VALDA

A ... Romance ... of ... Peking

BY JULIAN CROSKEY

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CHAPTER XIX—Continued.

"SAND? Provisions? Are you speaking of a balloon trip, Sir Claude? The idea is original, but you can scarcely carry"——

The British Minister burst into a hearty laugh.

"Original? By Jove! it is, Mr. Pericord, and I will make a note of it at once. A balloon! By gad, that is the very thing. But the sand and provisions I meant were a different sort of ballast. I suppose we shall have to feed at least five hundred mouths, it may be for a month, and you can't beat sand bags for bullet stoppers."

"But do you mean to say that you intend to stay in Peking in face of such a warning; in face, too, of the information I have just given you?"

"What else, my dear sir? You couldn't possibly have supposed that we should run away? Why, such a splendid opportunity wouldn't occur again in a century."

"Opportunity?"

"Yes, don't you see? Our friend Samovar is privately encouraging Tuan, with the intention of occupying Peking in force with a Russian army before America or England can transport troops to the spot. This, by the by, is also a tip from your secret service man, and, of course, can only emanate from you, who seem to know everything. Well, they all think it takes an army to occupy Peking. I hope to undeceive them. When Alexieff, or Nodzu, or whoever it may be arrives under the walls of Peking I hope to have the honor of receiving him in person at the Chien Men, and pointing to the Union Jack and the stars and stripes, and asking what I can do for him. But that is a minor matter. Not to be too bumptious, I trust to give these —— Chinamen the sort of a lesson Powell has been administering to the Boers."

"You would convert Legation street into a new Mafeking?" said the S. G., nervously. "Is it not a terrible risk? I am an old man and know nothing of soldiering, Sir Claude, but it appears to me that, commanded as we are from the wall and hemmed in in the midst of a hostile population——"

"What is sauce for the goose may be sauce for the gander. I tell you, Mr. Pericord, that I would not miss this opportunity if I had no one but my wife to share the risk of it! I am sick of diplomacy. I was not cut out for a diplomat, and the lies and trickery which taint the very air of Peking make me almost forget the plain duty of an English gentleman. Now, thank the Lord, I am allowed to remember that I am a soldier by trade. Looked at from that point of view, the policy which I am sent here to represent seems a policy of letting our prestige go to the dogs, and, by ——, I mean to save it as the civilians saved India in the days of the mutiny, or I don't want to leave Peking alive!"

The two men locked hands; the S. G.'s eyes were moist.

"I, too, am an Englishman," he said in a low voice as if he were half ashamed of having spent his life in the service of China. "And I thank God for it."

"We will see this thing through, Pericord—you, I and Conger."

"I shall do my part if it becomes necessary," the S. G. replied, reverting to the cautious misgivings of experience. "But theoretically I do not approve; I do not approve, Sir Claude. I shall endeavor to prevail on Mr. Conger to follow prudence rather than valor. I am afraid you have not calculated all the risks."

Another conversation on the same topic may as well be inserted here, although it did not occur until three weeks later, when the dangers forecast by Mr. Pericord had become facts. It was on the 12th of June, when Tung Fuh-siang marched out to stop the advance of Seymour's relief column, shutting the gates of Peking behind him.

"Mr. Conger," said Sir Claude Macdonald, "we are in a trap. We have got to get our backs against the wall and prepare for the worst. I certainly did not quite realize the magnitude of Tuan's preparations when I determined to hold the legation and I see now that if Seymour is defeated we stand a poor chance of getting out of Peking alive."

"We have put our hand to the plow and we cannot turn back if we want to, as Mr. Dooly puts it," replied the United States Minister with his quiet smile.

"Just so; and we don't mean to. But I wish to God your legation was next to mine. In times of danger British and American bluejackets have always been brothers. But I am sorry to say there is little love lost between my men and those of my neighbor Samovar."

