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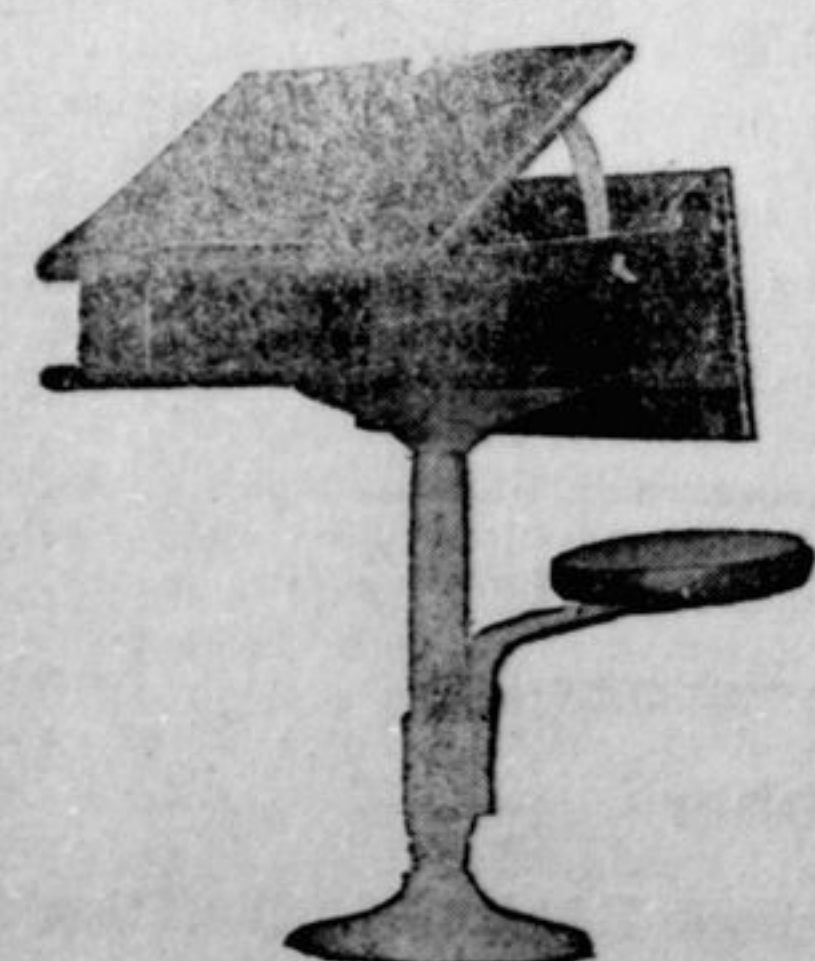
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**A SOLDIER OF COMMERCE**

By **JOHN ROE GORDON**

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**CHAPTER XI. PRISON ALARM.**

**C**OVERED by their long cloaks, unnoticed by the few who were in the streets, Alma and Harvey Irons went toward the river. Several times Harvey tried to speak, but Alma would not permit it. Winding through the narrower streets, met twice by sentries and giving the password, which she knew, Alma led him safely to the wharf where the hayboats lay. Lanterns moved here and there, but most of the boatmen were asleep. Alma knew where the boat of Charka of Ashkar was moored and hurried to it. It could not well be mistaken, for it was the largest of the hayboats, and its cargo had not been touched.

"Charka!" she said as the two stepped upon the boat. "Charka of Ashkar?"

"Who calls Charka of Ashkar?" asked the sleepy boatman as he emerged from the dingy little box he called his house.

"It is I, Charka, who purchased your hay and bargained for you to deliver it at Astrabad as a passenger."

"Good. You were long coming. The hay has been wanted many times. But I knew you would come, so I did not sell."

"M. Irons," said Alma, turning to Harvey and putting out her hands, "I can do no more. Knowing that you were in danger of being killed or of being sent to Siberia, where your identity would be lost and all hope of rescue gone, I determined that I would set you free if possible. I have purchased this hay, and Charka will deliver it to you, rather—at Astrabad, where you will be safe from the persecutions of your enemies."

