

CHAPTER X. BARBARA CAPTURED BY HEAD-HUNTERS

WHEN Barbara Harding, with Miller before and Swenson behind her, had taken up the march behind the loot-laden party seven dusky, noiseless shadows had emerged from the forest to follow close behind.

For half a mile the party moved along the narrow trail unmolested. Theriere had come back to exchange a half-dozen words with the girl and had again moved forward toward the head of the column. Miller was not more than twenty-five feet behind the first man ahead of him, and Miss Harding and Swenson followed at intervals of but three or four yards.

Suddenly, without warning, Swenson and Miller fell, pierced with savage spears, and at the same instant sinewy fingers gripped Barbara Harding, and a silencing hand was clapped over her mouth. There had been no sound above the muffled tread of the seamen. It had all been accomplished so quickly and so easily that the girl did not comprehend what had befallen her for several minutes.

In the darkness of the forest she could not clearly distinguish the forms or features of her abductors, though she reasoned, as was only natural, that Skipper Simms' party had become aware of the plot against them and had taken this means of thwarting a part of it; but when her captors turned directly into the mazes of the jungle, away from the coast, she began first to wonder and then to doubt, so that presently when a small clearing let the moonlight full upon them she was not surprised to discover that none of the members of the Halfmoon's company was among her guard.

Barbara Harding had not circled the globe half a dozen times for nothing. There were few races or nations with whose history, past and present, she was not fairly familiar, and so the sight that greeted her eyes was well suited to fill her with astonishment, for she found herself in the hands of what appeared to be a party of Japanese warriors of the fifteenth or sixteenth century. She recognized the medieval arms and armor, the ancient helmets, the hairdressing of the two-sworded men of old Japan. At the belts of two of her captors dangled grisly trophies of the hunt. In the moonlight she saw that they were the heads of Miller and Swenson.

The girl was horrified. She had thought her lot before as bad as it could be, but to be in the clutches of these strange, fierce warriors of a long-dead age was unthinkably worse. That she could ever have wished to be back upon the Halfmoon would have seemed, a few days since, incredible; yet that was precisely what she longed for now.

On through the night marched the little, brown men--grim and silent--until at last they came to a small village in a valley away from the coast--a valley that lay nestled high among lofty mountains. Here were cavelike dwellings burrowed half under ground, the upper walls and thatched roofs rising scarce four feet above the level. Granaries on stilts were dotted here and there among the dwellings.

Into one of the filthy dens Barbara Harding was dragged. She found a single room in which several native and half-caste women were sleeping, about them stretched and curled and perched a motley throng of dirty yellow children, dogs, pigs, and chickens. It was the palace of Daimio Oda Yorimoto, Lord of Yoka, as his ancestors had christened their new island home.

Once within the warren the two samurai who had guarded Barbara upon the march turned and withdrew--she was alone with Oda Yorimoto and his family. From the center of the room depended a swinging shelf upon which a great pile of grinning skulls rested. At the back of the room was a door which Barbara had not at first noticed--evidently there was another apartment to the dwelling.

The girl was given little opportunity to examine her new prison, for scarce had the guards withdrawn than Oda Yorimoto approached and grasped her by the arm.

"Come!" he said, in Japanese that was sufficiently similar to modern Nippon to be easily understood by Barbara Harding. With the word he drew her toward a sleeping mat on a raised platform at one side of the room.

One of the women awoke at the sound of the man's voice. She looked up at Barbara in sullen hatred--otherwise she gave no indication that she saw anything unusual transpiring. It was as though an exquisite American belle were a daily visitor at the Oda Yorimoto home.

"What do you want of me?" cried the frightened girl, in Japanese.

Oda Yorimoto looked at her in astonishment. Where had this white girl learned to speak his tongue?

"I am the daimio, Oda Yorimoto," he said. "These are my wives. Now you are one of them. Come!"

"Not yet--not here!" cried the girl clutching at a straw. "Wait. Give me time to think. If you do not harm me my father will reward you fabulously. Ten thousand koku he would gladly give to have me returned to him safely."

Oda Yorimoto but shook his head.

"Twenty thousand koku!" cried the girl.

Still the daimio shook his head negatively.

"A hundred thousand--name your own price, if you will but not harm me."