"Nor between mine and those of my neighbor Ketteler," replied the United States Minister, visibly distressed. "I tell you, Sir Claude, it is not much use my pretending to be equal to this emergency. I have not slept for three nights and the thought of my wife and my guests unmans me. I look to you to decide on the proper military measures to be taken."

"We shall have to pull together and rely on ourselves, that is obvious. Our men will not work with Dutchmen and Dagoes."

"Mr. Samovar and Mr. Pichon appear to be concocting some private arrangement of their own, and Baron Ketteler appears to resent any suggestion on military matters. You, thank God, are a soldier, and have dealt with similar situations before. Between us we muster, I think, just 200 English-speaking men. As Mr. Samovar refuses to have a telephone passed over his roof, my secretary, Mr. Squier, suggests this code of flash signals between us in case of attack by night."

"An excellent suggestion, sir; and we will rig up a heliograph as well, besides working Pericord's splendid notion of a balloon. But—look here, Conger—" Sir Claude laid his hand on the Minister's shoulder. "As you say, I have been in tight places before; things were not always comfortable at Zanzibar, to say nothing of the Niger territories. Now—this is a —— awkward thing to talk about. Do you see those paper packages? Our doctor has had a hundred of them put up. As an ordinary prescription they would be marked 'Poison.' Put a few in your pocket. It's a ghastly thing for a man to have to shoot his own wife, don't you know."

"May I ask you for a drink?" said Mr. Conger, sinking into a chair with shaking hands. "Insomnia has played the devil with my nerves. Thank you. Yes, if it comes to that—"

"Of course you will have to stand by your own legation as long as it is possible to keep up a show of diplomatic relations with this scoundrelly Yamen. It is a pity that your Government is not a little more generous in its building grants. Send your missionary women over to me if you are crowded. Ketteler, I presume, can hold the east end of the street unless they put a gun on the wall behind; but the moment Ketteler is pushed in you must all come over to my place and make the best of it."

"That is very good of you."

"If it comes to shelling us from the Chien Men, well, Samovar will intercept some of the trouble. He never expected to play shield to to the British Legation, I'll be bound. And between ourselves, Conger"—

The rest of Claude's words were uttered in a whisper.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SILENCE OF PEKING.

In response to the feeble protest of the diplomatic corps, which was dated the 21st of May, there appeared a few days later an imperial proclamation paternally requesting the Boxers to deal gently with the Christians, as they were quite harmless people, whose only object was to spread a gospel in some respects as respectable as that of Confucius, and to insert the wedge of a barbarian civilization which in other lands had been the invariable prelude to conquest.

Now, ever since the treaty of 1861, which opened China to the missionaries, there had been adopted a curious cipher in all proclamations having reference to the protection of foreigners. This cipher needed no key; it consisted in little more than reading the edict in the reverse sense to that which it assumed. Accordingly the message from the throne of the 23d of May was the signal for the massacre of all the native Christians in the capital city of Paoting, ninety miles south of Peking, and the tearing up of the railroad in course of construction there. On the 27th the station of Liuling, thirty miles from Peking, was burned to the ground and a party of thirty Belgian engineers forced to flee for their lives. On the 28th a temporary interruption was caused in railroad communication between Peking and Tientsin and the united sects of Boxers, a Chili organization directly founded by Prince Tuan, and Big Knives, a Shantung organization directly founded by the Viceroy of that province, openly invaded Peking and attacked the missions in the Tartar city.

Then, and then only, did the tardy Ministers wake to the reality of their danger (although one among them probably delayed till the last on purpose.) They telegraphed for reinforcements to the ordinary legation guards. On June 1, having traveled by rail, 350 foreign bluejackets, drawing five machine guns by hand, passed under the gloomy tunnel of the Peking wall, watched by a dense crowd of natives in unbroken silence. Of these 63 were Americans, 75 British, 75 French, 75 Russian, 42 Italian and 26 Japanese. Being mustered from their ships at a moment's notice they carried no provisions and no reserve supplies of ammunition for their guns. But the British Minister did not appear disturbed by this.

