

Chapter 9

Victory! She was here, a slave to these black conquerors. Once more I started toward her, but better judgment held me back--I could do nothing to help her other than by stealth. Could I even accomplish aught by this means? I did not know. It seemed beyond the pale of possibility, and yet I should try.

"And you will not bend the knee to me?" continued Menelek, after she had spoken. Victory shook her head in a most decided negation.

"You shall be my first choice, then," said the emperor. "I like your spirit, for the breaking of it will add to my pleasure in you, and never fear but that it shall be broken--this very night. Take her to my apartments," and he motioned to an officer at his side.

I was surprised to see Victory follow the man off in apparent quiet submission. I tried to follow, that I might be near her against some opportunity to speak with her or assist in her escape. But, after I had followed them from the throne room, through several other apartments, and down a long corridor, I found my further progress barred by a soldier who stood guard before a doorway through which the officer conducted Victory.

Almost immediately the officer reappeared and started back in the direction of the throne room. I had been hiding in a doorway after the guard had turned me back, having taken refuge there while his back was turned, and, as the officer approached me, I withdrew into the room beyond, which was in darkness. There I remained for a long time, watching the sentry before the door of the room in which Victory was a prisoner, and awaiting some favorable circumstance which would give me entry to her.

I have not attempted to fully describe my sensations at the moment I recognized Victory, because, I can assure you, they were entirely indescribable. I should never have imagined that the sight of any human being could affect me as had this unexpected discovery of Victory in the same room in which I was, while I had thought of her for weeks either as dead, or at best hundreds of miles to the west, and as irretrievably lost to me as though she were, in truth, dead.

I was filled with a strange, mad impulse to be near her. It was not enough merely to assist her, or protect her--I desired to touch her--to take her in my arms. I was astounded at myself. Another thing puzzled me--it was my incomprehensible feeling of elation since I had again seen her. With a fate worse than death staring her in the face, and with the knowledge that I should probably die defending her

within the hour, I was still happier than I had been for weeks--and all because I had seen again for a few brief minutes the figure of a little heathen maiden. I couldn't account for it, and it angered me; I had never before felt any such sensations in the presence of a woman, and I had made love to some very beautiful ones in my time.

It seemed ages that I stood in the shadow of that doorway, in the ill-lit corridor of the palace of Menelek XIV. A sickly gas jet cast a sad pallor upon the black face of the sentry. The fellow seemed rooted to the spot. Evidently he would never leave, or turn his back again.

I had been in hiding but a short time when I heard the sound of distant cannon. The truce had ended, and the battle had been resumed. Very shortly thereafter the earth shook to the explosion of a shell within the city, and from time to time thereafter other shells burst at no great distance from the palace. The yellow men were bombarding New Gondar again.

Presently officers and slaves commenced to traverse the corridor on matters pertaining to their duties, and then came the emperor, scowling and wrathful. He was followed by a few personal attendants, whom he dismissed at the doorway to his apartments--the same doorway through which Victory had been taken. I chafed to follow him, but the corridor was filled with people. At last they betook themselves to their own apartments, which lay upon either side of the corridor.

An officer and a slave entered the very room in which I hid, forcing me to flatten myself to one side in the darkness until they had passed. Then the slave made a light, and I knew that I must find another hiding place.

Stepping boldly into the corridor, I saw that it was now empty save for the single sentry before the emperor's door. He glanced up as I emerged from the room, the occupants of which had not seen me. I walked straight toward the soldier, my mind made up in an instant. I tried to simulate an expression of cringing servility, and I must have succeeded, for I entirely threw the man off his guard, so that he permitted me to approach within reach of his rifle before stopping me. Then it was too late--for him.

Without a word or a warning, I snatched the piece from his grasp, and, at the same time struck him a terrific blow between the eyes with my clenched fist. He staggered back in surprise, too dumbfounded even to cry out, and then I clubbed his rifle and felled him with a single mighty blow.

A moment later, I had burst into the room beyond. It was empty!

