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[CONTINUED.]

CHAPTER XVII.

A TRAITOR TO THE CZAR.

CAPTAIN ORSKOFF paced up and down the deck feverishly while the American ravenously ate his meal. Harvey, when he had finished, asked for a cigar.

"You are maddening!" said Orskoff as he handed the American a cigar. "One can see that you are not in love—not as I am."

"Sit down," said Harvey. They took chairs on deck.

"Getting excited is not going to help us any," said Harvey, puffing at his cigar. "I am as eager as you to rescue the girls. The difference is that you, without any plans, want to rush off and probably involve us in greater trouble, while I wish to plan out a line of action. Now, that boat went somewhere on the Bokharan coast—where, we do not know. The thing is to get what information we can out of the robbers."

"They would lie to us."

"I don't think the chief, Palpak, would lie. Except for my presence

"Stop!" he commanded suddenly.

the other robbers would have killed him, and he must feel some gratitude."

"But these fellows are shrewd. We could do nothing with them unless we granted them their freedom."

"And that, of course, you would not do."

"No! I am an officer of the czar!"

"What do you intend to do with me?"

"It is my duty to return to Tiflis with you and give you over to the authorities."

"Just so. You are one of these machine made soldiers so common in Russia—fight for the czar and die for yourself. Is that it? No; that isn't quite right—fight and die for the czar and to the devil with yourself; that's more like it. Let's look over the premises. Take my own case in a business sense. I don't know where my windmills are. They were taken to Astrakhan by that fool of a German. Well, supposing I was at liberty to go after them, the first thing I would do would be to outline a plan of getting as quickly as possible from where I am at this moment to the spot where I considered it most likely I would find them."

"I don't see—the connection."

"No, of course not. But tell me—what is your duty in the matter of these robbers?"

"I have already stated that. I must take them to Tiflis and charge them with robbery. Several times the officers in charge of the money to pay the soldiers have been robbed. We suspected that it was done by some of the mountain robbers and mistrusted the Bokharans. But we could never catch any."

"That's because you are a machine soldier. The third section of your police does not work that way."

"What way?"

"Without thinking. Pardon me, you insist it is your duty to go at once to Tiflis?"

"Certainly, unless we can intercept that vessel belonging to the ameer."

"Suppose we do not intercept it? Suppose the rascals make a port in Bokhara?"

"Then I must return to Tiflis and ask permission to enter the territory of the ameer in search of Koura."

Harvey looked at him and whistled.

"My friend, you accused me a short time ago of not loving as you do. Yet you sit calmly here and say you would go to Tiflis to ask permission to rescue the girl you claim to love."

"I am a soldier of the czar!"

"Verily you are, and well have you learned your lesson. I am a soldier of commerce, and love it, but I would consider neither trade nor honor nor citizenship against the chance of saving the girl I love. To the deuce with a patriotism that destroys love. Orskoff, do your duty! If you feel that it is your duty to take me and the robbers to Tiflis, do so, and forever bid farewell to Koura Biartelkis."

"But what can I do? The girls are by this time perhaps on Bokharan soil. It is against the orders of the czar for a Russian soldier to step foot in that country."

"Tiflis is several days' journey from here; Bokhara but a short distance. Somewhere, in the clutches of the Bokharans, are the girls you and I love. Your duty calls you to desert them in their need; mine calls upon me to die for them if necessary. Rather than let you take me back to Tiflis I'll fight you to the death."

Orskoff stared. Harvey turned and resumed his walk. He took several turns and closely watched Orskoff. The Russian was deeply thinking, his brow knitted in perplexity.

"Stop!" he commanded suddenly as Harvey reached him again. "You sell windmills. To no one save those who employ you do you owe allegiance. You come and go as you see fit. You are shrewd and brave and take your wares to all countries and run risks of death to promote the commercial interests of the company. You have spoken of your love. Under the whiplash of your tongue I am torn in halves with the bitterest conflict of my life. I have led my company in battle and have faced the enemy without a tremor, but that is nothing compared to the hell that is surging in my breast now. In me, in this breast, there is a conflict that overshadows anything in my experience."

"I don't understand," said Harvey.

"You would understand if you were a Russian officer and at the same time a man in love. Remember, I am performing my duty when I place you under arrest and take you back to Tiflis. You are a condemned prisoner who has escaped. With your innocence or guilt I have nothing to do. It is my duty to take those robbers to Tiflis, and it is not my duty to permit one of them to talk. Yet, as against this duty, the girl I love is in the hands of the Bokharans. You, the man who is most wanted in Tiflis, and these robbers are the only men on earth who can help me. For, once the girls are on Bokharan soil, I am helpless."

