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## A SOLDIER OF COMMERCE

BY JOHN ROE GORDON

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### CHAPTER XIII.

#### THE STORM ON THE CASPIAN.

**T**WO days and two nights they continued thus, traveling constantly. Two of the men did the poling while the third man slept. At times, under the cover of favoring darkness, Harvey would emerge from his hiding place, and while Alma kept watch for pursuing Russians Irons assisted with the boat to give one of the hardworking Astrakans a rest. On the third day they saw a boat overhauling them.

"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 inquisitiveness 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 sir, 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 hay boat. Well, my friend, where are you going?"

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

"Does every one who goes to the fair at Tiflis go from there to Astrabad?"

"Not all, excellent captain; but at Astrabad there are many caravans gathering, and I can sell my hay. The camels need it. To ascend the Volga to the big fair at Nijni Novgorod would take too long."

"Go on. There will be a fine mingling of races at Astrabad."

"No finer than at Tiflis," said Charka as the hayboat slowly drew away. "The

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scum of the earth and the cream were at Tiflis.

The launch turned back to the wharf where it had been lying. Charka felt that he was safe, and as there was a slight breeze he raised his sail. He had but one thing more to fear, he reasoned, and that was a Russian gunboat. Boatloads of hay were not infrequent on the Caspian, and he felt assured that it would not be difficult to hoodwink the captain of the gunboat.

Under sail the boat made better progress and was soon out on the Caspian, where in the inky darkness nothing could be seen. The slight wind that had promised so well soon died away, and the boat, now in deep water where the poles were useless, was almost helpless. Its big tarred sails flapped against the rude masts, and the men grumbled. This was not getting to Astrabad, and they had had enough of watching over the lives of a Muscovite woman and a man from what they considered another world. The boat got into a current that carried it out farther and farther, and Harvey, feeling secure in the darkness, called to Alma to come out from her hiding place. They sat together in the little deck house waiting for the breeze that must surely come sooner or later.

"By this time they are well in pursuit," said Alma, with a shudder. "It is death to be taken now."

"It would have been death at any time, my darling. We must be cheerful. I wish we had a cayik instead of this old hayboat."

"The cayik is faster, dear M. Irons, but would it be as safe? I fear that a storm is coming. In that little boat I would be afraid."

"I'd take my chances in that as soon as in this old hulk, and there would be the additional advantage of getting somewhere before the storm came."

"Ah, M. Irons, it is a long way across the Caspian."

"I am aware of that, Alma. I've been long enough trying to make the trip. Even now I am a good many days from my windmills."

"I fear you will never see them again, dear M. Irons."

"Not see my windmills again? Why, I'll sell them at the big fair at Nijni Novgorod. Surest thing in the world, my darling. We'll take our wedding trip out of my commissions. But don't call me M. Irons. Call me Harvey. That is my name, as yours is Alma."

"But we do not—it is not like Russian girls."

"You are a Russian girl no longer, dear. As soon as we get to a place where there is an American missionary who can perform the ceremony, or an American consul, you will be my American wife, and the Russian gins can thunder all they please. Hello! What's up now?"

Suddenly the delayed wind had come in squalls. It whistled through the

ropes, and one snapped. Charka could be heard outside cursing and bawling out orders to his men. Harvey went to the door and tried to see in the darkness. The boat began to move rapidly through the water and curved to one side. A flash of lightning showed him the three men hard at work trying to control the sails.

"The storm you feared has come, little girl, but do not be afraid. I'll go outside and see what I can do to help."

"Am I of use?" he asked, raising his voice to a shout.

"Use! Yes, you can be of use!" bawled Charka. "Help me and my men!"

Charka's voice showed his agitation. His men were working like beavers to untie the rope that had parted. Harvey assisted, and soon the sail was bellying out before the steadily growing wind.

"Now!" cried Charka exultingly as the old boat gathered speed. "Now the Turk's cayik would not be so fast!"

