

THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By
SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

CHAPTER XIV. THE MYSTIC TRIBUNAL.

Away back of the old Cathedral of Moscow and in a narrow, dark court which was overlooked by the towers of the giant edifice stood a curiously constructed stone building, which, though not connected bodily with the cathedral, yet seemed to belong to it. It was low and broad, with a flat, tiled roof and without a visible window. Within one of the apartments of this building—an apartment away down in the bowels of the earth, where the light of day never came—were seated six men. The room was of fair size, and the floor, the walls and the ceiling were of dark stone. Wooden benches were arranged about the place, and there were some other articles of furniture there, too—strange contrivances they were and fashioned after various shapes and patterns. But of that anon. The place was lighted by a large hanging lamp which had just power enough to make the room gloomy and dismal. The six men sat about a table on which were a book and sword, and the most prominent man there was Vladimir, the monk.

And Vladimir alone exposed his face. All the rest wore black masks, their robes being of the same melancholy hue. They sat there silent as death, Vladimir gazing down upon the table and the other five gazing fixedly upon him. They were stout men, all of them, and they bore themselves toward Vladimir as bears a servant to his acknowledged master.

"The hour is waxing late," said Vladimir at length, looking up from the table. His voice sounded in that place like the echo of a tomb. It was low and hollow, and the others started as they heard it.

"There's time yet to spare, master," replied one who sat next the monk.

"I trust we shall not be disappointed," said Vladimir at the expiration of a few moments more.

To this no answer was returned.

At length there came a dull echo from overhead, and the six dark sitters started up to listen. The sound grew louder, and soon it sent down into that dismal chamber the notes of coming footsteps. In a few moments more the heavy iron door creaked upon its hinges, and three men entered, and soon behind them came three more. Those who came in advance were two of them leading the third as a prisoner. And so it was with those behind. The iron door creaked again, and when the heavy bolts had been shoved into their sockets the two prisoners were led forward.

"Master," spoke one of the newcomers, "we have brought the prisoners—two of them—as you commanded."

"It is well," said Vladimir. "Let them be brought before us."

As the two men are brought to where the light can strike upon their faces we see the two guides who conducted Ruric Nevel to his place of confinement. One of them was he who met Ruric in the street, and the other is the one who guided him into the old bathhouse with the lantern in his hand. They shuddered fearfully as they gazed around upon the dismal scene, and their looks plainly showed that they knew not why they had been brought thither.

"Lesko Totma!" pronounced Vladimir.

The first of the prisoners—he who had met Ruric in the street—started as he heard that name and tried to speak.

"Are you the man?" asked the monk, looking into his face.

"Yes, holy father," the wretch tremblingly replied.

"Then stand you here in front of me."

The fellow was moved up in front of the table, and surprise and fear seemed to be struggling for the mastery over him, for he recognized now the strange monk about whom he had probably heard so much.

"Lesko Totma," said Vladimir low and slowly, "you have been seen much in the company of a hump-backed priest named Savotano. You know such a priest, do you not?"

The man hesitated. He gazed furtively about him and trembled more than before.

"Answer me!"

"Yes, sir, I know him."

"And now, sir, be sure that you answer me directly and truly. Do you know a young gunmaker named Ruric Nevel?"

The fellow started with a perceptible quake as this question was asked, but he seemed to have been prepared for it, for his answer was direct.

"No, sir, I do not."

"Ha! Beware! Think well before you speak."

"If you mean the man who fought the duel with the Count Damonoff, then I have heard of him, but I do not know that I ever saw him."

"Then you are sure of this?"

"Of course I am."

"Frederic Viska!"

The second prisoner now came forward. He was a few years younger than his companion, though somewhat larger and evidently more bold. Totma was conducted out of the apartment as Viska came forward.

"You, too, have been in the company of this priest, Savotano, have you not?" the monk asked.

"I know him," the fellow replied, with a slight touch of defiance in his tone. He had not surely looked about him to see those strange contrivances by which he was surrounded, or he would not have ventured such a tone.

"And you have been some in his company?"

"Perhaps so."

"Very well. And now, do you not also know Ruric Nevel?"