I gazed about, mad with disappointment. Two doors opened from this to other rooms. I ran to the nearer and listened. Yes, voices were coming from beyond and one was a woman's, level and cold and filled with scorn. There was no terror in it. It was Victory's.

I turned the knob and pushed the door inward just in time to see Menelek seize the girl and drag her toward the far end of the apartment. At the same instant there was a deafening roar just outside the palace--a shell had struck much nearer than any of its predecessors. The noise of it drowned my rapid rush across the room.

But in her struggles, Victory turned Menelek about so that he saw me. She was striking him in the face with her clenched fist, and now he was choking her.

At sight of me, he gave voice to a roar of anger.

"What means this, slave?" he cried. "Out of here! Out of here! Quick, before I kill you!"

But for answer I rushed upon him, striking him with the butt of the rifle. He staggered back, dropping Victory to the floor, and then he cried aloud for the guard, and came at me. Again and again I struck him; but his thick skull might have been armor plate, for all the damage I did it.

He tried to close with me, seizing the rifle, but I was stronger than he, and, wrenching the weapon from his grasp, tossed it aside and made for his throat with my bare hands. I had not dared fire the weapon for fear that its report would bring the larger guard stationed at the farther end of the corridor.

We struggled about the room, striking one another, knocking over furniture, and rolling upon the floor. Menelek was a powerful man, and he was fighting for his life. Continually he kept calling for the guard, until I succeeded in getting a grip upon his throat; but it was too late. His cries had been heard, and suddenly the door burst open, and a score of armed guardsmen rushed into the apartment.

Victory seized the rifle from the floor and leaped between me and them. I had the black emperor upon his back, and both my hands were at his throat, choking the life from him.

The rest happened in the fraction of a second. There was a rending crash above us, then a deafening explosion within the chamber. Smoke and powder fumes filled the room. Half stunned, I rose from the lifeless body of my antagonist just in time to see Victory stagger to her feet and turn toward me. Slowly the smoke cleared to reveal the shattered remnants of the guard. A shell had fallen through

the palace roof and exploded just in the rear of the detachment of guardsmen who were coming to the rescue of their emperor. Why neither Victory nor I were struck is a miracle. The room was a wreck. A great, jagged hole was torn in the ceiling, and the wall toward the corridor had been blown entirely out.

As I rose, Victory had risen, too, and started toward me. But when she saw that I was uninjured she stopped, and stood there in the center of the demolished apartment looking at me. Her expression was inscrutable--I could not guess whether she was glad to see me, or not.

"Victory!" I cried. "Thank God that you are safe!" And I approached her, a greater gladness in my heart than I had felt since the moment that I knew the Coldwater must be swept beyond thirty.

There was no answering gladness in her eyes. Instead, she stamped her little foot in anger.

"Why did it have to be you who saved me!" she exclaimed. "I hate you!"

"Hate me?" I asked. "Why should you hate me, Victory? I do not hate you. I--I--" What was I about to say? I was very close to her as a great light broke over me. Why had I never realized it before? The truth accounted for a great many hitherto inexplicable moods that had claimed me from time to time since first I had seen Victory.

"Why should I hate you?" she repeated. "Because Snider told me--he told me that you had promised me to him, but he did not get me. I killed him, as I should like to kill you!"

"Snider lied!" I cried. And then I seized her and held her in my arms, and made her listen to me, though she struggled and fought like a young lioness. "I love you, Victory. You must know that I love you--that I have always loved you, and that I never could have made so base a promise."

She ceased her struggles, just a trifle, but still tried to push me from her. "You called me a barbarian!" she said.

Ah, so that was it! That still rankled. I crushed her to me.

"You could not love a barbarian," she went on, but she had ceased to struggle.

"But I do love a barbarian, Victory!" I cried, "the dearest barbarian in the world."

She raised her eyes to mine, and then her smooth, brown arms encircled my neck and drew my lips down to hers.

"I love you--I have loved you always!" she said, and then she buried her face upon my shoulder and sobbed. "I have been so unhappy," she said, "but I could not die while I thought that you might live."

As we stood there, momentarily forgetful of all else than our new found happiness, the ferocity of the bombardment increased until scarce thirty seconds elapsed between the shells that rained about the palace.