But his jubilation came too soon. A sudden gust of wind tore the rope he was holding from his hand, and one that had been fastened to a pin at the side of the boat snapped with a report like that of a pistol. It cracked two or three times in the air and then wound itself around Charka's neck. A smothered curse came from him as he struggled with the rope. As Harvey stepped forward to assist him the sail gave an extra pull, and Charka was dragged over the side of the boat into the sea. A cry came from him as he sank, and his men uttered their prayers as they stood shivering, realizing the uselessness of trying to aid him.

"Don't stand there like idiots!" shouted Harvey. "You've got a small boat. Get it into the water and save Charka!"

"It cannot be done!" cried one. "He is already left far behind."

"Get out the boat, and I will go with you to rescue him."

"No, not you! You are the one who brought this upon us. Many times have we sailed upon the Caspian, but never before did this thing happen to us. It serves us right for taking an unbeliever and a Muscovite woman on the boat. That was our curse."

"Nonsense! Get out the boat."

The two consulted a moment, speaking so low that Harvey could not hear. "We will go to rescue Charka," said the one who had done the talking. "But you cannot go. You would bring us another curse."

Harvey went into the cabin to get a lantern. With the aid of this he watched the two men get the small boat off.

"Look well for him. He was a good man," said Harvey.

"He was," came the answer as the boat moved off. "We shall not return. We will not remain on a boat with a Muscovite woman and an unbeliever. We do not wish to kill, so we leave."

Harvey stood aghast. Alone he could not handle the sails. He shouted to

them to come back, but they paid no attention to him. He returned to Alma.

"The fools have left us! Charka was thrown overboard by a broken rope, and I told them to go in the small boat to rescue them. They took the boat, preferring that in the storm to remaining on this boat with us. They say, my darling, we have brought a curse upon them."

The wind howled. The boat shivered as it was driven along at increasing speed. The timbers surely would not hold together long.

"My darling! What a terrible experience for you!" said Harvey, taking her in his arms. "It is impossible to control the boat. The only thing I can do is to try to cut away the sails."

"Dear Harvey, I will help you."

But they had nothing save the sword of the inspector general of prisons with which to work. With this they backed at a few ropes they could reach, but the sails were held by ropes that had wound themselves around the masts. One must break and fell to the deck. It was beyond the power of both to move it. The speed of the boat seemed to be none the less for the heat of that mast. The rain now came down in torrents. The boat rocked and rolled over the waves swept completely over it.

"We cannot remain here," said Harvey. "We must climb up on the hay."

"They soon had a perch in the hay, which they kept by clinging to the cords that bound it to keep it in place. One of Harvey's arms was around the girl. They rushed along hour after hour, each moment fearing that the boat would sink or turn over. Suddenly there was a loud crash. The remaining mast broke and went plunging into the sea. The boat lurched frightfully, and it now seemed impossible for it to live in the foaming waters much longer.

"Darling one!" cried Alma. "My dearest sweetheart! Kiss me! Tell me once again that you love me, and with your strong arm around me I am content to die."

He kissed her passionately. "It is hard, my beautiful darling, to die when liberty is almost ours! But I see no hope. The boat is filled and must surely sink. If this be God's will, let us not cry out against it. Kiss me again. God grant that this may not be our last farewell!"

### CHAPTER XIV.

#### THE LOVERS ARE SEPARATED.

**T**HE cessation of the storm found the old hayboat still afloat, but the two lovers on top of the hay were in a precarious condition. The wind and rain had chilled Alma, and she snuggled close to Harvey for warmth.

"My darling," he said as he hugged her close. "This is indeed a terrible experience for you. Rather would I have remained in the prison at Tiflis

than subject you to such peril."

"Dear one, they would have killed you, and that would have killed me. Is it not better for us to die together, if we must die?"

"Yes, it is better; but, since the old hulk and its load of hay have survived the worst of the storm, we may yet run across a boat that will pick us up."

"Let us hope so."

"They spoke little as they huddled together on the hay. Each was straining to hear the faintest sound that might come from over the water.

"Hark!" said Harvey. "Dearest, did you not hear something?"

"I fancied—I hoped—I heard a shout. Can it be that Russian boat we are after so soon, and in that storm?"

"The Russians would not be shouting. I fancy it is some one in distress. Perhaps the Turks in that cayik are shouting for help."