"But what of you, my darling girl, my bravest? You have sacrificed yourself for me."

"They dare not kill me," said Alma. "They would do anything. But I cannot go like this. Give me just a moment. Let me take you in my arms!"

"Come with me now," raining kisses on her lips. "I will not go without you. I will go back and give myself up."

"Dear one, do not speak like that! It is ungrateful!"

"So it is, darling. You have cut off your hair, your beautiful hair, that I loved. How did you accomplish my rescue? Tell me what you did?"

Alma told Harvey the whole story.

"I even gave myself up to abandon for your sake, dear one," concluded Alma. "I permitted his lips to touch mine; I allowed his arm to encircle my waist. Oh, the thought of it burns, but it was for you!"

"Great heaven! What a woman! And now you want me to leave you to their vengeance! Russia does not forgive. You will be sent to Siberia. You must come with me or I shall remain and fight for you."

"And be killed! You must go at once. Kiss me, dear one! It may be the last."

"Where are your beautiful niece and Dellnikoff?" asked the governor. "The prince said they were going to find a secluded spot and talk things over. I asked Alma, and she consented to the announcement of their betrothal, but said the prince had not asked her to be his wife. I sent him to her, and they came to an agreement. But they wanted to be alone to talk. I do not know what keeps them."

"It is not so easy to leave off a conversation with a girl like Alma. It is almost time for the supper. I hope they will not forget."

The governor showed his anxiety as the time for him to take the highest of his guests to supper arrived.

"I am filled with misgivings, your excellency," said Jurneff. "There is something wrong."

"Wrong! What can be wrong?"

"Something, I know not what. The girl bewitched us all tonight. I had never seen her so gay, so reckless. She acted as if she had drunk too much wine, and she seldom drinks any, and now, when she is not here, with her beauty and her wit to ensnare me, I recall how she hated the prince. She never said so, but she refused to marry him. She was in love with an American."

"Where is the American?"

"He is in our prison. He is implicated in the abduction of Kouza Biartekis."

"And you think—what do you think? Speak, man!"

"I cannot think. I am going to the prison to see what has happened."

He called for his carriage. It was gone. He took the nearest one—one in which a Chinese mandarin had come to the bath—and hurried to the prison. He dashed to the living apartments. Marie was asleep. He roared for her, and, trembling in every limb, she came to him.

"Has my niece returned from the ball?"

"She did return, colonel. I went to her, but she dismissed me and told me to go to bed."

Jurneff ran to Alma's rooms. On the floor he saw her long brown tresses.

"What devilry is here tonight?" he gasped.

He dashed to the prison. The captain of the guard started when he saw the pallor of the colonel's face.

"Has any one visited the prison tonight?"

"Yes; the inspector general."

"What! Do you mean Prince Dellnikoff?"

"Yes, my colonel. He had with him also an orderly."

"He and his orderly went into the dungeons where the prisoners for Siberia are kept. They soon came back, as the orderly was not well. The inspector general said they would go out in the air a short time and return. They did not return."

"Open that door to the dungeons!" The captain took down the bunch of keys. He trembled and turned white. "What is the matter?" commanded Jurneff.

"The key is gone." Jurneff swayed. He no longer thought of promotion, but how to save himself from disgrace.

"The door must be broken in. Go for the locksmith!"

The locksmith was roused from his sleep and soon had the door open. Jurneff rushed in and began opening the cells. In one he found Dellnikoff, sleeping as if drunk. He dragged him out to the light.

"Drugged!" he exclaimed. "The girl has tricked us all! Where is the American?"

His cell was opened. It was empty. "Fire the alarm gun! They are still in Tiflis! The guards will find them! Get out every man! Have the garrison turned loose! I must go and report to the governor."

In ten minutes the ball was over. Chinese mandarins and Persian princes were hustled off and chattered together in bewilderment. Every Russian at the ball was sent out to hunt the fugitive, with orders to bring him back dead or alive.

