

## THE GUNMAKER OF MOSCOW.

By SYLVANUS COBB, JR.

### CHAPTER XVIII. STRANGE AND COMPLICATED.

Ruric Nevel dreamed that he was a great general and that he was upon the eve of an engagement. He gained a view of the commander of the opposing army, and he saw that it was the Duke of Tula. Yet the duke had an enormous hump upon his back, and instead of the usual uniform he wore the garb of a priest. This was very strange—at least so ran Ruric's thoughts in the dream. Soon the engagement commenced, and the loud mounded artillery opened its thunder. The din was deafening and strange, and Ruric shouted in vain to his aids, for the roar of cannon, drunk up his words direct from his lips. Louder and more loud grew the crash, and finally Ruric started for the charge. His horse was shot under him, and, with a quick leap, he reached his feet.

"Ruric, Ruric, my master!" Slowly the youth opened his eyes, and Paul stood by him in his night-clothes. He gazed about him and found that he had leaped from his bed and now stood shivering upon the floor.

"Don't you hear that racket at the door?" asked Paul.

"What? Ha! There is some one knocking," Ruric uttered as he heard the sound.

"And have you not heard it before?"

"No."

"Why did you leap up thus?"

"I was dreaming."

"I thought 'twas the noise below. Why, they've been making a perfect thunder of noise down there. Shall I go down?"

"Yes, go, Paul, and I will dress as soon as possible. What time is it?"

"It must be near daybreak."

And thus speaking Paul turned and went to his own room, where he threw on an outer garment, and then he went down. At the door he found a stout man wrapped up in furs, while close by stood a sledge with two horses attached to it. In the east the golden tints of morn were already visible.

"A gunmaker named Nevel lives here, does he not?" asked the applicant after having first made some passing remark on the trouble he had had in starting some one up.

Paul feared that there might be something out of the way, but he dared not tell a falsehood where it could not possibly be of any use, so he answered in the affirmative.

"Then let me see him as speedily as possible."

"He is preparing to come down, sir. If you will walk in, you may see him very soon."

The stranger followed the boy into the kitchen, where it was quite warm, the fire in the furnace having been burning all night. Ere long Ruric came down, and the visitor started up.

"How!" uttered the gunmaker, starting forward and extending his hand. "Demetrius?"

"Aye, my friend," the Greek replied, with a smile. "I am an early visitor, eh?"

"I should say so. But early or late you are welcome."

"Thank you. But we must not spend much time here now. My sledge is here at your door, and I wish you to accompany me."

"But wherefore is this?" asked the youth in surprise. "What has happened now?"

"I'll tell you. Last night Olga, the duke, came to see the emperor. I had just been giving his majesty some exercise at the sword, so I was present at the interview. The duke wished for power to arrest you, and in explanation of the request he stated that you were at the head of a band of robbers here in the city and that you had already committed several robberies. I needn't tell you all he said, but he made you out to be a most unmitigated villain, and with this the emperor granted his request. Olga wished for power to execute you at once, but Peter would not go so far as that. He gave the power of arrest, but ordered the duke to bring you before him."

Ruric stood for a few moments like one confounded.

"Then he must carry me to the emperor," he said at length.

"Ah," returned Demetrius, with a dubious shake of the head, "be not too sure of that. I saw a look upon his face when he turned away that meant more than he dared to speak. As sure as fate, he never means that you shall see the emperor. I know it—I saw it in his evil eye."

"But will he dare disobey the order?"

"Yes, for he hopes to escape by force."

"How easy for him to

swear that he had to kill you to take you!"

"I see, I see!" uttered Ruric.

"Then come with me."

"Did the emperor send you?"

"No; but I take the responsibility. I will take you to him myself. Be sure the duke's hirings will be here before long. Trust to me, and all shall be well."

Ruric pondered a few moments, and he saw that his friend was right.

"Let me go and see my mother," he said, "and then I will go with you."

"But make haste," urged the Greek, "for the duke's men may be here soon, and I do not wish them to see you. And tell your mother to inform whoever may call that she knows not where you are gone, but that you will be back by night."

The youth nodded assent and then went into his mother's room, where he explained to her what had happened and what he was about to do.

"And how long must these things be?" the mother uttered, gazing eagerly upon her son.

"Not long," returned Ruric. "I may do much toward settling the matter today. But fear not, for I am now safe and shall be until I see you again."