With clasped hands they waited through the dark hours of the early morning. Dawn began streaking the east. Harvey strained his eyes to pierce the scarcely perceptible light. Not more than 200 feet from them was a long, low hull that seemed at rest. The hum of voices could be heard as the wind and rolling current carried them nearer.

"We are saved!" cried Alma, and she wept on his breast.

"Ho, there!" shouted Harvey at the top of his voice. "Whoever you are, help us!"

"What is the voice that speaks out of the darkness?" came a shout. "In the name of Allah tell us!"

Then above the other voice there rose cries of "Allah! Allah, Ill Allah! Mohammedan Resoul Ullah!"

"Mohammedans, and most likely Turks," said Harvey. "Yet that does not sound like a Turkish voice. But any port in a storm."

As the dawn increased and the old hay barge floated nearer the other boat Harvey could distinguish dark forms lined up along the deck rail. He seemed to recognize that long, low, black hull. A rope was thrown to him, and he caught it after several attempts. Those on board the vessel drew the hayboat toward it.

"Who are you?" came a voice in a jargon that Harvey happily understood.

It was that, no matter with whom he came in contact, Irons could make himself understood.

"We will take you!" came the voice, and the hayboat was drawn close to the other. Powerful arms were out-reached to them, and Irons, stiff and sore from the experience of the night, gathered his strength to pass Alma over.

"A soldier of the hated czar!" yelled one on board, scanning the uniform of the inspector general of prisons, which Alma still wore. "One of our enemies!"

A sharp cry escaped Alma, and Harvey sang out: "Have a care how you use that woman! That is my wife! She wears that uniform only to escape!"

As he spoke he tried to leap to the other vessel, but a long spear stopped him.

"Remain where you are till we understand this thing!" said one who



"Remain where you are!"

seemed to be an officer. "If you attempt to come on this ship before you are wanted, you will be killed."

"What is it you wish to understand?" Another and another spear appeared until a regular wall of lance points barred him from the vessel.

"Remain where you are!" The terrified Alma was taken, with polite attentions, to a comfortable cabin, fitted up in oriental luxury. Here she saw, sleeping upon a divan, the beautiful daughter of the murdered Bartelkis.

"Koura!" exclaimed Alma, throwing her arms around the girl. But Koura, thinking that she was being embraced by a man, repulsed Alma.

"Koura, do you not know me? I am Alma Turnoff!"

"Alma Turnoff! Am I, then, rescued again by Russians?"

"No, my poor girl; I am as unucky as you. My American sweetheart, who was accused of abducting you the first time and was thrown into prison at Tiflis to be sent to Siberia or killed, escaped with my assistance. I wore the uniform of the inspector general of prisons, and by acting a part I succeeded in getting him out. We escaped from Tiflis while the alarm guns were being fired. The soldiers even came upon the boat where we were hiding under the hay. A storm overtook us. The captain of the boat was swept overboard and the other men deserted in a small boat, thinking the American was the cause of the storm. M. Irons and I left alone, have just been rescued by the men on this boat. At least, I am here, but M. Irons is held on the hayboat. They thought, as you did, that I was a Russian officer."

"I know you are not now," said Koura, putting her arm around Alma. "I recognize your voice and face. Let them know that M. Irons is a friend."

"How shall I address them? Do you know them well? When did you come?"

"But a short time ago. I know now that the American had nothing to do with my abduction. Of course you know that my father has not been found, and I had no home. I was lodging with my uncle, Dimitri Bartelkis, and one night as I was closing his house I was seized, hurried into a drosky and taken to the river, where I was put into a Turkish cayik."

"You passed us," cried Alma, "but we did not suspect that you were there."

"You could not. Even the soldiers that came—I thought they were looking for me, but they must have been looking for you—were deceived. I was thrust into a sack and placed under several other sacks of meal and grain, and they did not find me. Oh, this is terrible! But M. Irons will protect and defend us."

"Will he?" demanded a short, swarthy officer of the amer's boat as he turned Alma rudely around. "Let me look at you. You have cut your hair if you are a woman. But you must be a woman, you are so beautiful. Since we have had so much trouble with your

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