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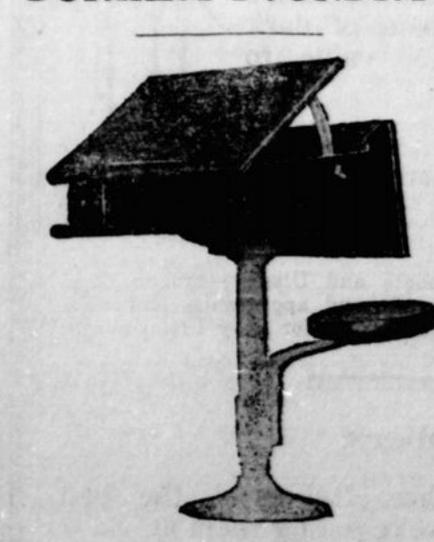
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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XV. FOUR GENTLEMEN OF WEALTH.

HE situation of Harvey Irons

on the hayboat was critical in the extreme; but, great as was his danger, he regarded it as nothing compared to the danger that threatened Alma. He was almost exhausted from hunger, cold and grief. The boat slowly drifted in a southern direction, making toward the eastern side of the Caspian. It drifted out of the ordinary course of navigation, and he watched in vain for a passing vessel. He watched as long as possible the course of the ameer's sloop and reasoned that it was making for the nearest Bokharan port. Night came on, with no rescuing vessel in sight. Hour after hour he drifted, hoping almost against hope, ever thinking of Alma and of a way to help her. Axle Grease and Hoof About midnight it seemed to him that the rocking motion of the boat had ceased; that it had become stationary.

> "Here is a pretty mess!" he exclaimed. "I wonder if this old hulk has run aground. The Caspian is shallow, but I did not think a boat like this could run aground in the middle of it."

An examination in the dark was not easy. Harvey slid down the pile of hay, groping about with one hand while he clung for safety with the other. He fancied he saw a faint light glimmering some distance from him, but it disappeared as suddenly as it had come. He saw the light again, a quick passing from one point to another, but showing for a moment only.

"Now, that light is not on a vessel," Harvey reasoned. "It is a lantern carried around by a person who is walking on land. If I drifted aground here, certainly there cannot be water enough at that place to float any kind of vessel. I've probably drifted on the shore of some island. Is it a hospitable island or will I be worse off in the clutches of the inhabitants than where I am? The wind may drive me off again before morning and a vessel pick me up. But would the vessel be any safer than this island? And how can I investigate without attracting attention?"

Soon there was another gleam of light such as might come through an open door from a light within. A man was standing between Harvey and the light. He seemed to be looking toward the hayboat, but soon disappeared into the same place from which came the mysterious light.

"It is an island," said Harvey. "I am now resting on a shoal, and the water cannot be very deep between this and the island. I'll swim ashore and risk

He removed some of his clothing, made a bundle of it and slid off into the water. To his surprise he could stand on bottom. Carefully he felt his way. For a short distance the water grew more shallow. Then it got deeper, and he was forced to swim. After a short swim he again felt the ground under his feet, and he waded on to dry land. The shore was sandy.

He moved slowly and cautiously. It was difficult to locate where the light had been. He groped along, wandering in many curves. Trees were on the island, but he could see no trace of a building. After groping some time in the darkness he discovered what appeared to be a rock about five feet high. Feeling the surface of this, he found that it was not a solid rock, but a rocky formation with an opening on one side. Lying flat on the ground and peering in, he saw a light far in the earth, apparently from a lantern hung on a peg. He slowly crawled inside the cave. After advancing for several feet he found that he could stand up and walk.

A voice came from behind a shelter of the rocky wall that projected into the chamber. It pleased Harvey that it was not the voice of a Russian, for Russians were the only people he had any reason to fear.

"I have spoken," said a calm, stern voice within the concealed chamber. "I have given the treasure as it should be given."