When Mr. Pericord was informed of this move, a look of depression overspread his face. "The S. G. begins to show his age," was the remark of more than one of his staff. It was not age, but the infallible clairvoyance of an intellect in its prime which wrote its deep mark of care on that tranquil countenance.

"This is the most fatal mistake which has ever been perpetrated by the foreign envoys," he said to Cinderpan sadly, "and their mistakes have not been few. I foresee the gravest consequences from this move. It reduces the chances of conciliating the court party, doubles the occasions for precipitating a riot and increases the security of the legations not at all. I have done my best. I have begged them personally to withdraw temporarily to Tientsin with their families, not in the way of flight, but as a warning to the Tsung-li Yamen that friendly intercourse cannot be maintained with a Government which is unable to police the streets of its own capital. One Minister—and I need not specify which one—treated my suggestion with scorn; he went so far as to hint that I desired to get rid of him in order to pose as the sole representative of the united powers. Alas, this wretched jealousy will indeed succeed in ruining me, in a way that he less foresees. But I can do nothing more."

The S. G. acted, however, with his usual firmness and promptitude. While all the legations were busy converting their compounds into forts and posting armed sentinels at the gates, the Superintendency General maintained its aspect of peace. The staff was forbidden to go abroad or to carry arms. The Commissioners at the thirty treaty ports were instructed by telegraph to maintain a strictly neutral attitude in case of riots, an injunction particularly necessary, as in most of these ports the revenue staffs form the bulk of the able-bodied residents, and number many young men of a particular bellicose temperament. And finally, Mr. Pericord handed in to the Board of Revenue his quarterly statement, showing receipts amounting to nearly ten millions of dollars. Unfortunately, he was not able to accompany the statement with the cash, as nearly the whole of this fine revenue was written off in payment of interest on the Japanese war loans, forced on China by Russia.

No sooner had the legation guards passed within the walls of Peking, than the Boxers broke across the Peking-Tientsin railroad behind them and burned the stations of Fengtai and Huangtsun. The retreat of the foreigners was cut off. Seventy miles as the crow flies separated them from the port to Tientsin, and the intervening plains were swarming with thousands of rebels. On June 5 Rear Admiral Kempff cabled to Washington: "Engagement begun." He referred to a collision outside Tientsin between the territorial garrison under General Nieh and the Boxers. He little thought that his pregnant words announced the commencement of war between China and the world.

On this day railway communication with the coast entirely ceased and the Boxers, joined by the Imperial troops sent out to quiet them, commenced openly drilling within sight of the walls of Fengtai.

Then M. de Samovar played his trump card. He called on the Tsung-li Yamen and formally offered to suppress the rebellion with Russian troops, thus forming an alliance with China against all the world. To his profound chagrin the offer was refused. On the very day that he was to call for a definite reply Prince Tuan was appointed President of the Board of Foreign Affairs in supersession of Prince Ching. Russia's diplomacy, steadily pursued with a single purpose since the seizure of Port Arthur in 1895, was mysteriously defeated.

"Valda has played me false," M. de Samovar exclaimed, with a ferocity which for once showed the true color of the Muscovite. "Vassilich, seek her out; she is——" here he whispered in the attache's ear. "Instead of discovering anything important at the Superintendency General she has betrayed our designs to Pericord and he has played off Prince Tuan against me. Let the girl be brought back to the legation, and I will force the truth from her if my Cossacks have to tear her limbs off."

On this day, the 10th of June, telegraphic communication with Tientsin was cut, and the foreigners of Legation street were completely isolated. They were also completely imprisoned, although they scarcely realized it, within the walls of Peking. Prince Tuan had sent secret orders to the guards of the gates to arrest all runners bearing messages for Tientsin. Peking was in a state of siege from the Boxers without, pending the claim of their leaders to be definitely recognized as imperial officers. Legation street was in a state of siege from the populace within, pending the decision of the court party whether to defy the world by permitting their massacre or to avert war by safeguarding them as hostages.