"Silence!" growled the man. "What are even a million koku to me who only know the word from the legends of my ancestors. We have no need for koku here, and had we, my hills are full of the yellow metal which measures its value. No! you are my woman. Come!"

"Not here! Not here!" pleaded the girl. "There is another room--away from all these women," and she turned her eyes toward the door at the opposite side of the chamber.

Oda Yorimoto shrugged his shoulders. That would be easier than a fight, he argued, and so he led the girl toward the doorway that she had indicated. Within the room all was dark, but the daimio moved as one accustomed to the place, and as he moved through the blackness the girl at his side felt with stealthy fingers at the man's belt.

At last Oda Yorimoto reached the far side of the long chamber.

"Here!" he said, and took her by the shoulders.

"Here!" answered the girl in a low, tense voice, and at the instant that she spoke Oda Yorimoto, Lord of Yoka, felt a quick tug at his belt, and before he guessed what was to happen his own short sword had pierced his breast.

A single shriek broke from the lips of the daimio; but it was so high and shrill and like the shriek of a woman in mortal terror that the woman in the next room who heard it but smiled a crooked, wicked smile of hate and turned once more upon her pallet to sleep.

Again and again Barbara Harding plunged the sword of the brown man into the still heart, until she knew beyond peradventure of a doubt that her enemy was forevermore powerless to injure her. Then she sank, exhausted and trembling, upon the dirt floor beside the corpse.

When Theriere came to the realization that Barbara Harding was gone he jumped to the natural conclusion that Ward and Simms had discovered the ruse that he had worked upon them just in time to permit them to intercept Miller and Swenson with the girl, and carry her back to the main camp.

The others were prone to agree with him, though the mucker grumbled that "it listened fishy." However, all hands returned cautiously down the face of the cliff, expecting momentarily to be attacked by the guards which they felt sure Ward

would post in expectation of a return of the mutineers, the moment they discovered that the girl had been taken from them; but to the surprise of all they reached the cove without molestation, and when they had crept cautiously to the vicinity of the sleepers they discovered that all were there, in peaceful slumber, just as they had left them a few hours before.

Silently the party retraced its steps up the cliff. Theriere and Billy Byrne brought up the rear.

"What do you make of it anyway, Byrne?" asked the Frenchman.

"If you wanta get it straight, cul," replied the mucker, "I tink youse know a whole lot more about it dan you'd like to have de rest of us tink."

"What do you mean, Byrne?" cried Theriere. "Out with it now!"

"Sure I'll out wid it. You didn't tink I was bashful didja? Wot fer did you detail dem two pikers, Miller and Swenson, to guard de skirt fer if it wasn't fer some special frame-up of yer own? Dey never been in our gang, and dats just wot you wanted 'em fer. It was easy to tip dem off to hike out wid de squab, and de first chanct you get you'll hike after dem, while we hold de bag. Tought you'd double-cross us easy, didn't yeh? Yeh cheap-skate!"

"Byrne," said Theriere, and it was easy to see that only through the strength of his will-power did he keep his temper, "you may have cause to suspect the motives of everyone connected with this outfit. I can't say that I blame you; but I want you to remember what I say to you now. There was a time when I fully intended to 'double-cross' you, as you say--that was before you saved my life. Since then I have been on the square with you not only in deed but in thought as well. I give you the word of a man whose word once meant something--I am playing square with you now except in one thing, and I shall tell you what that is at once. I do not know where Miss Harding is, or what has happened to her, and Miller, and Swenson. That is God's truth. Now for the one thing that I just mentioned. Recently I changed my intentions relative to Miss Harding. I was after the money the same as the rest--that I am free to admit; but now I don't give a rap for it, and I had intended taking advantage of the first opportunity to return Miss Harding to civilization unharmed and without the payment of a penny to anyone. The reason for my change of heart is my own affair. In all probability you wouldn't believe the sincerity or honesty of my motives should I disclose them. I am only telling you these things because you have accused me of double dealing, and I do not want the man who saved my life at the risk of his own to have the slightest grounds to doubt my honesty with him. I've been a fairly bad egg, Byrne, for a great many years; but, by George! I'm not entirely rotten yet."