"But, no, my brother," came a voice that seemed to Harvey to tremble with emotion. It was a harsh, cold voice, not like the other. "You have done well for yourself. You have done well for the clans in the mountains. But we have not fared as we should. Was it not our courage that made the accu-

mulation of this booty possible?" "Yes; that is so," answered the first speaker. "But I am Palpak, chief of the Zannucks, and it was I who planned everything. The wealth that came from the ameer's people we were compelled to hide here until the ameer's soldiers had finished their search of this island, having just purchased it among our villages, and the wealth from the Russian government. I'll have no murder committed here." that came from the Buddhist temples, which we found the most valuable of all, and the gold that came from the paymasters of the Russian soldiers whom we attacked and robbed. All SCHOOL DESK. whom we attacked and robbed. All these are mine-mine! Do you understand, Domitan? It was Palpak, the chief, who in the interest of all his people, downtrodden as they are by

the wicked ameer, strove to gain that

with which we could buy horses and

must be divided among the people."

"No." said a third voice, thick and guttural. "Domitan is right, Palpak, though you be chief. We were with you in all the ventures. It is not right that you should rob us now."

"Rob you!" cried Palpak angrily. "Rob you of what? In the name of the white bull, of what can I rob you when you have nothing save what I have given you? I tell you I am working not for wealth for you, my brothers, but for the whole people. The Zannucks have been downtrodden and robbed by the ameer. He demands more tribute than we possess. He taxes us for our wives, for our cattle, and then his soldiers steal the cattle. He taxes us for our families, and the soldiers steal our children. Our boys are compelled to enter the ameer's army, and our girlscurses upon the ameer and upon you if you cannot see the justice of what I am doing. But the ameer has desisted from his search. He has some great affair now in progress. It is time we took the treasure to the mountains and distributed it among the people and then begin again to plan."

"It shall not be so! I swear it!" "There are three of us!" growled the surly voice.

"And we are determined men!" said one who had not spoken before.

"Do you intend to defy me?" demanded the one who called himself

The three laughed. "We intend toyou will see what we intend." Harvey began to catch the drift of

"This," he reasoned, "is what is popularly called honor among thieves. Here's a band of four who have been successful in gathering treasure by robbing everything and everybody to enrich a people kept down by that miserable wretch of an ameer. And now the only decent one, if there is such a thing as decency among them, is to be killed so that the other three can keep the treasure instead of putting it to the



Who are you?" the robbers demanded use originally intended. Three against one. If I can save the leader, I can no doubt enlist him in my behalf."

He crept to the wall and peered around. A strange sight met his eager gaze. On a wooden peg that had been driven into a crevice of the rocky wall hung a lantern. On the stone floor of the cavern squatted four men in a circle, and between them were many bags of gleaming jewels, bales of choicest fabrics and bags of gold.

It was not difficult to pick out Palpak, for his watchful eyes were roving from one to the other as he remained on his guard against an attack. But the plans of the other three were already laid. It was evidently a preconcerted arrangement. The one called Domitan shouted "Now!" and the three hurled themselves upon Palpak.

"Hold on there! Let that man alone!" shouted Harvey, rushing in.

His presence disconcerted the robbers, and they stopped fighting. Domitan, with a curse and gasping for breath, rose to his feet and seized his

"Who are you?" the robbers demanded in chorus. The four seemed ready to join

against Harvey. "My friends," he said, "permit me to say that this conduct upon my own territory, to which you were not invited, is most unseemly. I am the owner

"You! The owner of the island of Ping Shong!" "That's what I said! At this moment

I own the island." "It is a lie!" said Domitan. "You die on your island, then."

He made a rush, but Palpak intercepted him. The other two, recovering from their astonishment, joined with

cattle and make the Zannucks wealthy. Suddenly from the outer cavern came I have given you enough. The rest the rush of booted feet and the clank of

"Selze them all!" commanded Captain Sergius Orskoff to the force of Russian soldiers, who rushed upon the combatants and executed the order before the American and the robbers were aware of their presence.

At the moment Harvey recognized Orskoff the latter exclaimed:

"The American! I have found you at last!"

CHAPTER XVI. AN ARGUMENT AND AN EXPLANATION.

ENGEANCE gleamed in Orskoff's eyes. His sword was at the throat of the American. "Stealer of women! Scoundrel who has twice stolen the daughter of Biartelkis. Where have you hidden her? The searchlight of the gunboat revealed the hayboat, but she is not there. Where have you hidden her?"

"Now, captain," said Harvey, "don't be too hasty in this matter. I did not steal Koura Biartelkis, but I know where she is."