To remain long would be to invite certain death. We could not escape the way that we had entered the apartment, for not only was the corridor now choked with debris, but beyond the corridor there were doubtless many members of the emperor's household who would stop us.

Upon the opposite side of the room was another door, and toward this I led the way. It opened into a third apartment with windows overlooking an inner court. From one of these windows I surveyed the courtyard. Apparently it was empty, and the rooms upon the opposite side were unlighted.

Assisting Victory to the open, I followed, and together we crossed the court, discovering upon the opposite side a number of wide, wooden doors set in the wall of the palace, with small windows between. As we stood close behind one of the doors, listening, a horse within neighed.

"The stables!" I whispered, and, a moment later, had pushed back a door and entered. From the city about us we could hear the din of great commotion, and quite close the sounds of battle--the crack of thousands of rifles, the yells of the soldiers, the hoarse commands of officers, and the blare of bugles.

The bombardment had ceased as suddenly as it had commenced. I judged that the enemy was storming the city, for the sounds we heard were the sounds of hand-to-hand combat.

Within the stables I groped about until I had found saddles and bridles for two horses. But afterward, in the darkness, I could find but a single mount. The doors of the opposite side, leading to the street, were open, and we could see great multitudes of men, women, and children fleeing toward the west. Soldiers, afoot and mounted, were joining the mad exodus. Now and then a camel or an elephant would pass bearing some officer or dignitary to safety. It was evident that the city would fall at any moment--a fact which was amply proclaimed by the terror-stricken haste of the fear-mad mob.

Horse, camel, and elephant trod helpless women and children beneath their feet. A common soldier dragged a general from his mount, and, leaping to the animal's back, fled down the packed street toward the west. A woman seized a gun and

brained a court dignitary, whose horse had trampled her child to death. Shrieks, curses, commands, supplications filled the air. It was a frightful scene--one that will be burned upon my memory forever.

I had saddled and bridled the single horse which had evidently been overlooked by the royal household in its flight, and, standing a little back in the shadow of the stable's interior, Victory and I watched the surging throng without.

To have entered it would have been to have courted greater danger than we were already in. We decided to wait until the stress of blacks thinned, and for more than an hour we stood there while the sounds of battle raged upon the eastern side of the city and the population flew toward the west. More and more numerous became the uniformed soldiers among the fleeing throng, until, toward the last, the street was packed with them. It was no orderly retreat, but a rout, complete and terrible.

The fighting was steadily approaching us now, until the crack of rifles sounded in the very street upon which we were looking. And then came a handful of brave men--a little rear guard backing slowly toward the west, working their smoking rifles in feverish haste as they fired volley after volley at the foe we could not see.

But these were pressed back and back until the first line of the enemy came opposite our shelter. They were men of medium height, with olive complexions and almond eyes. In them I recognized the descendants of the ancient Chinese race.

They were well uniformed and superbly armed, and they fought bravely and under perfect discipline. So rapt was I in the exciting events transpiring in the street that I did not hear the approach of a body of men from behind. It was a party of the conquerors who had entered the palace and were searching it.

They came upon us so unexpectedly that we were prisoners before we realized what had happened. That night we were held under a strong guard just outside the eastern wall of the city, and the next morning were started upon a long march toward the east.

Our captors were not unkind to us, and treated the women prisoners with respect. We marched for many days--so many that I lost count of them--and at last we came to another city--a Chinese city this time--which stands upon the site of ancient Moscow.

It is only a small frontier city, but it is well built and well kept. Here a large military force is maintained, and here also, is a terminus of the railroad that crosses modern China to the Pacific.

There was every evidence of a high civilization in all that we saw within the city, which, in connection with the humane treatment that had been accorded all prisoners upon the long and tiresome march, encouraged me to hope that I might appeal to some high officer here for the treatment which my rank and birth merited.

We could converse with our captors only through the medium of interpreters who spoke both Chinese and Abyssinian. But there were many of these, and shortly after we reached the city I persuaded one of them to carry a verbal message to the officer who had commanded the troops during the return from New Gondar, asking that I might be given a hearing by some high official.