"Helpless?"

"I cannot stir regiments to cross the border. The order must come from St. Petersburg. By the time we get that order the girls will be married to the princes."

"That is what I have been striving to show you—the uselessness of your duty in this case. I claim your duty is to go after the girls."

"Impossible! There is a secret corps for such work. I am not a soldier once off Russian soil unless sent there."

"Who asked you to be a soldier? Come with me. Let us rescue the girls. Alma has really committed a crime, I suppose, but we must risk the danger of Tiflis. I'll take care of that part when we get the girls."

"You would try to escape—would even try to kill me to escape."

"Nonsense. If you will assist in rescuing the girls and let Alma Jurnieff escape, I will go back to Tiflis with you and take my medicine."

"You would risk death and disgrace for the girl you love?"

"Yes. I'd risk hell for the girl I love."

"That is love! That is love! It is as I feel myself. Let me think! What a problem for a man to solve!"

He abruptly left Harvey, who sat down, preferring to let Orskoff work out the problem himself. Orskoff paced gravely up and down, never once looking at Harvey.

"Have you a plan?" he asked suddenly, stopping before Harvey.

"Give me your answer to the problem you have set out to solve, and I will give you the plan I have thought of."

Again that monotonous pacing up and down the deck. It seemed to Irons as though the Russian was growing older looking each moment. Again the feverish eyes and working lips. It came to an end at last. With a sigh as if exhausted Orskoff dropped into the chair by the side of Irons.

"Well, I have fought the fight," he said wearily.

"And won?" asked Harvey.

"No; God knows it is no victory! I have lost. My patriotism goes down before my love. I am a Russian. I know the Russian cruelties to those who defy the czar. I know the pitiless rule that breaks the hearts and destroys the lives of those who even permit a culprit to escape. Knowing this—knowing the punishment, the disgrace, the horror of treachery—I have resolved to become—a traitor!"

"A traitor! What nonsense!"

"Yes, a traitor to the czar! You and I will soon be under the same condemnation. We will go together to the very throne of Bokhara if necessary and rescue those we love or die in the attempt. It is settled. I will not turn back!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A CONTRACT WITH A ROBBER CHIEF.

HARVEY broke the spell of silence:

"I thought you would see daylight. Now that we agree, let us go on and plan. We must not lose sight of the fact that we are dealing with unknown quantities. We have no method of learning just where the girls are. We must use measures that will assist us. What was your idea when you spoke of becoming a traitor?"

"I become a traitor the moment I give you your liberty and accompany you upon the proscribed ground of Bokhara."

"You must go even further than that. We must use the robbers."

"Palpak! I must at least send him and his brothers to Tiflis."

"You will then throw aside the one staff that can assist us over the difficulty."

"What use can the robbers be to us?"

"This fellow Palpak is chief of a clan called Zannucks, who hate the ameer and all those who are faithful to him. I overheard them talking in the cave. It seems the ameer levies such exorbitant taxes that the Zannucks cannot pay. He taxes everything—wives, children, cattle. That is the reason the chief seeks to rob the ameer and his people—to reimburse the Zannucks. Palpak would not hesitate to help us if by helping us he could work injury to the ameer. Grant the robbers their freedom. Let them take their booty to their people on condition that they assist us in rescuing the girls."

"Set free robbers who have attacked Russian paymasters!"

"You said that you would not turn back. Now you are trying to turn two ways—one toward Tiflis, the other toward Bokhara. It will not do. If you wish to accomplish anything in this affair, you must go the whole figure—stake all and win or lose. That is the way I do business."

"What is your plan?"

"Have Palpak brought here and let us talk with him in a straightforward businesslike way. Any man will help another if he can also benefit himself by doing so."

"I leave it to you. Your head is full of plans, while mine is simply taken up with thinking of poor Koura."

"I think of Alma as much as you do of Koura. But simply thinking will not rescue them. We must act, and act quickly."

Orskoff sent for Nevisky. The lieutenant was pacing the bridge, eager to be off. He could not understand why the captain did not hurry to Tiflis with the prisoners instead of wasting the time chatting in an apparently friendly way with one of them.

"Lieutenant, have the chief robber brought to me," said the captain.

As Palpak was being led toward them Orskoff said to Harvey: "Conduct the negotiations. I will agree to anything you plan."