"You know! Of course you know! But you lie when you say you did not steal her. You came down the Kur in a hayboat belonging to the Astrakhan Charka with a woman disguised as a man? Who else was that but Koura?" "You are getting excited! Kindly take that confounded sword from my

throat. I'd like to talk with some com-"Comfort! A stealer of girls asks for comfort! That is the limit of

American effrontery. I'll rup the sword to the bone." "If you do, I assure you that you will never see your Koura again."

"See, he admits he has the girl! He

has accomplices who will kill her if he is harmed!" shouted one of the soldiers. Something in the words and manner of Harvey impelled Orskoff to lower his sword. He turned to the soldiers who were guarding the four robbers and said:

"Take them on board the gunboat. It is evident that they have robbed Russians, for here are bags of rubles. They must be taken at once to Tiflis, Convey all the treasure on board."

Turning again to Harvey, his face resuming its expression of hate, he said: "You know that I love Koura, and to rescue her I am willing to parley with you. I had determined to kill you on

sight. Come with me." Harvey followed his captor to the entrance of the cave. Here he found a guard of additional soldiers with lanterns. In the distance a brilliant searchlight sent its gleam upon the island, lighting it as by day. In the great light from the gunboat Harvey could see that the old hayboat had stuck in the mud near the island. At a little distance was a sailing vessel, evidently the property of Palpak and his robber brothers. On the shore were two boats, which had landed the Rus-

The five prisoners were jostled rudely while getting into the boats and at a command from Orskoff were soon on the way to the waiting gunboat. They were received on board by a young officer, who saluted Orskoff.

"I congratulate you, my captain. I am told by the men that you not only captured the American who stole the daughter of Biartelkis, but that you also had the good fortune to seize the four robbers who attacked the paymaster and robbed him at Mogda."

"Are you sure these are the men?" "I could not be mistaken. The leader is Palpak, chief of the tribe of Zan-

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nucks, nominally under the rule of the ameer, but hating him." "Guard them well then."

captain?" "No, lieutenant. As you know, we want to find Koura Biartelkis. I have, it is true, captured the man who stole her, but I have not succeeded in finding the young woman. Remain here while I investigate. I shall go on that island in the daytime and search. I can see little at night even with the searchlight."

"Shall we get under way at once, my

Harvey stood waiting to be questioned, but Orskoff paid little heed to him. "Put the prisoners in irons," he said to a subaltern.

"But irons won't unlock my lips," said Harvey.

"I will find a way to unlock your line. If I cannot find Koura on that island in the morning, I will hang you by your thumbs till you tell the truth." "But I am anxious to tell it now. You won't listen."

Orskoff waved his hands, and Harvey was dragged away.

The gunboat remained, and as soon as it was sufficiently light in the morning Orskoff took a squad and returned to the island. He examined every foot of the place and returned to the gunboat chagrined and angry.

"Bring up that American!" he commanded. Harvey was hustled to the

"Lieutenant Nevisky, attend!" said Orskoff. "Now, stealer of women, I will give you one more chance to tell the truth. If you do not, your thumbs will be torn out. Your life depends upon your answers. Tell where you have hidden Koura. Your punishment will be worse than death if you do not. Koura was to have been my wife"-

"You said something like that before, but that she was to be your wife is news to me. For my part, I am willing to tell you where she is."

"I have searched the island. I am convinced that Koura is not there." "I could have told you that and saved you trouble and time. Koura is getting farther away every minute. You will never find her."

"You fiend, I will have your life!" howled the captain as he sprang to his "You do seem inclined that way, but

before you take it, reflect. Just show a little common sense, if you have any. If you kill me, how do you expect to find Koura?" "But you say you do not know where

"I said nothing of the kind. I said I did know where she was. But I did not take her there. Take off these confounded irons, treat me like a man, and I will tell you what I know."

"Remove the irons," said the captain. The lieutenant unlocked them. "Come with me alone," said Harvey. Surprised, Orskoff beckoned to Ne-

visky, who turned and walked away. "Beware," said Orskoff, "how you trifle with me." "I am not trifling with you. I am the only man who can help you find your Koura, and it happens that I have

as ardent a reason to want to find her as you." "You-you love her!" "I don't even know her, but one love is with her."

