have challenged me. I have no fear of death when duty calls for my life, but I would not die thus, nor would I slay a fellow being thus. Six separate times today since our swords first crossed have I spared your life."

"Liar!"

—and twice have I had you before me unarmed," Ruric continued without noticing the interruption.

"I had hoped this would have shown you that I sought not harm to you and, furthermore, that you were no match for me at this kind of work."

"Out, fool!" yelled Damonoff, now fairly frothing with rage. "If you dare not cross swords again, say so, but do not crawl off like a coward!"

"One word more," uttered Ruric, paling for an instant beneath the unmerciful insult of the senseless tongue that assailed him, and he stood proudly erect while he spoke, "before these men were assembled and before God I swear that thus far I have spared you, but my own life may be the forfeit if I trifle with you more. So now beware. You have sufficient warning."

Perhaps the count really overlooked the facts of which Ruric had spoken. In his un governable rage he may have fancied that "was only accident that had worked against him. However, he started forward once more and made a furious lunge at his antagonist.

"Now," he gasped, "play your best, for my sword's my own."

But Ruric spoke not. He saw that the count was stronger than before—for his rage seemed to give him a maniac's power—and that he was earnest only for life or death. He struck quickly and furiously, and his movements were strange and unprecedented. He threw up all rules of exercise and cut and thrust only in wild madness. Twice Ruric came nigh being run through. He lost all run of his opponent's play and quickly saw that he must put a stop to the conflict or run the risk of leaving a childless mother in his home to see that day's sun sink.

"Will you give o'er?" he asked as he struck the count's point down.

"Never! Submit to such as you?"

Bah!

A few moments more the conflict lasted. The one more opportunity he had at Damonoff's heart, and he spared him. All present saw it save the madman.

"Fool!" uttered the monk, who trembled from head to foot with excitement, his huge belly shaking like a bag of jelly. "Will you throw away your own life, Ruric Nevel? Shall I tell your mother you left her of your own will?"

This mention of his mother called the last lingering doubt from Ruric's mind. Again he struck the opposing point down, and then he pressed his own point upon the

count's bosom. He avoided the heart—he tried to avoid the vitals—but he threw his arm forward, and his glittering blade passed through the fool's body. With an expression of pain upon his features he started back and rested his reeking point upon the trodden snow. The count came furiously on again, but he struck wildly and at random, Ruric merely warding off his blows, until finally his arm sank. On the next moment his sword fell from his nerveless grasp, and he sank, fainting, back into the arms of his attendants.

CHAPTER VI.

"Is he dead?" asked Ruric, starting quickly forward.

"Hold, my son," uttered the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm. "Surely you have nothing to fear. It was none of your work, no more than if you had run your sword to the heart of a wild beast that had attacked you."

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth. "I was careful of that. I would have struck him upon the head with the flat of my sword, but I feared I might break his skull."

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time. "He has only fainted from the shock of the blow, coupled with his own fears and passions."

"But will he die?" Ruric asked, kneeling down by the fallen man's side.

"I cannot yet tell," the doctor said, at the same time wiping the blood away, which was flowing freely.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk. "Now is the best time, for the place is not yet inflamed, and while he is thus insensible he will be free from pain."

The surgeon at once saw the truth and propriety of this, and he proceeded to act upon the suggestion. Having selected a probe which appeared applicable, he examined the wound. Ruric watched him eagerly and with a painful expression.

"I do not think this wound is mortal," the surgeon reported as he carefully felt his way along the course the steel had taken. "It has passed below the right lung and only severed some of the smaller blood vessels. I think, with proper care, he may recover."

"Thank God!" fervently ejaculated Ruric, with his hands clasped.

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen. "You were ready enough to accept his challenge."

"Aye, else you would have called me coward," returned the gunmaker with a flashing eye. "Had I refused to meet him that fatal wound would have met me at every turn. I knew that such a man as he was no coope for me at any game where strength of arm and sleight of hand were required. So I meant to disarm him and then give him up his life, believing that such a move would end the combat. You know how I labored to spare him. But I could not. Yet I would not have the life of a fellow being, a countryman, upon my hands in such a quarrel. My father died fighting for his country, and so would I die if my death must come from the hand of man. But to die thus would be a curse upon my name, and to inflict such death upon another would be a curse in my memory."

"I believe you, my son," the monk said. "Only if the count dies you must not allow such feelings as you mention to overcome you. In no way are you to blame for this."

"True, father. You speak truly," added the surgeon. "The young man has acted most nobly, and no blame can be attached to him."

Ruric seemed somewhat relieved by these assurances, and, having seen the count's wound dressed and assisted in bearing the insensible form to the sledge, he took Alaric's proffered arm and proceeded to his own team.

"(continued.)"

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