Orskoff ordered the irons removed from the robber. When the three were alone, Harvey said to Palpak:

"We have had you brought here to have a businesslike talk. You appreciate your situation, I suppose."

"I am a prisoner of the czar. He will perhaps kill me."

"Just so. And all of your treasure, the stealings of many months, is on board this boat."

"Yes, to enrich a Russian officer. My people can starve. The ameer's tax must be paid or twenty of our best young men and women must go to Bokhara. It is wrong."

"Of course it is wrong. We know your people hate the ameer and that the ameer is cruel. It was a strange chance that took me to that island of Ping Shong."

"You saved my life, for my brothers were mad with wine."

"Your future course will show whether I did well. Let me explain how I came to the island."

Then followed a detailed rehearsal of the story of Koura and Alma.

"They are beautiful girls," said Harvey as he concluded. "One is to be the wife of the captain; the other is to be my wife."

"Why do you tell me this? I am a prisoner."

"Because we want your assistance in rescuing these two girls from the men of Bokhara. They are your enemies, and you have sufficient reason to hate them."

"But I do not love the Russians more."

"This is not a question of loving the Russians. I saved your life, did I not?"

"I would do anything for you."

"Suppose you are set free and the treasure is restored to you. The only return we ask is that you give us all the assistance in your power to recover the two young women."

"Do you mean that the Russian will permit me to depart in peace to my people and take with me the treasure that I stole?"

"Yes; to rescue the young girls we will do that. The captain has promised it."

"Do you agree?" put in Orskoff anxiously.

"I am not a fool."

"That means you agree, of course," said Harvey. "The ameer is the sliest rascal in Asia, but our united brains ought to be able to outwit him. First we must figure out where the girls probably are now."

"Where was the ameer's boat when you saw it?" asked Palpak eagerly.

"I cannot say. I drifted all day and half the night before I reached the island. It went in the same direction I drifted."

"They were going to Siloon."

"What is Siloon?"

"The most important port on the Bokharan shore. It is not a Zannuck vil-

"We have had you brought here to have a businesslike talk."

lage, nor do the people like the ameer. They are for the greater part exiles from Khiva."

"Then they will not fight for the ameer?"

"No, nor against him. They wish only to be let alone."

"How long would it take the boat to reach Siloon?"

"Two days. By this time they are at Siloon, and we could not overtake them, as the finest camels of the ameer would be in waiting for them, with a guard of his best soldiers."

"Is it not possible that a caravan of rich goods will take advantage of this escort and go to Bokhara?"

"It would be so."

"There would be some delay getting started."

"The ameer's soldiers would be afraid to linger."

"Then what can be done, Palpak? We put the matter into your hands."

"Excellent sirs. You promise me much. One of you saved my life; the other, a Russian officer, releases me, and I can take the treasure to my starving people. I am grateful. I will do all I can to assist you in winning back the young women. From Siloon the road to Bokhara is winding. It runs through what is called the Siloon pass. We are now in what is known as the Kharaboghaz. A short sail from here is a small village on the coast belonging to my people. By going there and taking the trail over the mountains we can reach the Siloon pass at a point where it will be four days' journey for the caravan. It will take us only three days."

"Good!" said Harvey. "What then?"

"The Zannucks have many causes to hate the soldiers of the ameer. They will have fine camels and horses. There will also be many valuables going to Bokhara. If there is to be a wedding of a prince, there will be great feasting, and the ameer will distribute gifts. Some of these will be in the caravan. My people will follow me to the Siloon pass."

"By the Kharaboghaz do you mean the Scythian gulf?" asked Harvey.

"Yes. It is what we call the gulf."

"Then our plan is clear. Orskoff, you and I will go with Palpak in his boat to this village of his people and accompany his warriors to the pass. Send Nevisky to Siloon with all speed. If he finds the caravan there, let him attack and rescue the girls. If the caravan has gone, let him wait there for our return. We must go back to Siloon if we rescue the girls or there will be no way of leaving the coast."

"I will explain the plan to Nevisky," said Orskoff.

Nevisky listened with many misgivings. A Russian officer to release prisoners in this manner and to set foot on forbidden soil! But Orskoff was his superior officer. He could do nothing but obey.

The treasure was placed in Palpak's sailing vessel, and the four robbers, with Harvey and Orskoff, the latter fully armed from the stores of the gunboat, went on board. The gunboat steamed away for Siloon, and the other boat, with all sail set, started for Palpak's little village.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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