

OUT OF RUSSIA

CHAPTER XXV

IF Florence had delayed her flight from Helingsfors a day longer, she would probably not have gone at all. At practically the same moment at which she arrived at St. Petersburg, Bill Wilkins left that city, having completed arrangements for the shipment of the gold.

He had found the task of finding a ship a very difficult one. Ten tons of gold was not freight that would ordinarily be found in the possession of a man of Wilkins' appearance, and the fact that he wanted to get it out of the country secretly was abundant proof that he had come by it illegally. To explain the true nature of the stuff he wanted to ship was to risk betrayal to the police on the one hand and treachery and murder from those who aided him on the other.

Yet it was practically impossible to conceal the fact that it was gold with which he wished to escape. Its mere weight would almost inevitably betray its character, for it was not credible that men should be willing to pay the sum necessary to induce a captain to violate the laws and risk his ship in order to carry off a few tons of lead, which was about the only conceivable substance of approximately equal weight.

Gold, of course, might be so packed in boxes too large for it, so as to conceal its relative weight, but the Wilkins brothers had no means at hand to enable them to do this.

Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that it took Wilkins practically all of the ten days he had supposed might be required to make his arrangements. He made them at last, however, with a villainous looking captain, who drove a very hard bargain, and whom Wilkins suspected would try to rob them if given the ghost of an opportunity. Neither he nor Tom, however, were men who shrank from taking risks.

Tom Wilkins had discovered Florence's disappearance long before Bill arrived, but found himself helpless. Florence had taken the dinghy, and Wilkins, unable to swim, found himself marooned on the schooner, unable to get ashore except by calling for aid. Although he had no nerves to speak of and was ready at any time to fight his weight in wild cats, even he found the situation appalling. Alone in a strange city, unable to speak a word of the language, under ban of the police, tied by the leg to a pile of gold, and deserted by his companions, a weaker man would have attempted to sail away despite his ignorance in regard to the management of the boat. But Tom Wilkins was not that sort. He would stick till the last minute.

Florence's desertion was the hardest to bear. He really loved the girl and he had almost persuaded himself that she loved him; believing this, he found it very hard to conclude that her absence spelled treachery, as it obviously seemed to do. Rather, knowing how she chafed against the long confinement and remembering her hysterical fit of the night before, he clung to the hope that she had merely gone ashore and would soon be back.

But as the hours wore on and she did not return, he was forced to believe that she had deserted and perhaps had betrayed him. He had taken her as a partner in his flight when he had expected to reach safety easily and quickly; if he had had any idea of what was before him, he would have gone without her and sent for her after the toil and danger of the adventure were over. But having taken her, he expected her to stand by him and to find that she was a "quitter," the thing he despised most on earth, hurt him. According to his ideas, his own conduct in leaving the yacht was not "quitting," but frank piracy, a thing which he by no means held in the same disesteem.

Bill's arrival did not mend matters. Arriving at the shore, his sailor's eyes quickly missed the dinghy that had trailed behind the sloop and he promptly hired a shore boat and had himself rowed out.

As he came alongside, Tom, who had been watching from below, came on deck to meet him, but showed no interest in the success of his errand.

Bill, however, did not notice the other's moodiness.

"It's all right, Tom," he cried, breathlessly. "It's all right. Everything's fixed, and we'll be off as soon as it gets dark. I had a d—d hard time of it with them d—d nihilists on one side and the cops on the other. But I pulled it off at last. Where's the liquor? Let's splice the main brace on the strength of it."

Without answering, Tom set out a bottle and watched the other drink. But he himself took nothing.

Such disrespect to the conveniences roused Bill's indignation. "What in h—l's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Anybody'd think I'd brought bad news 'stead of tellin' you I'd pulled the thing off."

Still Tom did not answer, and the other stared at him with growing suspicion. "Where's the dinghy?"