Prince Tuan, in fact, was only now showing his hand by demanding that the Boxers, whom he had organized himself, should be incorporated as a patriotic militia in the military organization of the empire. At his back stood the ferocious Tung Fuh Siang, who had won his spurs under the eyes of the prince among the border tribes of Shensi, and was now in command of the imperial bodyguard of 10,000 rifle-armed Bannermen. The aged Prince Ching, supported by Yung Lu, commander in chief of the Peking field force of 20,000 ill disciplined braves, insisted that the Boxers and Big Knives were simply rebels who sought to entangle the government in a foreign war in order to upset the Ching dynasty and perhaps accomplish the revolution inaugurated by Kang Yu-wei.

Both parties appealed to the Empress Dowager, who was in equal vacillation from different causes. This ambitious and capable woman, although now over 60 years of age, still clung to power with the tenacity of Li Hung Chang. For twenty-five years she had held it unchallenged through the puppet she had placed on the throne. But since the Reform conspiracy of 1898—the Reform party was called the Pao Wang Hui and owed its origin to a foreigner—she could no longer rely on the Emperor, Kwang Hsu. On the other hand, she equally dreaded the accession of Po Chun under the masterful regency of his father, Tuan. Her sympathies were strongly in favor of a war of extirpation against foreigners. The success of such a war would make Tuan paramount. Defeat—and she knew that it would end in defeat—would ruin Tuan, but perhaps drag her down in his ruin. In these perplexities she sent a special courier to her old ally, Li, at Canton, and for the month which must pass before she could receive his answer, she immured herself in her palace and left affairs to fate.

When the admirals of the allied fleet at Taku learned that communication with Peking was interrupted they dispatched a relief column of 2500 men, under the British admiral, Seymour, to bring the envoys back to the coast. This column left Tientsin on the 10th of June, repairing the railway as it advanced. It included 900 British, 800 Russian and 100 American marines, the latter under the ill-fated McCalla. It was accompanied by a battery of ship's guns with which, if necessary, to blow in the gates of Peking.

On the 28th of June the column returned to Tientsin. It had effected nothing save to demonstrate to the Boxers and Imperialists that the foreigners were not invincible. It had lost 400 men in killed and wounded and narrowly escaped annihilation. It had not reached Peking.

On the 17th of June, when news was received that Seymour had been attacked by imperial troops under Tung the forts of Taku were bombarded. This was a declaration of war against China, in which Russia took the leading part and the United States stood aloof. The act, which was unprovoked, destroyed the last chance of peace. It threw the imperial troops into the arms of the Boxers, whether their commanders followed or not. The Taku garrisons retreated toward Tientsin, breathing fury and vengeance. Peking, entirely cut off, was forgotten. Reinforcements were hurried to Tientsin to save the garrison there. For three weeks 10,000 troops were besieged in the foreign settlement. On the 14th of July they captured the native city of Tientsin and were then only in a position to think of relieving Peking.

But nothing was done. A week was spent in jealous recriminations among the different generals. United action fell to the ground. The Russians, convinced by the unexpected attack on their Manchurian railway that their cherished scheme to pose as China's champion was based on a blind miscalculation, laid furious hands on the Tientsin-Taku Railway for fear they should be left behind in the division of the spoil. The British admiral retired in disgust to Shanghai. The Japanese hung back, their policy changed by the unexpected energy of the Chinese forces on the Russian frontier, which might make an invasion of Korea more profitable than an invasion of China. The United States alone were firm in their intention to march on Peking. Unfortunately they had not more than 2000 troops on the spot, while the Ninth Regiment had suffered disaster in the defense of Tientsin, losing its colonel, Liscum.

And for seven weeks, since the hopeful marching forth of Seymour's column, nothing had been heard from Peking; nothing save a host of terrible and conflicting rumors. The legations had been left to their fate, while the world at home scanned the papers morning after morning with an impotent agony of fear.

What was happening in this hidden city, so long looked on as a next-door neighbor to Tientsin? What was the explanation of this mysterious and awful silence, which had fallen like a curtain between the outside world and its representatives at Peking?

