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STRICTLY ONE PRICE.

The Gunmaker Of Moscow

By SYLVANUS COBB, Jr.

[CONTINUED.]

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 moment 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?"

"I suppose they're coming to see if we've finished the job," returned the other, "and, by the saints, we ought to have done it ere this. But they shall find it done!"

The ponderous club was raised again, and, with a quick, decisive movement, the man advanced. Ruric made a movement of the body as though he would bow his head for the stroke. Every nerve and muscle of his frame was set for the trial, and for the instant his heart stood still. Quick as thought his body bent—his right knee was brought almost to his chin—and then, with all the force he could command, he planted his foot in the pit of the assassin's stomach. The effect was electrical. The wretch bent like a broken stick and sank down without a single sign of life.

The second man uttered an oath and sprang forward with uplifted club, but Ruric easily dodged the blow, and then, as the thought for the first time flashed upon his mind, he darted to where the lantern stood and overturned it. He had noticed an open passage close at hand which seemed to lead to some sort of a dressing room, and, guided by his memory alone, for it was now dark as Erebus there, he glided swiftly into it. When he knocked over the

lantern, he had upset column and all, and just as he reached the passage he heard a heavy fall, and he knew that his enemy had stumbled over the fallen column. He heard the curses, loud and deep, which dropped from the lips of the baffled man as he picked himself up, and in a moment more he was edified by a conversation between the two, for villain No. 1 had revived, though the tone of his voice plainly indicated that he had a severe pain still lingering with him.

"Michael, Michael!" groaned No. 1, and as he spoke Ruric could hear him scrambling up on his feet.

"Hi, Oriel!" returned No. 2.

"Have you dropped him?"

"No!" cried Michael, with a curse which we do not choose to transcribe. "He's a perfect devil!"

"But where's the lantern?"

"He put it out."

"But you ought to have knocked him down, you clown."

"So had you."

"Me? Why, he kicked me over."

"Well, he dodged by me and kicked over the lantern."

"But where is he now?"

"He's gone. Hark! Ha, I guess they've caught him. Don't you hear?"

"Yes; they've caught somebody."

"And of course it's him. He went that way. Let's go and find!"

He did not finish the sentence, for at that moment a voice came up in thunder tones, and it said:

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"Good God!" gasped villain No. 1.

"What is that?"

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"By the living gods, that is not from any of our men!" uttered the second ruffian. "Ha, they are coming this way!"

"Ruric! Ruric!"

"There is but one place," returned Oriel. "Here in the little drawing room. Come, let's find it. Oh, curses on that gunmaker's head! If he be not the very devil, then he's a bound partner of his. Have you found the entrance, Michael?"

"No. It's near you somewhere. Can't you—Ha! In, in!"

At that moment the glare of a flaming torch flashed through the gloom of the place, and the two villains stood revealed. A dozen stout men, all well armed, appeared in the only passage by which they could escape, for to have fled into the drawing room of which they had spoken would avail them nothing.

"Ho, villains!" shouted Vladimir, the monk, raising his flaming torch high above his head with his left hand, while in his right he waved a heavy sword. "Where is Ruric Navel?"

"Here, here!" cried our hero, starting forward into the larger room.

"What! Safe—alive—well?" uttered Vladimir.

"Aye, my noblest of friends. But, oh, cast off this accursed bond from my arms. It eats into the flesh."

(To be Continued.)

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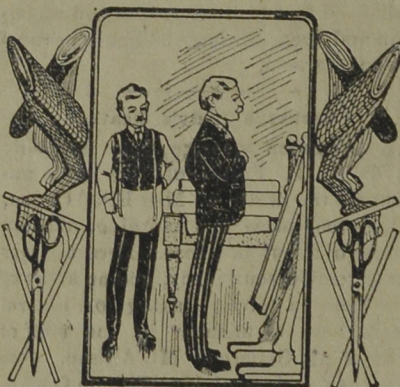
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JANUARY 1902.

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