

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

CHAPTER VI. BEFORE THE EMPEROR.

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

"Hold, my son," uttered the monk, laying his hand upon the young man's arm.

"But I did not touch his heart," quickly returned the youth.

"He is not dead yet," answered the surgeon as Ruric pressed forward and asked the question a second time.

"But why not probe the wound now?" suggested the monk.

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

"But why so anxious?" asked Urzen.

"I believe you, my son," the monk said.

"True, father. You speak truly," added the surgeon.

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

"I only know that he is called Vladimir," returned Ruric.

"Yes; several times about our barracks. He has been there when some of our poor fellows have been sick and dying.

"I agree with you there," our hero said.

sion and all, if I could handle the sword as you can."

"I do understand the weapon passing well," returned the youth modestly.

"Ah, 'tis not all science," the officer added.

"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.

The widow sat in her great chair by the fire. She was pale and anxious.

"Mother!" "Ruric! My boy! Safe!"

By and by the widow became more calm, but still there was an eager, eager look of fear upon her face.

"Nor wounded?" she uttered quickly and eagerly.

"Yes; badly. But listen, I could not help it. And thereupon he related all the circumstances connected with the conflict.

After this Ruric went to his shop, but Paul manifested no great emotion upon beholding him.

"Why, of course," returned the boy composedly.

It was toward the latter part of the afternoon that Ruric was somewhat startled by seeing some of the imperial guard approaching his house, and ere long afterward his mother came to him, pale and trembling, and informed him that he was wanted by the emperor's officers.

"Oh," she groaned, with clasped hands and tearful eyes.

"Who should want you but the emperor?"

"Oh, they will not take my noble boy from me!" cried Claudia, catching the officer by the arm.

"Hush, mother," interposed Ruric, "Fear not yet."

"Come," said the leader. "It is growing late, and Peter will not brook delay."

"But they will not harm him!" the mother frantically cried, clinging now to her son.

"No, no, my mother. Rest you easy here until I return." And then, turning to the guard, he added, "Lead on, and I will follow."

"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.

"This 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.

Ruric saw Stephen Urzen and the surgeon there, and he also saw the Duke of Tula there.

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

CHAPTER VII. A STARTLING TRIAL.

In order to understand the circumstances under which Ruric was brought before the emperor it will be necessary to go back a few hours.

The autocrat had occasion to send for the surgeon, Kopani, who had attended at the duel, and as he was some time in answering the summons he was questioned when he did come concerning his tardiness.

"Yes, but he met with an accident today."

"A humble gunmaker, sire, named Ruric Nevel."

from the ranks under Feodor and was one of the bravest of the brave."

"Captain Nevel. Ah, yes, I remember now. He and Valdai were the two who first captured the remnants at Izium. So the old dispatches read."

"Yes, sire. Pope Nevel was shot a month afterward while leading his brave company against a whole squadron of Turkish Infantry, while Valdai came home and got a colonel's commission."

"And afterward received a title," added Peter.

"Yes, sire."

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

"Sire," spoke the duke after the usual salutations had passed.

"Thus it was, sire: 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."

"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.

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

"No, sire, but you must remember that it was an instance of self preservation with the noble count. The fellow would have undoubtedly murdered him had he not taken this course."

"You were present at the duel, my lord?"

"Let me explain here, sire," interrupted the duke as his puppet hesitated.

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

"Then tell me about it."

This hidden Urzen resumed:

"The noble count was desirous, 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.

"Sir, thy bearing is bold."

"Why should it not be, sire, when I stand before one whom I honor and respect and do not fear?" So spoke Ruric calmly and with peculiar dignity.

"Insolence!" uttered the duke.

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

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

"Never mind," broke in the emperor, with an authoritative wave of the hand.

"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."

"And then you knocked him down?"

"And perhaps you would have done the same to me."

"Sire," answered the youth quickly, "when Damonoff cried by threats to make me sign his paper I told him there was but one man on earth at whose order I would do that thing! The man who has the right to command shall never have occasion to strike me."

"But now about this duel," resumed the emperor.

"Let Ruric Nevel's skill be tried here before you. If I mistake not, you have some good swordsmen near your palace. There is Demetrius, the Greek."

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