The widow promised all that her son asked and soon became assured that all was well, but Paul was left with the duty of attending to those who might come for Ruric, though they might see the widow if they persisted. The boy promised to tell all that asked for his master that he was gone away on business and would not return till evening.

The mother came out before Ruric was ready to start, and her examination of the Greek's countenance seemed to be satisfactory, for the anxious look left her face, and she looked upon the visitor kindly.

As Ruric entered the sledge the dawn of day was plainly announced in the east and the stars were paling in the sky. The Greek did not take the direct road to the Kremlin, but struck off to the westward and so entered by the Neglina.

An hour later a party of five men drove up to the gunmaker's cot. They were dark, villainous looking men, and murder was plainly stamped upon their faces. They entered the dwelling, but they found not their prey. They stormed and swore, but to no purpose, and when they were convinced that the gunmaker was not there they went away.

An hour later still another party drove up to the same cot. It consisted of two men in a double sledge, one of whom was Vladimir, the monk. The fat, mystic man entered the cot, and there he remained for some time. When he came out, the widow and Paul accompanied him, and they all got into the sledge and drove off together.

What did it mean?

It was noon. The proud duke was once more alone in his private room, and he was pacing uneasily to and fro. There was a cloud upon his brow and trouble in his soul. His lips were firmly set and his hands clinched. Ever and anon he muttered to himself, and when he did so his hands would work nervously and emphatically. He looked often at his watch, and often he stopped near the door and hearkened.

At length came that well known shuffling, uncertain, catlike tread. He threw open his door, and the dark priest glided in.

"Ha, Savotano, I've waited for you," the duke uttered, sinking into a chair, for his nervous walking had made him weary. "Now tell me the work is done. Oh, for God's sake, don't tell me again of failure!"

"Alas, my lord!"

"Hold, Savotano! By the host of hosts, you are not going to tell me of failure!"

"Not really a failure, my lord," the priest returned nervously, "but our men did not find the gunmaker at home. He had gone when we got there, and no one knew where."

"No one knew? Did not his mother know?"

"No. She said he did not tell her where he was going. He only left word that he was going on business and should not return till evening."

"By heavens, I think he has fled!"

"No, my lord, I do not think so. I think he must have had business."

"But what time were you there?"

"Shortly after sunrise."

"And he gone then?"

"Aye! He had been gone an hour."

"It looks suspicious. But the men shall not escape me now."

"There is no fear of that, my lord. I will see that he is apprehended as soon as he returns."

"Right, Savotano, right! And now to the other matter. I am to be married this afternoon!"

"Ah! So soon?"

"Yes; I waste no more time. What is the use?"

"None, my lord—none at all."

"Then you must remain, for the ceremony shall be performed as soon as possible."

"And does the countess know of your determination?"

"Yes. She knew it ere she retired last night. I told her she should not escape again till she could carry my name with her. By the mass, sir, she sealed her own doom! Ha, ha, ha! The Duke of Tula will have his coffers filled again. Money must come somehow, and how else so easily as this?"

"Sure enough," returned the priest, with that odd, coarse, wicked smile; sure enough, my lord—how?"

"In no way. Ho, I'll put the seal upon that budget and stamp it—mine! So here you remain until I am married. Today—until that ceremony is performed I am not sure. But tomorrow they cannot harm me. Oh, she shall be mine, Savotano! Today she is my wife, tonight she shares my bed, and tomorrow all heaven and earth and hell combined cannot undo the work. I have waited long enough. I have worked and schemed and have puzzled my brain to one great purpose, and yet each step I had marked out has failed me. Damonoff lives, the gunmaker lives, the black monk lives—but I, too, live! Ha! I live, Savotano, and now the work shall be done as it might have been done at first had I been so disposed!"

The duke had arisen to his feet while speaking thus, and his manner had been frantic and excited. As he ceased speaking he sank into his chair and gazed the priest in the face. He was all iron now. Every nerve and muscle was set, and a fierce determination was in his soul.

There is one more scene in the ducal palace, and it goes on at the very time while the duke and his tool were together.

Vladimir, the monk, was in the chamber of the countess, and the fair occupant and her maid were there with him.

"And you are sure he means to make you his wife today," said the monk in continuation of a conversation which had been going on for some moments; "that he will have the ceremony performed whether you consent or not?"

"Yes, sir," the countess murmured. She gazed into the strange man's face a few moments after she had spoken, and then, starting quickly up, she threw herself upon her knees before him.