The reply to my request was a summons to appear before the officer to whom I had addressed my appeal. A sergeant came for me along with the interpreter, and I managed to obtain his permission to let Victory accompany me--I had never left her alone with the prisoners since we had been captured.

To my delight I found that the officer into whose presence we were conducted spoke Abyssinian fluently. He was astounded when I told him that I was a Pan-American. Unlike all others whom I had spoken with since my arrival in Europe, he was well acquainted with ancient history--was familiar with twentieth century conditions in Pan-America, and after putting a half dozen questions to me was satisfied that I spoke the truth.

When I told him that Victory was Queen of England he showed little surprise, telling me that in their recent explorations in ancient Russia they had found many descendants of the old nobility and royalty.

He immediately set aside a comfortable house for us, furnished us with servants and with money, and in other ways showed us every attention and kindness.

He told me that he would telegraph his emperor at once, and the result was that we were presently commanded to repair to Peking and present ourselves before the ruler.

We made the journey in a comfortable railway carriage, through a country which, as we traveled farther toward the east, showed increasing evidence of prosperity and wealth.

At the imperial court we were received with great kindness, the emperor being most inquisitive about the state of modern Pan-America. He told me that while he personally deplored the existence of the strict regulations which had raised a barrier between the east and the west, he had felt, as had his predecessors, that

recognition of the wishes of the great Pan-American federation would be most conducive to the continued peace of the world.

His empire includes all of Asia, and the islands of the Pacific as far east as 175dW. The empire of Japan no longer exists, having been conquered and absorbed by China over a hundred years ago. The Philippines are well administered, and constitute one of the most progressive colonies of the Chinese empire.

The emperor told me that the building of this great empire and the spreading of enlightenment among its diversified and savage peoples had required all the best efforts of nearly two hundred years. Upon his accession to the throne he had found the labor well nigh perfected and had turned his attention to the reclamation of Europe.

His ambition is to wrest it from the hands of the blacks, and then to attempt the work of elevating its fallen peoples to the high estate from which the Great War precipitated them.

I asked him who was victorious in that war, and he shook his head sadly as he replied:

"Pan-America, perhaps, and China, with the blacks of Abyssinia," he said. "Those who did not fight were the only ones to reap any of the rewards that are supposed to belong to victory. The combatants reaped naught but annihilation. You have seen--better than any man you must realize that there was no victory for any nation embroiled in that frightful war."

"When did it end?" I asked him.

Again he shook his head. "It has not ended yet. There has never been a formal peace declared in Europe. After a while there were none left to make peace, and the rude tribes which sprang from the survivors continued to fight among themselves because they knew no better condition of society. War razed the works of man--war and pestilence razed man. God give that there shall never be such another war!"

You all know how Porfirio Johnson returned to Pan-America with John Alvarez in chains; how Alvarez's trial raised a popular demonstration that the government could not ignore. His eloquent appeal--not for himself, but for me--is historic, as are its results. You know how a fleet was sent across the Atlantic to search for me, how the restrictions against crossing thirty to one hundred seventy-five were removed forever, and how the officers were brought to Peking, arriving upon the very day that Victory and I were married at the imperial court.

My return to Pan-America was very different from anything I could possibly have imagined a year before. Instead of being received as a traitor to my country, I was acclaimed a hero. It was good to get back again, good to witness the kindly treatment that was accorded my dear Victory, and when I learned that Delcarte and Taylor had been found at the mouth of the Rhine and were already back in Pan-America my joy was unalloyed.

And now we are going back, Victory and I, with the men and the munitions and power to reclaim England for her queen. Again I shall cross thirty, but under what altered conditions!

A new epoch for Europe is inaugurated, with enlightened China on the east and enlightened Pan-America on the west--the two great peace powers whom God has preserved to regenerate chastened and forgiven Europe. I have been through much--I have suffered much, but I have won two great laurel wreaths beyond thirty. One is the opportunity to rescue Europe from barbarism, the other is a little barbarian, and the greater of these is--Victory.