**CHAPTER XII. THE SEARCH FOR THE FUGITIVES—THE HAYBOAT STARTS.**

**C**HARKA of Ashkar pretended to waken from a deep slumber as four soldiers, led by a subordinate officer, came rushing down the wharf.

"Ho, there, on board this hayboat!" shouted the officer.

"Masters, I am here," said Charka, rubbing his eyes and blinking in the light of the lanterns they carried. "What has happened?"

"A prisoner of the czar has escaped! Assisted by a woman who is a traitor, he escaped from the prison at Tiflis tonight and must be, with his companion, somewhere in the city."

"Well, am I the prisoner?"

"No, you pig."

"Am I, then, the woman?"

"Curses upon you!"

"Why am I awakened with these shouts? I am a peaceful man from Ashkar, trying to sell my hay."

"Oh, your hay!" shouted one of the soldiers, with a laugh. "With the business of finding a prisoner of state on our minds, we must think of your hay!"

As he spoke he thrust his bayonet deep into the hay.

"By the gods," exclaimed another, "that is an idea! This man is from Astrakhan and would no doubt assist the American to escape."

"Shut your mouth, fool!" said the officer. "There is no American. It was a Russian who escaped."

"Profits! You want profits from a fair and yet follow the mollah against the czar?" returned one of the soldiers. Charka made a sign. The men at once began releasing the boat, amid the shouts and cries of soldiers and disturbed boatmen all along the river. Hundreds of soldiers flocked along the wharfs, invaded boats, routing out men and women that they might inspect the most secret places.

Charka, grumbling and with much make believe anger, slowly got under way. The soldiers laughed as the hayboat began slowly to descend the stream. The boat was a most crude affair. Its only means of propulsion was a great lateen sail, useless on this quiet night. So the men resorted to long poles, and the big boat crawled along the bank.

The search throughout Tiflis went on. Generals and colonels, many of them informed for the first time that the abductor of Kouza Biartekis was an American, joined in the hunt. Officers in the brilliant uniforms they had worn at the ball rushed with those in working garb and searched bazaars, coffee houses and churches. There was not a square foot of ground in Tiflis that was not searched nor a building that was not entered.

Mystified, baffled and enraged, Jurneff raved and cursed as he paced the prison corridor. But while he raved, and soldiers searched, Charka and his boat continued slowly down the river. By daylight Charka had made twenty miles and tied up at the rotting wharf of a small town. Leaving his men in charge, he went ashore to buy food. He returned with a sufficient supply for the day, and the boat went on. A little steam launch containing soldiers came puffing up behind him.

"Who are you?" demanded the officer. "Why do you leave Tiflis with a load of hay? The markets are there."

"There are no markets for me," said Charka, with a sad wail. "Many days



"I took the precaution to bring my purse."

have I spent on the journey. Many nights I lay and thought of my profits. At last, when I reached Tiflis, there came a merchant who owned five camels. He purchased the hay and promised to come and take it away and pay me for it. But, alas, the soldiers of the czar came in the night and drove me away! I am Charka of Ashkar. They said that because I follow the mollah I am not fit to sell hay to camels."

"Enjoy yourself, fanatic. Go ask the mollah to buy your hay. He has many camels."

"Aye, and men and guns," muttered Charka as the launch sped on.

"Have you seen two escaped prisoners?" came back a voice.

"I have seen many men. No one informed me he was an escaped prisoner."

"One was a woman."

"Then let a woman hunt. It is the only way."

A curse for his insolence came floating back. The launch continued down the river.

In the little box of a house Charka prepared a meal. Before he or his men partook of anything he called to the refugees.

"It is safe," he said. "The launch is out of sight, and we are passing swamp lands where there are no villages or farms. We shall meet no one. Come from under and eat. It may be some time before you reach a place of safety."

"We must keep well under cover till that boat has passed us," said Harvey. "What do you make it out to be, Charka?"

It was a long, low vessel, without masts, with high bow and stern. It was propelled by four rowers, two on each side, and a fifth man sat in the stern with a paddle to steer.