"Oh," she cried, with her clasped hands raised toward him, "can you not help me in this bitter moment? Do not say so. Oh, I know you have some strange power, and you may help me. You cannot know the misery I suffer. Oh, earth has no pangs more cruel! In all the long catalogue of woes there is nothing more bitter! Sir—and the maiden raised both hands toward heaven as she thus continued—"sooner than be that man's wife I would with my own hand let my lifeblood out were not the act a sin against my God! But you may help me."

"Alas, lady, I cannot assure you now."

"Oh, say not so! You can help me flee from here; you can find some hiding place—some place where my days can be spent in safety from this great evil."

"But how can I help you away, lady?"

"Because you know some secret entrance to the palace. You know some secret passage, else you would not be here now."

"True," the monk replied in a perplexed tone, "I do know such a way, for by that way I came, and by that way shall I return, but I cannot convey you away thus. I am sorry that—"

The monk stopped here, for at that moment a heavy footfall sounded without. He had started up from his seat when the door opened and the stout duke entered. The countess uttered one low, quick cry and sank down. She would have sunk to the floor had not Zenobie caught her and bore her to the couch.

The monk stood erect, with his arms folded across his breast, but his right hand was hidden within the bosom of his robe. The duke started back like one thunderstruck, and it was some moments ere he could gain the power of speech. He turned first pale as death, and then the blood mounted, hotly, fiercely to his brow.

"By the living God," he gasped in a hissing, frantic tone, "how came you here?"

"To learn of your wickedness, Duke of Tula," calmly responded Vladimir.

"Ha! Do you heard me in my very palace, dog? But you have ventured here once too often. As sure as there is life in me, you go not hence alive!"

"Hold, Olga!" spoke the monk, and so strange and powerful was the tone that, though the duke had turned toward the door, yet he stopped. "This lady tells me you mean to make her your wife. Is it so?"

"Out, accursed monk! Who gave thee right to question me?"

"By my soul, proud duke, you shall know that anon. But listen

if you force this lady to that thing, you do it at your peril! You had better seek the fabled potion of the gods and drink and be a dog than do that thing!"

"Hold a moment, monk!" cried the duke, now nearly blind with passion. "You go not hence alive! What, ho, there! Without, I say! Zenobie, pull that bellcord—quick! Back, monk! You pass not here alive! What, ho! Without, there!"

"Beware, Olga!" spoke the monk as calmly as before, at the same time drawing a heavy pistol from his bosom and cocking it. "I would shoot you as I would a dog! Offer me one motion of impediment to my passage, and you die on the instant!"

Instinctively the duke moved to one side. There was something in the look and tone of the strange man that he dared not cope with then. The monk passed out, but as soon as he was gone the duke sprang to the bellcord and pulled it till he broke it. In a few moments more the servants came rushing in.

"Out, dogs," the madman shouted, "and stop that monk from leaving the palace! Kill him on the spot where you find him if he dares to offer the least resistance! Kill him! You have my orders, and I am alone responsible!"

Thus speaking, the duke rushed from the apartment to start up more of his household. First to the gate of the court he went. But the monk was not there, nor had he been there. Then he rushed to the postern, but that was locked, and the snow was untrodden before it. He returned to the hall, and one by one the servants came back from the search.

No monk could be found!

At first Olga was tempted to believe that his servants deceived him. But he quickly set that thought aside, for he could see by their countenances that they were as much astonished as he. The search was renewed, but the strange man was not to be found! There was some wonder and some uneasiness.

### CHAPTER XIX. CONCLUSION.

Pale as death sat the fair young countess in her dressing room. She did not tremble now, for every nerve had become fixed in utter despair.

"Will you not change your dress, my mistress?" asked Zenobie in a low, tremulous tone.

"No, no," the maiden replied, and her voice sounded strangely even in her own ear, it was so low and hollow. "Why should I dress for the sacrifice? The dumb beast may suffer garlands about its neck before being led to the heathen altar, but, alas, God has not given me a brute's ignorance to help me now. No, no, Zenobie; I will not dress for the bride."

"But the duke expects it."

"I care not. He cannot ask me to do it. He may do all he wills, for I am helpless here, but he dare not ask."

"Oh, my dear mistress!" cried the faithful girl, throwing her arms about the neck of her mistress and weeping as she did so, "would to God that I could bear this for you."

"I thank you all the same, my best of friends," the countess replied, gazing gratefully up into her attendant's face. "But it matters not much now. I shall not suffer long. My sorrow will soon cease."