Nothing so baffling and inexplicable had ever been read of in history. Only a day's journey by mounted courier from the port of Tientsin, lay a city which for years had been in telegraphic communication by five different lines with every part of its border. It was the capital of a great empire whose widely scattered officials could do nothing without the imperial consent. Two railways, one from the coast at Tientsin and one from the interior at Paoting, ran to within a few miles of its walls. Its population was over a million, in constant intercourse with the country beyond. This country was densely populated all the way to the coast, and rumor would spread over a hundred miles like a fire signal. Within the city were a thousand foreigners, of whom at least a score mantained large staffs of native servants, from among whom at least a dozen trusty messengers could be found. Mr. Pericord had controlled an organized courier service for twenty years. Bishop Favier numbered among his parishioners hundreds of devoted converts who would cheerfully court martyrdom for his sake. Among the residents were three gentlemen who acted as special correspondents of great English newspapers, and who were perfectly well aware that any news that they could send out would be cheaply conveyed at a price which to a Chinaman would be a fortune. In the student-interpreter and revenue messes were dozens of daring riders possessed of racing ponies which could outdistance all pursuit, who from mere sporting instinct would embrace the opportunity to run the gauntlet. And finally, the Embassadors were in command of six hundred picked troops armed with Maxims and revolvers, as well as with magazine rifles, who might be supposed capable of forcing a way through the gates in the face of the whole Chinese army.

And yet during seven weeks not a single letter had been received from the legations. Only one message had come through. It was signed by Mr. Pericord and addressed to any officer of the relieving column into whose hands it should fall. It simply said that the position was desperate and the column must hasten or it would be too late. The messenger had left the city on June 24.

After that no news came out for a month. The only information vouchsafed to the world was issued in a garbled and equivocal form by the Taotai of Shanghai, who was in telegraphic communication with the Governor of Chinan. Chinan is the capital of the province of Shangtung and lies five hundred miles north of Shanghai and three hundred miles south of Peking. The Governor of the province was one Yuan, an ambitious and capable general. A noble pamphleteer having, in a widely read book, referred to this general's troops as the best drilled brigade in China, Yuan Shih-kai became, during this anxious interregnum of silence, the prime bogey of the professional manufacturer of news. The information they supplied about his "army" was copied verbatim from the noble traveler's report, which had been written eighteen months previously, long before Yuan become Governor of Shantung.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE FLIGHT THAT FAILED.

On the 10th of June the recorder of victories at the Board of War received a telegram from the Viceroy of Tientsin announcing the departure of Seymour's relief column. The S. G., as head of a courier service which worked in conjunction with the Imperial Post, had close relations with this board, and the ominous information reached him ten minutes after it had been deciphered.

Mr. Pericord appeared utterly prostrated by the news. Every one on his staff had perceived in his conduct since the outbreak an indecision and preoccupation very different to his usual attitude in crises, but his distress on receipt of the welcome intelligence puzzled even Cinderpan.

"What has come over the chief?" he said to the second secretary, Hayrick. "Is he sinking into dotage, or is there something behind all this which none of us has suspected? I'll never believe that he meant to bring off the Pao-Wang revolution himself."

"Pooh, the S. G. has enough to think about without changing the Government. It's my belief he wants to retire, and foresees that if the powers take over the Government of Peking they will force him to take the helm. It'll mean an earldom and all that, of course, and be a dooced fine thing for the service, but it looks to me as if there was a private worry on his mind."

"You will marry me, then, my darling?" he whispered, bending toward her.

"Oh, he's in love!" laughed a junior, getting off his stock witticism. This jeune chestnut had come into vogue from some private theatricals given by the mess.

In the meantime Mr. Pericord had remained lost in sad reflections.

"Impossible, impossible," he murmured to himself poignantly.

Then, with vacillating hand, he rang the bell. Kuei-lien appeared.