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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

AT about the same time, two mysterious messengers arrive in the United States—one a man, the other a beautiful young woman. The former visits Professor Shishkin, a distinguished scientist, formerly of Russia. The latter goes to the New York apartments of a rich young bachelor named Caruth and amazes him by her presence there when he returns at midnight. The man speaks a few mysterious words to Professor Shishkin and demands his obedience to the dictates of the Revolutionary Brotherhood of which both are members; then he tells him of plans to recover the vast Russian treasure that lies at the bottom of the Baltic in the wreck of a ship scuttled by the Revolutionists. He commands Shishkin to join the treasure seekers, and thus lead the world to believe that they are merely scientists investigating the Baltic sea bottom. The young woman, Marie Fitzhugh, tells Caruth that she comes for a letter that is to be delivered to him that very night—a letter found near the coast where a Russian ship was wrecked. The letter comes; she demands it while Caruth is protesting her claims to his letter, his valet, Wilkins, appears and declares the letter is his. Caruth tears the message open and finds that Wilkins' prediction as to its contents is right and gives it to him. Miss Fitzhugh, in a frenzy of fear and with threats of dire vengeance upon Wilkins, buys the letter, but when Wilkins has gone, she discovers that the envelope no longer contains the real sea-stained message, but a dummy of blank white paper. Caruth pursues Wilkins, only to discover his body lying in blood, murdered and robbed of both money and letter. Matters are complicated by the appearance of a westerner, Tom Wilkins, who claims to be a brother of the dead Wilkins. This man says he was summoned to New York by his brother and he displays a copy of the missing letter—a letter from a sailor that tells of the millions of sunken Russian treasure.

Caruth seeks out Miss Fitzhugh to warn her. She confides in him that she is an emissary of a revolutionary society, sent to organize an expedition to rescue the sunken gold, but she denies that she or her friends killed Wilkins, the valet. Caruth impulsively declares his love for her, and pledges himself to aid her. She insists on meeting the westerner, Wilkins, and finds from him that he holds the key to the location of the treasure ship. He is taken into the plan and Caruth offers his own private yacht for the expedition.

Worried by the command of the Brotherhood to take his daughter with him, Professor Shishkin plots with Bristow, a newspaper man, to engage some young woman to impersonate his daughter. Bristow enters into the scheme when Shishkin gives consent to his immediate marriage to Olga, his daughter, and secures a music hall girl for the impersonation.

In the meantime, Baron Demidoff, chief of the Russian secret police, receives from the United States a cipher message divulging to him the plans of the revolutionists and warning him to be on the lookout for Caruth's yacht. When it arrives for its search of the sea bottom, Demidoff manages to get an interview with the fictitious daughter of Shishkin. He tells her that she is in fact a wealthy Russian princess who was kidnapped twenty years before by Shishkin on his escape from prison, where he had been placed for plotting against the czar. Demidoff also tells her that the gold is in truth hers, for it represented a loan made upon the English estates of her dead father. Before his interview ends he secures her promise to betray the expedition to the police as soon as the gold is recovered and brought on board. On her return to the ship, Wilkins approaches her with details of his own plot to steal the gold. He asks her to join him and become his wife. In the midst of their plottings, the gold is found. The Russians, who are informed, make a night attack, but are repulsed. After the skirmish, it is discovered that the gold is missing, as are Wilkins, the young woman and Shishkin. Immediately Caruth orders flight towards St. Petersburg, where he plans to seek protection of the American consulate. There he unexpectedly meets Bristow, who tells him that Marie is to be condemned by the Inner Circle for her failure unless she succeeds in some other heroic task. Caruth faces the Inner Circle, tells of his love and demands Marie's freedom; it is granted, but only on pledge of a million dollars. Taking Marie, disguised as a man, Caruth flees from the police, but on the train a guard hurriedly informs them that they are known. Caruth immediately puts his coat and cap on Marie and tells her to strike him with his revolver. She does, and in the confusion attending the finding of Caruth's body she escapes. In the meantime the bogus Miss Shishkin deserts Wilkins and the gold and meets Demidoff, who proposes marriage to her. In the midst of their schemes, Shishkin appears before them. Bluntly they tell him that when he escaped from a Russian prison years before and stole what he thought his child, he stole a princess and heir to a great estate. Demidoff tells him that he and this princess are to be married. When Olga, who all her life supposed herself Shishkin's daughter, learns these facts, she refuses to displace the bogus princess. In the midst of these disclosures, Caruth and Marie appear safe and sound and surprise all with the announcement of their marriage.

he demanded suddenly. "And where's that girl?"

Tom raised his heavy eyes. "Gone," he responded, briefly. "She took the boat and vamoosed some time last night."

"Gone! Gone!" Bill's voice rose to a scream. "Gone where? After the cops? I always knowed it. I always told you she'd do us. The little hellcat! Dama her—"

A pair of sinewy hands closed round his throat, choking the words, and he felt himself shaken to and fro like a rat.