Zenobie looked inquiringly up, but she did not speak.

"God will soon take me home," the wretched maiden murmured after a pause. "I feel the chill hand upon my heart even now, and I know that earth cannot bind my spirit long with such a curse upon it."

Zenobie had no more words of consolation to offer, so she did all she could do. She drew the head of her mistress upon her bosom, and there she held it for a long time. She held it thus until the door of the apartment was opened and a female domestic entered.

"Lady," the newcomer said, trembling perceptibly while she spoke, "the duke bade me tell you he awaited your coming below in the hall."

She stopped here and seemed to wait for an answer. But Rosalind did not speak.

"What answer shall I give him, lady?"

At this the countess started up, but she sank back again without speaking.

"Tell him we will come," interposed Zenobie, who saw that the announcement had taken the last power of effort from her mistress.

"Yes, yes," whispered the countess as the messenger hesitated and gazed inquisitively into her face.

And with this the woman left the apartment.

"My dear mistress," spoke Zenobie, now calling all her power of self control to her aid, "all means of help and escape we have tried in vain. The time has come—"

"O God, have mercy!" groaned the countess.

—and we must meet it, since there is no further hope. It will be better to go down at once than to arouse the bad man's anger by more delay. Were there the least glimmer of hope, we would not go. But there is not. You know what I mean."

A few moments Rosalind sat like one dead. Then she started up, with her hands clasped, and raised her eyes toward heaven. She did not speak aloud, but her lips moved, and she surely uttered a prayer to God, and it was none the less eloquent because it was silent. Then she turned to her companion. Her lips were set and colorless, and a deathly look had overspread her whole face.

"Zenobie," she said in a tone which bore no feeling more than the gliding of a cold, icy sound. "I am ready. Once more, before the last joy of earth departs from me, let me bless thee and press thee to my bosom. I am pure now!"

She opened her arms as she spoke, and when she closed them again Zenobie was within their embrace.

"Bless you, bless you ever! God keep and guide you to the end of life and then receive you home to himself! Kiss me. There, I am ready now!"

The broken hearted girl wiped the tear from her eye, and in a moment more she was as cold and passionless as before.

"Lead on, Zenobie. I shall walk without help."

Without looking around the Moslem maiden led the way to the hall. She walked slowly, and she fancied she could hear the beating of her mistress' heart. In the hall stood the duke with some half dozen of his own male attendants. He took the hand of the countess as she approached him and gazed earnestly into her face, but he did not speak. He led her toward one of the drawing rooms, and when they entered there they found the humpbacked priest already in waiting. Rosalind came well nigh fainting when she saw this miserable villain ready for his work. She knew now that the priest was like the master.

"You see, my dear countess," spoke the duke in a low, hypocritical tone, "that we have all prepared. I trust we shall have no trouble before this holy man."

This last sentence was spoken in a threatening tone, but it had no effect upon Rosalind. She hardly heard the words he spoke.

"Come, father," said Olga, turning now to the priest. "We are ready."

Savotano moved forward and mumbled a Latin prayer. Then he looked upon the twin before him and directed them to kneel.

"No, no, no!" gasped the fair countess, trembling for the first time. "I cannot do that!"

"Kneel!" hissed the duke between his clinched teeth, and as he spoke he grasped the maiden more firmly by the arm and forced her down. She uttered a quick cry of pain as she felt the unmerciful grip, but she could not resist the strong arm of her persecutor.

"Now go on!" the duke cried as he held the maiden down. "Go on, Savotano, and let the business be done as soon as possible."

"Hold!"

It was a voice of thunder which spoke thus, and it came from the door. The duke started to his feet, and he beheld Ruric Nevel, the gunmaker, approaching the spot. But the youth came not alone. Behind him came the huge bulk of Vladimir, the monk, and more still, back of the monk came the widow, Claudia Nevel, and the boy, Paul, and then there were, besides all this, a heavy tramp of feet in the hall and the clang of steel.

"Hold! Stop this accursed mockery!" Ruric shouted as he strode up the apartment.

"Miserable dog!" gasped the duke, mad and frantic with rage. "How dare you come hither?"

"Look ye, proud duke," the monk interposed, coming quickly forward; "I am at the bottom of all this. I have come to stop this foul work!"

Rosalind had started to her feet when she first heard Ruric's voice, and now, as the monk spoke, a ray of hope darted to her soul, and, with a quick bound, she reached her lover's side.

