

The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

(CONTINUED.)

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 was beautiful. The sun shone brightly upon the glistening snow, and the air was still and calm. The sharp frost of the atmosphere served only to brace the system up, and Ruric threw open his pelisse that he might breathe more freely. He had been upon the ground but a few minutes when the other party came in sight around the head of the river.

As soon as the count and his second arrived and the horses had been secured the lieutenant proposed that they should repair to the building which was close at hand. This was a large open boathouse which was unused and deserted in the winter, and it was proposed to go in there because the reflection of the strong sunlight from the bright snow was calculated to blind and blur the eye.

"Ha! What means that?" uttered Orsa as he saw a sledge just turning the bend of the river with an officer in it.

"It is only a surgeon," replied Damonoff. "I would not cut a man's flesh without giving him a fair chance to survive it."

"And then you may find him serviceable to yourself, eh?" suggested the lieutenant.

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

In a moment more the new sledge came up, and Ruric recognized its 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 unhinge 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 moved a step forward, "ere we commence 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!"

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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 the 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 Conrad Damonoff was accounted a strong man. In the athletic sports of the court club he had few superiors and not many equals. But Ruric Nevel 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 Conrad Damonoff started back, and a quick cry escaped his lips. His antagonist's point had 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.

(Con)

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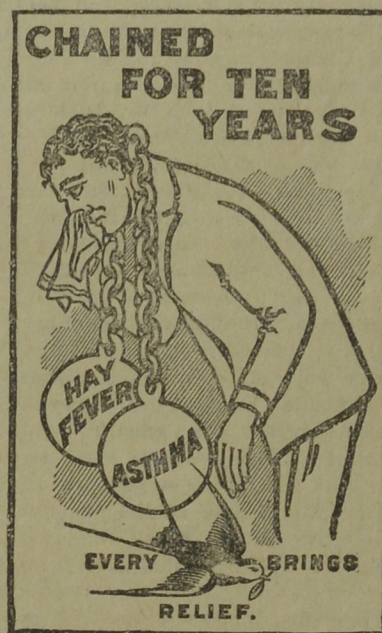
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