"My boy," Mr. Pericord said, not looking at the youth, but speaking very gently, "I must again intrust to you a mission which I may not perform openly. A foreign army has to-day started from Tientsin to rescue the envoys here; by so doing it seals their doom. This army is an army of invasion, but in numbers it is a mere battalion, quite inadequate for the purpose. It will simply enrage the Government, and its certain defeat will send the wavering to the banners of Prince Tuan."

He paused for a little while and then resumed:

"To-morrow or the next day all the foreigners in Peking will be prisoners. The next few hours are the last chance for the women to withdraw. If there is a general exodus suspicion will be aroused and they will be stopped. Only a few, therefore, can go. Count Beriskoff, unlike his successor, was my friend. He married an American, and some of his wife's relatives are at present guests of my equally good friend, Mr. Conger. Count Beriskoff had a daughter"——

He turned away and looked out of the window. Kuei-lien was silent.

"Miss Beriskoff," continued the S. G., "may still be in Peking. If so, it would be natural that she should seek the protection of her father's relatives. The United States Legation is the only one which is regarded with friendship by the Tsung-li Yamen. I think that a party quickly leaving that legation would be unmolested. Go, I beg of you, Kuei Lien, and at once, and tell them what I say. And if by any means you could find and warn Miss Beriskoff——"

"Are you so anxious, master," faltered Kuei-lien in Chinese, "that she should go?"

Mr. Pericord turned his large eyes full on the boy. Their pupils dilated to the rim of the iris, as if a mortal pain had gripped his heart.

"For her sake, for her sake!" he groaned. "Yes, Kuei-lien; you—Miss Beriskoff, I mean—must leave me, must leave Peking."

"But if she would rather stay?" faltered the boy in a low voice, hanging his head.

"It cannot be—no, it cannot be."

Kuei-lien moved near to him and lifted his deep and pleading eyes.

"Let me stay, master. Only as your servant—only a native servant, who would rather die by your side than go back to a life of gayety."

"Kuei-lien, we are speaking of Miss Beriskoff," said Mr. Pericord, hopelessly. "Listen, child; you do not understand. She might have been my own daughter. Count Beriskoff and I were friends; twenty years ago I was not always a recluse. Sometimes, desipientes, we shared the same pleasures together: shared——"

He passed his hand over his forehead.

"I am afraid it is true what they say of me, that I am growing old; you perceive it, too, do you not, Kuei-lien? You have never thought, perhaps, that he whom you have chosen to call master is an old man, old enough——"

He turned from the window and, crossing the room, laid his hand on the youth's shoulder.

"Nay, child," he murmured soothingly, "do not weep. My heart is heavy enough without the tears of those I love. Go, go, my boy, and if you cannot find Miss Beriskoff, then accompany Miss Conger yourself. Perhaps you will find her again in Tientsin; find her I pray God, restored to the natural affections of youth; brilliant once more with that high spirit which first reminded me I was old; go—"

"What message shall I give her, sir, from you? I have heard it said among the servants that once when she came to you in secret, wishing to do you a service, you dismissed her harshly, saying she was a spy."

"I have learned my mistake, Kuei-lien; how could I have dreamed? But all that is passed. Better that I had continued to suspect her. Tell her—tell her, Kuei-lien, that I shall never forgive myself—never forget her. Tell her that now—now, when I must never see her again—she takes away with her an old man's love; a love which he would not be at liberty to utter, which would only be a shame and weariness to her—"

"No—no—I love you!" cried the boy..

Mr. Pericord's voice hardened.

"Go, Kuei-lien," he said, gravely, with a slight emphasis on the Chinese name. "No breath of scandal must ever rest on the name of Miss Beriskoff; nor will I, even in the privacy of my own heart, recognize any fact which would compromise her. Go, boy; every moment is precious. And," he added, wearily, "Ching, not tsai-chien, Kuei-lien." ("Presentiment tells me that I may not see you again.")

The boy fell on his knees and sobbed with passionate silence over his master's hand. Then Mr. Pericord bent over him and kissed his brow with infinite tenderness.