Byrne was silent for a few moments. He, too, had recently come to the conclusion that possibly he was not entirely rotten either, and had in a vague and half-formed sort of way wished for the opportunity to demonstrate the fact, so he was willing to concede to another that which he craved for himself.

"Yeh listen all right, cul," he said at last; "an' I'm willin' to take yeh at yer own say-so until I learn different."

"Thanks," said Theriere tersely. "Now we can work together in the search for Miss Harding; but where, in the name of all that's holy, are we to start?"

"Why, where we seen her last, of course," replied the mucker. "Right here on top of dese bluffs."

"Then we can't do anything until daylight," said the Frenchman.

"Not a ting, and at daylight we'll most likely have a scrap on our hands from below," and the mucker jerked his thumb in the direction of the cove.

"I think," said Theriere, "that we had better spend an hour arming ourselves with sticks and stones. We've a mighty good position up here. One that we can defend splendidly from an assault from below, and if we are prepared for them we can stave 'em off for a while if we need the time to search about up here for clews to Miss Harding's whereabouts."

And so the party set to work to cut stout bludgeons from the trees about them, and pile loose fragments of rock in handy places near the cliff top. Theriere even went so far as to throw up a low breastwork across the top of the trail up which the enemy must climb to reach the summit of the cliff. When they had completed their preparations three men could have held the place against ten times their own number.

Then they lay down to sleep, leaving Blanco and Divine on guard, for it had been decided that these two, with Bony Sawyer, should be left behind on the morrow to hold the cliff top while the others were searching for clews to the whereabouts of Barbara Harding. They were to relieve each other at guard duty during the balance of the night.

Scarce had the first suggestion of dawn lightened the eastern sky than Divine, who was again on guard, awakened Theriere. In a moment the others were aroused, and a hasty raid on the cached provisions made. The lack of water was keenly felt by all, but it was too far to the spring to chance taking the time necessary to fetch the much-craved fluid and those who were to forge into the jungle in search of Barbara Harding hoped to find water farther inland, while it

was decided to dispatch Bony Sawyer to the spring for water for those who were to remain on guard at the cliff top.

A hurried breakfast was made on water-soaked ship's biscuit. Theriere and his searching party stuffed their pockets full of them, and a moment later the search was on. First the men traversed the trail toward the spring, looking for indications of the spot where Barbara Harding had ceased to follow them. The girl had worn heelless buckskin shoes at the time she was taken from the Lotus, and these left little or no spoor in the well-tramped earth of the narrow path; but a careful and minute examination on the part of Theriere finally resulted in the detection of a single small footprint a hundred yards from the point they had struck the trail after ascending the cliffs. This far at least she had been with them.

The men now spread out upon either side of the track--Theriere and Red Sanders upon one side, Byrne and Wison upon the other. Occasionally Theriere would return to the trail to search for further indications of the spoor they sought.

The party had proceeded in this fashion for nearly half a mile when suddenly they were attracted by a low exclamation from the mucker.

"Here!" he called. "Here's Miller an' the Swede, an' they sure have mussed 'em up turrible."

The others hastened in the direction of his voice, to come to a horrified halt at the sides of the headless trunks of the two sailors.

"Mon Dieu!" exclaimed the Frenchman, reverting to his mother tongue as he never did except under the stress of great excitement.

"Who done it?" queried Red Sanders, looking suspiciously at the mucker.

"Head-hunters," said Theriere. "God! What an awful fate for that poor girl!"

Billy Byrne went white.

"Yeh don't mean dat dey've lopped off her block?" he whispered in an awed voice. Something strange rose in the mucker's breast at the thought he had just voiced. He did not attempt to analyze the sensation; but it was far from joy at the suggestion that the woman he so hated had met a horrible and disgusting death at the hands of savages.

"I'm afraid not, Byrne," said Theriere, in a voice that none there would have recognized as that of the harsh and masterful second officer of the Halfmoon.

"Yer afraid not!" echoed Billy Byrne, in amazement.

"For her sake I hope that they did," said Theriere; "for such as she it would have been a far less horrible fate than the one I fear they have reserved her for."

"You mean--" queried Byrne, and then he stopped, for the realization of just what Theriere did mean swept over him quite suddenly.

There was no particular reason why Billy Byrne should have felt toward women the finer sentiments which are so cherished a possession of those men who have been gently born and raised, even after they have learned that all women are not as was the feminine ideal of their boyhood.