"We have nothing to fear from that," said Charka. "That is a Turkish cayik. Some rich merchant perhaps from Constantinople has brought his pleasure boat all the way to the fair. Think of carrying a boat across land!"

"That may be so or not," said Harvey. "A boat might be built at Tiflis after the Turkish model. It is safer for us to be out of sight."

The long boat came on rapidly, and Harvey and Alma again crawled under the hay.

Charka grumbled enviously as he saw the four rowers bending to their task. The Turkish cayik seemed more anxious to avoid the hayboat than Charka was to avoid the cayik. It steered to the opposite side of the river, the efforts of the rowers were doubled, and at a burst of speed it went by.

At night they were within sight of the village of Salain. Though it was a dark night, Charka, who had the lives of his passengers in mind, forbade them coming from under the hay.

"The steamboat of the Muscovites has not yet returned up the river," he said. "It is lying at Salain to watch the boats that go out upon the Caspian."

"This was too much for the inequity of Harvey. He crawled to the edge of the hay to observe what was going on."

"Charka," he said, "that Turkish boat is up to something. I notice the Russian is going to intercept it. There's business of some kind going on. Get nearer, that we may hear the conversation."

As they came opposite the lights of the town they saw the Russian boat shoot out from the land and in the radius of the strong electric light in her bow saw the cayik evidently trying to escape.

"They are after the Turk! We are in for it, too!" wailed Charka.

"Keep a cool head, Charka," said Harvey. "Remember, a precious life depends upon your shrewdness."

"I know."

"Stop where you are!" came a voice from the Russian. "We will inspect you."

Knowing the uselessness of refusing, Charka made his way toward the launch, which had now steamed up alongside the cayik.

"It is true, most excellent sirs," a Turkish voice from the cayik was saying. "I am an Osmanli. It is also true that I am Hafiz Effendi, who once acted as merchant in those goods the men of Georgia and Circassia had to sell. I stole nothing, but when a father wished to place his beautiful daughter in the house of a wealthy prince I carried on the negotiations. But that is all done. Even the other day a girl was stolen, but it was an American, not an Osmanli, who stole her."

"Yes, and we want that American now!" growled the officer in command. "What have you in those sacks?"

"Nothing, excellent sirs, but some of the goods I took to the fair and which I did not sell. I shall return to Astrabad and thence to Constantinople by way of the caravan."

"Go on," said the officer, and the cayik shot away.

"Now, you," said the officer to Charka. "Hello! It is that slow old hayboat. Well, my friend, where are you going?"

"I, too, my master, am going to Astrabad," said Charka.

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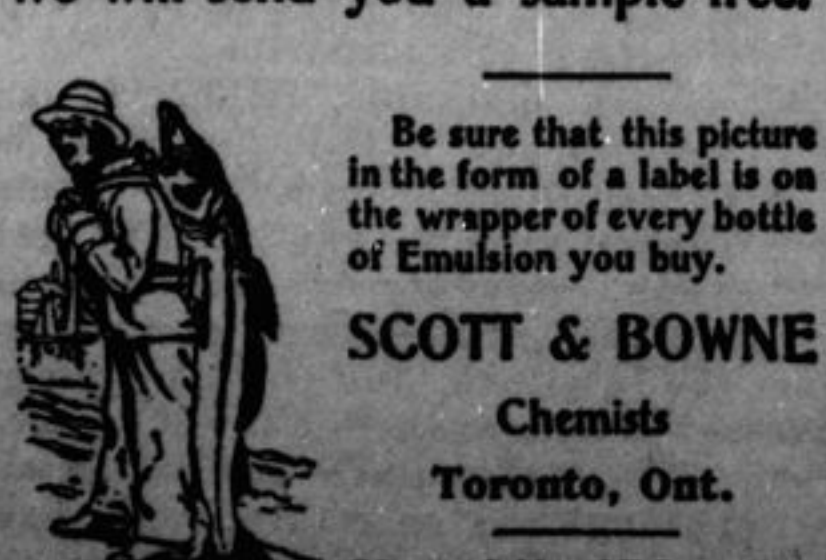
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