"I have seen him, too, sir."

"And now can you tell me where he is at this present time?"

"No," was the answer, short and quick.

"Beware! If you have any regard for your own welfare, you will answer me truly. Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I tell you I know nothing about him—nothing at all."

"And of this you are sure?"

"Who are you that assume to question me thus? I know you not."

Viska spoke this in a tone of virtuous indignation, probably thinking that that turn might serve him.

"We will let you into the secret by and by," the monk returned, with a peculiar shake of the head.

"But I will ask you once more, do you know where Nevel is?"

"No!"

"You need not speak quite so loud. We hear easily."

"Then don't ask me impertinent questions," retorted the prisoner.

Vladimir started half way up, and his fists were clinched, but the quick flush passed from his face, and he sat back again.

"Look ye," he said as soon as he was sure his anger would not manifest itself, "were I not sure that you know what I ask I would not question you thus. And now, once more I ask you, will you give me some clew to the whereabouts of Ruric Nevel?"

"I'll answer you once more. I know nothing about him. You must not think that this dark place and you men all dressed in black can fright men into telling a lie as it might a child."

At this point Vladimir turned to one of his men, one of those who helped bring the prisoners in, and said:

"You know this to be the man?"

"Yes, my master."

"And you have seen him in private confab with the hump-backed priest?"

"I have."

"And the other things you told me are true?"

"They are, master."

"Then let down those interpreters."

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 filelike 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.

"O God! Down, down! Let me down!"

"But answer. Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I—I don't—"

"Hold, thou false hearted villain!" shouted Vladimir in a voice of thunder. "This is the last of this torture, but when we take you from here we can put you into a state compared with which the pain you now experience is real joy. Each particular limb shall be wrenched all out of shape, and your very eyes shall start out like—"

"Down, down! O great God, down!"

"Where is Ruric Nevel?"

"I'll tell you! I'll tell you if you spare me!"

"Tell me first!"

There was a moment more of hesitation, 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 slacked 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 presage of the place, so dark and dismal, had more effect upon his mind than it 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 wretch 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 hoped to overcome the man who brought 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—oh, 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 her son, but Rosalind 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 hump-backed 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."

"I'll say so?"

"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 faintest 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, lightninglike 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 pelisse, 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, cave-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 die 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 go the sooner you'll get over it. You won't suffer a bit if you don't go to 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 instant 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?"

(Continued on Seventh Page.)

For Sixty Days.

For the next sixty days we shall sell goods very cheap for cash in order to run down our stock as we expect to make some changes in business. If you need

Heavy and Fancy

Groceries,

Snuff, Cigars, Tobacco, Confectioneries or almost anything in

General Merchandise

come to our store. Your patronage solicited.

Mr. Paul Fitzgerald is with us and will be glad to have his friends call and see him.

J. M. VINGON & CO.,
Selma, N. C.

July 1-11.

F. C. CORSETS

Make
American Beauties.

We have them in all styles and shapes to fit every figure, and every corset is sold under this most liberal warrant—

"Money refunded after four weeks' trial if corset is not satisfactory."

Look for this Trade Mark on inside of corset and on box.

KALAMAZOO CORSET CO.
Sole Makers, Kalamazoo, Mich.
FOR SALE BY
W. G. YELVINGTON,
SMITHFIELD, N. C.

YOU NEED IT.

It is Good to have on hand.  **Liniment**
A Bottle of Mozingo's Nerve and Bone

Made strictly by an old and reliable formula. Has been used for thirty-five years.

For Man and Beast.

You Get a Large Bottle for 50 cts.
MADE AND FOR SALE BY
J. B. MOZINGO,
Smithfield, N. C.

For sale by Hood Bros., Smithfield; Haywood Price, Beulah; township; Hare & Son, Selma, N. C.; W. E. Smith, Micro, N. C.; G. F. Woodard, Princeton; Alex. Edgerton, Pinkney; Pope Bros., near Kenly; J. R. Kains, Bagley. March 19—11

NEW MILLINERY.

Go to H. W. Mitchell's for bargains in fancy millinery goods.

Hats Trimmed to Order

—BY—

Miss Annie Glisson,<