"My daughter," he whispered, "do you understand?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

BLAKE GETS HIS PROMOTION.

An hour later some ladies, including Miss —— and Miss Woodward, left the United States legation in closed carts, escorted by Under Secretary Bainbridge and a squad of marines. Unexpected deference was shown to them by the guards of the Ha Ta gate, and they passed through the Chinese city unmolested, but they were doomed to disappointment. Barely clear of the walls of the city, they were stopped by a mounted man, who conferred earnestly and in whispers with Bainbridge. To advance was impossible. The reasons the Under Secretary could not give—they must trust to him—he could not abuse the confidence of his good friend Blake, for Blake it was and none other.

The hapless fugitives turned sadly back to Peking. Blake sat gazing after them for some seconds like a man who realizes that he is an outcast. Then a timid voice said from behind:

"Alan!"

He turned and saw the Chinese youth.

"It is you, Valda," he said, looking mournfully at her tonsured head. "When you warned me on the racecourse I thought I recognized you, although you spoke Chinese. But afterward when I fled I refused to believe it. I persuaded myself that it was a nightmare of my imagination."

"Why should you be so anxious to disbelieve your own eyes? Am I so very ugly in this dress?"

"Are you quite shameless?" he said, fiercely. "Is it quite impossible to place any misconstruction on your freak? You would not think so, I fancy, if you had heard the remarks of Prince Tuan's suite about you when you passed with Mr. Pericord's guests."

"A woman does not cut off her hair for a passing freak," Valda replied with quiet dignity, but with a pathetic touch of feminine regret and reproach.

"You seem almost more beautiful as you are," said Blake, harshly. "Mr. Pericord did not find you any less . . . No, damn me!" he shouted aloud, unconsciously lashing his pony and wrenching it back again; "I cannot discuss it; it makes me mad to think about it . . . Stand still, you brute, will you?"

"When you have recovered your temper, Mr. Blake, I shall be ready to explain anything you wish to know." Valda turned her tired little pony, at a walk, back toward the walls of Peking.

Blake sent his big black with one bound to her side.

"Have I any right to ask explanations from you, Miss Beriskoff?" he said humbly, although the passion in his voice was hardly controlled.

"I have no one else to turn to," she answered in a low voice, without looking at him.

"Oh, my God, forgive me! Do not tell me anything. If I can serve you . . . What else—what else have I to live for except to show how I love you, Valda?"

"Men have strange ways of proving their love," she murmured.

"There is at least one way which is common to all honorable men. With the deepest humility, Valda—I am not worthy of you, I am a disgraced and penniless man—but I place my life and my heart at your feet, and if you will marry me——"

Valda turned her head and gave him one quick, full glance, in which there was a trace of tender mockery.

"You do not say anything, Valda. May I dare to hope——"

"That I have forgotten, Mr. Pericord? I shall never do that, Alan."

"Ah!" perhaps Blake had forgotten. It is not easy for a young man to remember a gray-haired rival.

"Perhaps, if you knew my origin, you would not be so eager to—marry me. The daughter of a Russian count is, no doubt, a respectable match even for a revenue man. But the daughter of a——"

"Hush, dearest. Do not forget that I recognized you when we said good-by? Would not the ease with which you wear your present disguise remind me? When a man loves a woman as I love you, he does not ask to see her pedigree."

"I always believed that I was Count Beriskoff's daughter. My mother is the wife of the Grand Councilor Sheng, and now a very great lady in the Imperial City. But my father—I no longer know who my father is. A greater man than Count Beriskoff has called me his daughter to-day."

Blake stared at her in astonishment. Then intuition, which love will sharpen and refine incredibly in the most obtuse of men, made him understand everything. He knew, as distinctly as if he had overheard it, that the S. G. had taken upon himself this preposterous stigma to save the girl from the unnatural devotion which had obsessed her. He understood, too, that at present Valda wished to believe it, as a salve to the disloyalty of her affections. Mr. Pericord had indeed cursed her to his own forfeit, and yet without forfeiting more than just that particle of passion which differentiates a daughter's tenderness from a wife's.

