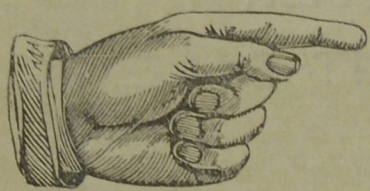


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KERNER: The Destroyer of High Prices

The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

[CONTINUED.]

Thus bidden Urzen resumed:
"The noble count was desirous, sire, 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 Khitagorod 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, sire, 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, sire. 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, sire, 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, sire. 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 misstates"—

"Never 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."

"And then you knocked him down?"

"I did, sire."

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

"Sire," answered the youth quickly, "when Damonoff tried 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."

There was something in this reply and more in the tone and bearing of him who spoke it that made the duke tremble. He saw plainly that the emperor's eyes sparkled with admiration as they rested upon the gunmaker.

"But now about this duel," resumed the emperor. "How dared you take advantage of the count in the conflict?"

"Advantage, sire?" repeated the youth in surprise.

"Aye. Did he not, Stephen Urzen?"

"He did, sire," replied the man thus addressed.

"And which of the two do you call the best swordsman?" Peter asked.

"Why, sir, the count is or was vastly his superior."

"And what say you, sir lieutenant?"

Alaric trembled, for this was addressed to him. He knew that the duke was anxious to crush his friend, and he feared to draw the wrath of that powerful nobleman down upon his head. But a happy thought came to his aid.

"Sire," he said, "I would rather you would judge of that for yourself."

"Me judge? And how am I to do that?"

(To be Continued.)

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