"Then you did take her away?" "No. I did not. I know nothing about Koura-that is, except where she is this moment. But, before I tell, you must first tell me how you traced me to the island."

Orskoff made a gesture of impa-

"Koura had been living with her uncle in Tiflis. I saw her every day, and if I was not on duty I spent the evening at the house. One night I was on duty and did not go. I stopped to see her the next morning, and her uncle, who was beside himself with terror, told me she had gone out the night before and had not returned. I knew she had been stolen, and, as that was the morning you escaped from prison, I knew you had taken her. I searched the river and learned that Charka's hayboat had gone down toward the Caspian. It was said that a man and woman, the woman disguised as man, had gone with Charka. I reached the coast as soon as possible, but could not overtake you. The launch had gone before I made the discovery, or all this would not have happened. On the gunboat I cruised everywhere, using searchlight at night. Last night we discovered the hayboat and

at once went to the island." "I was on Charka's boat," said Harvey, "and if you had used any reasoning powers you would have known that it could not have been Koura who was with me. You say you were told that the woman with me was disguised as a man. Now, how could I get Koura in such a disguise? When a woman disguises herself, it is for a purpose. Koura was stolen; she did not go of her own accord, as did Alma."

"You speak of Alma Jurnieff, niece of the colonel."

"Yes. She assisted me to escape, and, as our attempt was discovered before she could return to her apartments, it was necessary for her to fly with me. On the Caspian the hayboat met with disaster, and Alma and I were left on it alone. We drifted all night, shivering with cold and hunger. In the morning we found ourselves under the bows of a long, black toat belonging to the arneer of Bokhara."

"I know the hoat. It is used to carry goods to Persia.'

"Not this time. It is being used to

carry Alma Jurnieff and Koura Biartelkis to Bokhara. They permitted Alma to go on board, and I, like a fool, in my excitement allowed them to know she was not what her clothing would show. They would not take me, and the captain, whose name, I believe, is Karakal, or something like that, shouted out to me that they had the daughter of Biartelkis and that soon both

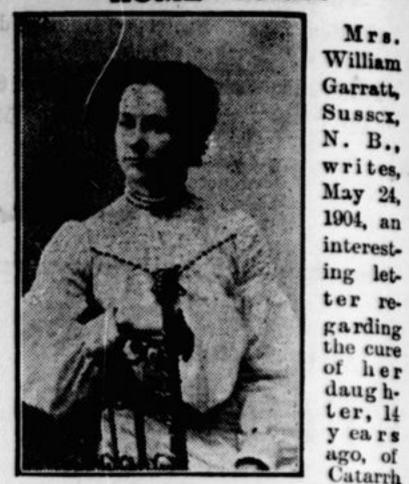
girls would be the brides of princes." "Is this true? Do you swear you are

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telling me the truth? How did they get Koura?"

"Hafiz Effendi passed us in a cayik. He was intercepted at the mouth of the river by the launch, and something was said about sacks. They were permitted to depart. Undoubtedly the Turk had Koura 'concealed."

Orskoff spent several minutes in thought. Suddenly turning to Harvey he held out his hand, saying:

"I believe you. I ask your pardon for the insults I have heaped on you. This is terrible! Koura gone! A slave to the heathen ameer, and I helpless to aid or rescue her! It makes one mad! I could drive this sword blade into my heart!"

"Sit down and be calm," said Harvey. "We can rescue Alma Jurnieff and Koura or kill the men who marry or harm them. Let us work the game together. I am starving. Give me some food."

The food was ordered.

TO BE CONTINUED.

Gooseberries and a Cat. Not long ago, says Collier's Weekly, officials of the department of agriculture were much amused by a letter sent the department by an occasional

correspondent in Virginia, Among other things the writer hastened to advise the secretary of the department-to this effect:

My wife had a Tame cat that dyd. Being a Torture shell and a Grate faverit, we had the same berred in the Gardin. and for the enrichment of the soil I had the Carkis deposited under the roots of a Gooseberry Bush. (The Frute being up to then of the smooth variety.) But the next Seson's Frute, after the Cat was berred, the Gooseberrys was all Hairyand more Remarkable, the Catapilers of the Same Bush was All of said Hairy de-

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