"You will marry me, then, my darling?" he whispered, bending toward her.

She looked at him fondly and trustfully. It was a pleasant thought to be transformed once more into an admired beauty and to leave the murky city which was not only rife with horrible dangers, but which would always remind her of a double shame. She sat, looking silently toward the dull, squat walls of her birthplace. Blake did not interrupt her, thinking she was taking a mental farewell.

"He is there," she said at last.

Blake felt the unconscious test which her loyalty was putting to his. He realized, almost with a sense of awe, the primitive heroism of his fiancee's character. And he remembered his own deep-seated devotion to the grave chief who remained at his post at the risk of his life.

"If you are willing, Valda," he said, gently, "we will go back."

"My husband!" she said. With that word she realized something of her own sublimity, and rejoiced to feel that her riper love had not missed a hero.

L'ENVOI.

I have not yet received any definite news of what befell our friends during the tragic six weeks between the 10th of June and the 16th of July, when the blood-soaked city was as mysteriously and completely veiled from the ken of civilization as if some vast-winged dragon had rapt it away in a cloud back to the filmy chasms of antiquity. But one very characteristic and on the whole satisfactory item I am able to report on the strength of a letter which has reached me to-day from Shanghai.

It will be remembered that about the 20th of July, after the lesson administered by the capture of Tientsin by the allies and the entire defeat of Tung's troops by the legation guards, the Chinese Government graciously vouchsafed permission to the foreign Ministers to communicate with their respective homes. The Commissioner at Shanghai, and indeed the revenue service all over China, was awaiting news regarding the safety of the superintendent general with more anxiety than any Foreign Office awaited news of a diplomatic representative. Apart from the personal love and veneration of their chief, the entire careers of a thousand foreigners depended on this news.

When, therefore, a telegram arrived from Chinan, addressed in the familiar code word "Custos," the rumor ran around the general office, the opium desk, the import desk, the export desk, the transit pass desk, the half duty (coastwise) desk and all the branches of the statistical department like a streak of lightning, and almost before the envied ting-chai had passed the cover to the Commissioner a score of senior and junior assistants, backed by a crowd of linguists and shupans, flocked around the "foreign gate" of the Commissioner's cozy office to hear the momentous news.

Mr. B—— broke the envelope in the midst of a pin-drop silence. He glanced over the telegram.

"This concerns you, I think, Kopsch," he said, passing it carelessly to the statistical secretary.

The latter gentleman read it aloud.

"Gazette," third quarter. Fourth assistants A. Blake to be promoted to second B for special services, with transfer in charge to Niuchwang.—Pericord."

A howl of good-natured execration welcomed the luck of Blake. After six weeks of honest silence—nothing but a cold item of routine! Nevertheless this very absence of all personal news brought back to them the touch of the vanished hand which they loved, and the staff went wild with joy. "Pericord"—that contained everything they wanted to know, and the shroffs and coolies in the weighing sheds were kicked out of the way in order that the outdoor staff might repair in a body to their club to celebrate the salvation of the service.

But almost on the heels of the first telegram came a second. The contents of this were as follows:

"S. G. informed that during interruption of communications a laxity of discipline observable among outport staffs, statistical department will prepare circular in conformity with instructions contained in circulars Nos. 73 and 109 of 187, reminding Commissioners and assistants in charge that prestige of service must be maintained. By order.—Cinderpan."

"Here, no business can stand this, you know," said the Commissioner, laying aside his work and vainly trying to restrain a delighted grin. "The 'little bird' and the threatening letter at once! Gentlemen, if any of you care to drop in to the club during the next half hour I shall be obliged to stand you a cocktail to inaugurate the revival of despotic discipline."

Then a cheer went up which nearly typhooned the roof of the new Customhouse. Next to the S. G., the Port Commissioner is the greatest man in the land, and when he unbends even the indoor staff is apt to forget its dignity.

THE END.