"That'll do, Bill Wilkins," grated a voice that he hardly recognized as his brother's. "That'll do. Don't you orthogrify a word agin her. She's playin' for her own hand, same's we are. You keep your tongue off her." With the last word the plainsman hurled the other across the room.

Bill picked himself up slowly. He fingered his throat, swallowed once or twice, and then came back to where Tom stood glowering.



"All right," he mumbled. "I won't say nothing against her. She's an angel of light if you say so. But I reckon she's sold us out, and I guess the peelers are coming for us right now. We'd better get a move on—unless you'd sooner stay here and get pulled so's not to spoil her game."

Tom quivered, but said nothing. Life-long self-control was again in the ascendency. He knew the other was right, and he already repented his fury of a moment before.

"All right, Bill!" he said, almost calmly. "You're right. Only don't say nothing against her to me. I'm too plumb sore to stand it just now. We'll go as soon as you say."

"I say now. The Haakon—she's the steamer I've chartered—won't be along till about dawn, but we've got to get out in the bay and wait for her. That little hell—that is, them policeoffskis may be down on us any bloomin' minute. The water's quiet and I guess we won't swamp. Wait! Let's look."

The man broke off and ran up the ladder that led to the deck and poked his head above the combings. In a moment he turned and Tom could see that his face was pale under its tan.

"—!" he raged. "They're coming now. A dozen boats are starting out. Quick! We ain't got a minute to lose."

He leaped upon the deck, followed by the plainsman.

"Here," he yelled. "Get that anchor up. Quick! Then help me with the mainsail."

He darted forward and grasped the jib halliards. The weight was almost too much for one man, but necessity lent strength, and by the time the anchor was on board the jib was up. Then the two men tailed on to the mainsail halliards, and the big sail rose slowly to the peak.

"Make fast! Hurry! Those boats are getting near."

Leaving the halliards to his brother, Bill sprang to the sheet, and drew aft the flapping sail, holding it with one hand against the bits, and grasping the helm with the other.

The sloop was moving now, slowly but surely. Behind her pulsed a distant outcry, borne hoarsely across the water! Bill glared backward over his shoulder. "Shoot! Shoot! Damn you!" he cried.

Tom was by his side now, sheeting home the mainsail. The sloop felt the added press and with every movement gathered way. But in the lee of the shore the wind was light and the boats, driven by sinewy arms, were coming fast, relentlessly cutting down the distance that intervened.

Bill glared back at them. "Shoot!" he cried. "Shoot 'em, Tom! Why don't you shoot?"

A grim smile curved the plainsman's lips. Erect he stood, a revolver in either hand, balancing to the swaying boat. "Too far yet," he muttered. "I ain't got no cartridges to waste. This is only the opportunity; we'll want 'em all for the performance. Besides, we're holding even with them now."

Indubitably the sloop was holding its own. With every foot she gained from the land, the breeze grew stronger. Soon the strip of water between her and the boats showed perceptibly larger and the hoarse cries grew fainter.

Tom lowered his pistols. "I guess we're all right now," he remarked, comfortably.

Bill grunted. "All right as far as them boats counts," he agreed. "But they'll have steam launches and gunboats and torpedo boats after us mighty soon, and then where'll we be?"

"We won't be in no jail," returned his brother grimly. "I won't, anyway. I won't be took. I always expected to cash in with my boots on and I'm ready right now."

"Same here! If I can't help myself. But I reckon we've got a chance yet. They'll be expectin' us to run west and try to fetch Copenhagen, I reckon! But we'll fool 'em. If we can get out of sight, we'll run east and try to meet the Haakon. We've got to go east anyway. If we ran out into the Baltic, we'd swamp, sure, just as we would have the other day."

CHAPTER XXVI

DRIVEN by twin propellers, the Sea Spume raced westward, bearing happy souls released from the suspense of the past month. Caruth had found a wife; Professor Shishkin a daughter; Marie a father and a husband; and freed from the long strain of service to the cause, had learned for the first time how heavy the burden had been.

With them were Bristow and Olga. The reporter's assignment to the Russian capital was nearly up, and as it was madness for Olga to remain longer in the same city with Baron Demidoff and the pretended Princess Napraxine, he had decided to sail with Caruth.

They were all going back to America, to the western world, and they were all happy at the