"Ruric, Ruric!" It was all she could say, and, with a flood of tears, she pillowed her head upon his bosom, and his stout arms were wound fondly about her.

"Fear not," he whispered, "for, oh, Rosalind, thou art safe now."

The mad duke saw the movement, and, with a bitter curse, he started toward them.

"Now, by the living gods," he shouted, with his fists clinched and his eyes flashing fire, "you have come to your death! What, ho, there! Without! Slaves, where are ye?"

In a moment more the side door was thrown open, and a dozen of the duke's servants came rushing in.

"Ha! Olga cried. "You are in time. Seize these dogs! Kill them

on the spot if they offer one act of resistance. At them now! Down with the dogs!"

"Hold!" It was Vladimir who spoke, and every arm dropped as they heard that voice. It was different from the voice they had heard the fat monk use before.

The duke started as though a thunderbolt had burst at his feet.

"Who art thou?" he gasped, staggering farther back.

"Olga, duke of Tula," spoke the monk in tones which sounded strange for him, because they were so different from those he had been wont to use, "I am thy master!"

As he spoke he threw open the long black robe which enveloped his person and cast it upon the floor at his feet, and there it lay, a huge pile of wadding and stuffing! The vast rotundity of person was gone, and the strange man now stood in his own fair form. His chin—that prominent chin—was no more hidden, and he was but a small man—not much larger than the boy Paul, who stood near him. Next he placed his hand to his head and tore away the tight skullcap, and the ring of gray hair came away with it, leaving a cluster of glossy hair floating down over the neck and shoulders!

"Great God of mercy," gasped Savotano, staggering back, "it is the emperor!"

"Aye," cried Peter, turning his darkly flashing eye upon the staggering duke, "I am your emperor! Paul, go and call the guard."

The boy hastened from the palace, and when he returned he was followed by a party of the Imperial guard.

"Mercy, mercy, sire!" gasped the duke, sinking down on his knees.

But the emperor answered him not. He only turned to his guard and bade them secure the duke and the foul priest.

Rosalind Valdaï gazed upon the transformed man until the strange truth worked its way to her struggling mind, and then she turned once more to Ruric. She gazed up into his face, and she saw the holy smile which rested there. The joyful truth came to her now, and, with one long, low cry of frantic hope and bliss, she sank upon her noble lover's bosom. She could not speak. She could only cling closely and more close to her loved protector, and, with her head pillowed close by the heart that beat for her, she wept away all the grief of her opened soul.

"Olga," spoke the emperor after the nobleman had been firmly bound, "your race of iniquity is run."

"No, no, sire!" the duke cried in humble, supplicating tones. "Say not so! In this single thing I may have been wrong, but let my mad, consuming love be some palliation for my offense. Oh, you will not crush me with public shame for this! You will not cast from you one who loves you well!"

"Oh, miserable man," uttered Peter, with a look of utter contempt upon the base wretch, "add not perjury to your already accumulated crimes! Hark ye, some months since I knew there was conspiracy in my capital, and I knew there was much of evil, too, which was never reported to me. I resolved to ferret it out, and to that end I meant to mingle among my people without their knowing me. So I had that robe made and so stuffed and wadded that I could even hide my chin in the seeming fat. I assumed the garb, and my own master at arms did not at first know me. Once in awhile I made my page assume the garb and be seen in it about the city, and thus all thought of suspecting me was cut off. I have been at the work, Olga, and I have found out all I sought. It was mere accident that first threw me in the way of this young gunmaker, and it was by accident, too, that I overheard the Count Damonoff and his companion discussing the subject of their mission to the gunmaker's shop. Of course I followed that scheme up, and I should have snatched our fair young countess from your grasp ere this had I not been desirous of arriving at another point first. Perhaps you know that the Princess Sophia and the Minister Gallitzin have planned a grand overturn of my throne? Ah! You tremble! And now, my noble duke," the emperor continued in a deeper tone, "I have learned of your own guilt in that affair. Oh, you do love me, do you? But I know you now. Two of your tools are in my hands. They are named Totma and Viska. They have made a full confession, and I now know all your villainies. I know what you have planned against this noble countess and against her noble lover. I know what you planned against the Count Damonoff, and I know, too, what you have planned against your emperor. Not a word, sir! You are the Duke of Tula no more. A more worthy man wears the ducal coronet from this hour. Ruric Nevel shall assume the station you have dis-