Billy's mother, always foul-mouthed and quarrelsome, had been a veritable demon when drunk, and drunk she had been whenever she could, by hook or crook, raise the price of whiskey. Never, to Billy's recollection, had she spoken a word of endearment to him; and so terribly had she abused him that even while he was yet a little boy, scarce out of babyhood, he had learned to view her with a hatred as deep-rooted as is the affection of most little children for their mothers.

When he had come to man's estate he had defended himself from the woman's brutal assaults as he would have defended himself from another man--when she had struck, Billy had struck back; the only thing to his credit being that he never had struck her except in self-defense. Chastity in woman was to him a thing to joke of--he did not believe that it existed; for he judged other women by the one he knew best--his mother. And as he hated her, so he hated them all. He had doubly hated Barbara Harding since she not only was a woman, but a woman of the class he loathed.

And so it was strange and inexplicable that the suggestion of the girl's probable fate should have affected Billy Byrne as it did. He did not stop to reason about it at all--he simply knew that he felt a mad and unreasoning rage against the creatures that had borne the girl away. Outwardly Billy showed no indication of the turmoil that raged within his breast.

"We gotta find her, bo," he said to Theriere. "We gotta find the skirt."

Ordinarily Billy would have blustered about the terrible things he would do to the objects of his wrath when once he had them in his power; but now he was strangely quiet--only the firm set of his strong chin, and the steely glitter of his gray eyes gave token of the iron resolution within.

Theriere, who had been walking slowly to and fro about the dead men, now called the others to him.

"Here's their trail," he said. "If it's as plain as that all the way we won't be long in overhauling them. Come along."

Before he had the words half out of his mouth the mucker was forging ahead through the jungle along the well-marked spoor of the samurai.

"Wot kind of men do you suppose they are?" asked Red Sanders.

"Malaysian head-hunters, unquestionably," replied Theriere.

Red Sanders shuddered inwardly. The appellation had a most gruesome sound.

"Come on!" cried Theriere, and started off after the mucker, who already was out of sight in the thick forest.

Red Sanders and Wison took a few steps after the Frenchman. Theriere turned once to see that they were following him, and then a turn in the trail hid them from his view. Red Sanders stopped.

"Damme if I'm goin' to get my coconut hacked off on any such wild-goose chase as this," he said to Wison.

"The girl's more'n likely dead long ago," said the other.

"Sure she is," returned Red Sanders, "an' if we go buttin' into that there thicket we'll be dead too. Ugh! Poor Miller. Poor Swenson. It's orful. Did you see wot they done to 'em beside cuttin' off their heads?"

"Yes," whispered Wison, looking suddenly behind him.

Red Sanders gave a little start, peering in the direction that his companion had looked.

"Wot was it?" he whimpered. "Wot did you do that fer?"

"I thought I seen something move there," replied Wison. "Fer Gawd's sake let's get outen this," and without waiting for a word of assent from his companion the sailor turned and ran at breakneck speed along the little path toward the spot where Divine, Blanco, and Bony Sawyer were stationed. When they arrived Bony was just on the point of setting out for the spring to fetch water, but at sight of the frightened, breathless men he returned to hear their story.

"What's up?" shouted Divine. "You men look as though you'd seen a ghost. Where are the others?"

"They're all murdered, and their heads cut off," cried Red Sanders. "We found the bunch that got Miller, Swenson, and the girl. They'd killed 'em all and was eatin'

of 'em when we jumps 'em. Before we knew wot had happened about a thousand more of the devils came runnin' up. They got us separated, and when we seen Theriere and Byrne kilt we jest natch'rally beat it. Gawd, but it was orful."

"Do you think they will follow you?" asked Divine.

At the suggestion every head turned toward the trail down which the two panic-stricken men had just come. At the same moment a hoarse shout arose from the cove below and the five looked down to see a scene of wild activity upon the beach. The defection of Theriere's party had been discovered, as well as the absence of the girl and the theft of the provisions.

Skipper Simms was dancing about like a madman. His bellowed oaths rolled up the cliffs like thunder. Presently Ward caught a glimpse of the men at the top of the cliff above him.

"There they are!" he cried.

Skipper Simms looked up.

"The swabs!" he shrieked. "A-stealin' of our grub, an' abductin' of that there pore girl. The swabs! Lemme to 'em, I say; jest lemme to 'em."

"We'd all better go to 'em," said Ward. "We've got a fight on here sure. Gather up some rocks, men, an' come along. Skipper, you're too fat to do any fightin' on that there hillside, so you better stay here an' let one o' the men take your gun," for Ward knew so well the mettle of his superior that he much preferred his absence to his presence in the face of real fighting, and with the gun in the hands of a braver man it would be vastly more effective.

Ward himself was no lover of a fight, but he saw now that starvation might stare them in the face with their food gone, and everything be lost with the loss of the girl. For food and money a much more cowardly man than Bender Ward would fight to the death.

Up the face of the cliff they hurried, expecting momentarily to be either challenged or fired upon by those above them. Divine and his party looked down with mixed emotions upon those who were ascending in so threatening a manner. They found themselves truly between the devil and the deep sea.

Ward and his men were halfway up the cliff, yet Divine had made no move to repel them. He glanced timorously toward the dark forest behind from which he momentarily expected to see the savage, snarling faces of the head-hunters appear.

"Surrender! You swabs," called Ward from below, "or we'll string the last mother's son of you to the yardarm."

For reply Blanco hurled a heavy fragment of rock at the assaulters. It grazed perilously close to Ward, against whom Blanco cherished a keen hatred. Instantly Ward's revolver barked, the bullet whistling close by Divine's head. L. Cortwrite Divine, cotillion leader, ducked behind Theriere's breastwork, where he lay sprawled upon his belly, trembling in terror.

Bony Sawyer and Red Sanders followed the example of their commander. Blanco and Wison alone made any attempt to repel the assault. The big Negro ran to Divine's side and snatched the terror-stricken man's revolver from his belt. Then turning he fired at Ward. The bullet, missing its intended victim, pierced the heart of a sailor directly behind him, and as the man crumpled to the ground, rolling down the steep declivity, his fellows sought cover.

Wison followed up the advantage with a shower of well-aimed missiles, and then hostilities ceased temporarily.

"Have they gone?" queried Divine, with trembling lips, noticing the quiet that followed the shot.

"Gone nothin', yo big cowahd," replied Blanco. "Do yo done suppose dat two men is a-gwine to stan' off five? Ef yo white-livered skunks 'ud git up an' fight we might have a chanct. I'se a good min' to cut out yo cowahdly heart fer yo, das wot I has--a-lyin' der on yo belly settin' dat kin' o' example to yo men!"

Divine's terror had placed him beyond the reach of contumely or reproach.

"What's the use of fighting them?" he whimpered. "We should never have left them. It's all the fault of that fool Theriere. What can we do against the savages of this awful island if we divide our forces? They will pick us off a few at a time just as they picked off Miller and Swenson, Theriere and Byrne. We ought to tell Ward about it, and call this foolish battle off."

"Now you're talkin'," cried Bony Sawyer. "I'm not a-goin' to squat up here any longer with my friends a-shootin' at me from below an' a lot of wild heathen creeping down on me from above to cut off my bloomin' head."

"Same here!" chimed in Red Sanders.

Blanco looked toward Wison. For his own part the Negro would not have been averse to returning to the fold could the thing be accomplished without danger of reprisal on the part of Skipper Simms and Ward; but he knew the men so well that he feared to trust them even should they seemingly acquiesce to any such

proposal. On the other hand, he reasoned, it would be as much to their advantage to have the deserters return to them as it would to the deserters themselves, for when they had heard the story told by Red Sanders and Wison of the murder of the others of the party they too would realize the necessity for maintaining the strength of the little company to its fullest.

"I don't see that we're goin' to gain nothin' by fightin' 'em," said Wison. "There ain't nothin' in it any more nohow for nobody since the girl's gorn. Let's chuck it, an' see wot terms we can make with Squint Eye."

"Well," grumbled the Negro, "I can't fight 'em alone; What yo doin' dere, Bony?"

During the conversation Bony Sawyer had been busy with a stick and a piece of rag, and now as he turned toward his companions once more they saw that he had rigged a white flag of surrender. None interfered as he raised it above the edge of the breastwork.

Immediately there was a hail from below. It was Ward's voice.

"Surrenderin', eh? Comin' to your senses, are you?" he shouted.

Divine, feeling that immediate danger from bullets was past, raised his head above the edge of the earthwork.

"We have something to communicate, Mr. Ward," he called.

"Spit it out, then; I'm a-listenin'," called back the mate.

"Miss Harding, Mr. Theriere, Byrne, Miller, and Swenson have been captured and killed by native head-hunters," said Divine.

Ward's eyes went wide, and he blew out his cheeks in surprise. Then his face went black with an angry scowl.

"You see what you done now, you blitherin' fools, you!" he cried, "with your funny business? You gone an' killed the goose what laid the golden eggs. Thought you'd get it all, didn't you? and now nobody won't get nothin', unless it is the halter. Nice lot o' numbskulls you be, an' whimperin' 'round now expectin' of us to take you back--well, I reckon not, not on your measly lives," and with that he raised his revolver to fire again at Divine.

The society man toppled over backward into the pit behind the breastwork before Ward had a chance to pull the trigger.

"Hol' on there mate!" cried Bony Sawyer; "there ain't no call now fer gettin' excited. Wait until you hear all we gotta say. You can't blame us pore sailormen.

It was this here fool dude and that scoundrel Theriere that put us up to it. They told us that you an' Skipper Simms was a-fixin' to double-cross us all an' leave us here to starve on this Gawd-forsaken islan'. Theriere said that he was with you when you planned it. That you wanted to git rid o' as many of us as you could so that you'd have more of the ransom to divide. So all we done was in self-defense, as it were.

"Why not let bygones be bygones, an' all of us join forces ag'in' these murderin' heathen? There won't be any too many of us at best--Red an' Wison seen more'n two thousan' of the man-eatin' devils. They're a-creepin' up on us from behin' right this minute, an' you can lay to that; an' the chances are that they got some special kind o' route into that there cove, an' maybe they're a-watchin' of you right now!"

Ward turned an apprehensive glance to either side. There was logic in Bony's proposal. They couldn't spare a man now. Later he could punish the offenders at his leisure--when he didn't need them any further.

"Will you swear on the Book to do your duty by Skipper Simms an' me if we take you back?" asked Ward.

"You bet," answered Bony Sawyer.

The others nodded their heads, and Divine sprang up and started down toward Ward.

"Hol' on you!" commanded the mate. "This here arrangement don' include you--it's jes' between Skipper Simms an' his sailors. You're a rank outsider, an' you butts in an' starts a mutiny. Ef you come back you gotta stand trial fer that--see?"

"You better duck, mister," advised Red Sanders; "they'll hang you sure."

Divine went white. To face trial before two such men as Simms and Ward meant death, of that he was positive. To flee into the forest meant death, almost equally certain, and much more horrible. The man went to his knees, lifting supplicating hands to the mate.

"For God's sake, Mr. Ward," he cried, "be merciful. I was led into this by Theriere. He lied to me just as he did to the men. You can't kill me--it would be murder--they'd hang you for it."

"We'll hang for this muss you got us into anyway, if we're ever caught," growled the mate. "Ef you hadn't a-carried the girl off to be murdered we might have had

enough ransom money to have got clear some way, but now you gone and cooked the whole goose fer the lot of us."

"You can collect ransom on me," cried Divine, clutching at a straw. "I'll pay a hundred thousand myself the day you set me down in a civilized port, safe and free."

Ward laughed in his face.

"You ain't got a cent, you four-flusher," he cried. "Clinker put us next to that long before we sailed from Frisco."

"Clinker lies," cried Divine. "He doesn't know anything about it--I'm rich."

"Wot's de use ob chewin' de rag 'bout all dis," cried Blanco, seeing where he might square himself with Ward and Simms easily. "Does yo' take back all us sailormen, Mr. Ward, an' promise not t' punish none o' us, ef we swear to stick by yo' all in de future?"

"Yes," replied the mate.

Blanco took a step toward Divine.

"Den yo come along too as a prisoner, white man," and the burly black grasped Divine by the scruff of the neck and forced him before him down the steep trail toward the cove, and so the mutineers returned to the command of Skipper Simms, and L. Cortwrite Divine went with them as a prisoner, charged with a crime the punishment for which has been death since men sailed the seas.