

CHAPTER XI. THE VILLAGE OF YOKA

FOR several minutes Barbara Harding lay where she had collapsed after the keen short sword of the daimio had freed her from the menace of his lust.

She was in a half-stupor that took cognizance only of a freezing terror and exhaustion. Presently, however, she became aware of her contact with the corpse beside her, and with a stifled cry she shrank away from it.

Slowly the girl regained her self-control and with it came the realization of the extremity of her danger. She rose to a sitting posture and turned her wide eyes toward the doorway to the adjoining room--the women and children seemed yet wrapped in slumber. It was evident that the man's scream had not disturbed them.

Barbara gained her feet and moved softly to the doorway. She wondered if she could cross the intervening space to the outer exit without detection. Once in the open she could flee to the jungle, and then there was a chance at least that she might find her way to the coast and Theriere.

She gripped the short sword which she still held, and took a step into the larger room. One of the women turned and half roused from sleep. The girl shrank back into the darkness of the chamber she had just quitted. The woman sat up and looked around. Then she rose and threw some sticks upon the fire that burned at one side of the dwelling. She crossed to a shelf and took down a cooking utensil. Barbara saw that she was about to commence the preparation of breakfast.

All hope of escape was thus ended, and the girl cautiously closed the door between the two rooms. Then she felt about the smaller apartment for some heavy object with which to barricade herself; but her search was fruitless. Finally she bethought herself of the corpse. That would hold the door against the accident of a child or dog pushing it open--it would be better than nothing, but could she bring herself to touch the loathsome thing?

The instinct of self-preservation will work wonders even with a frail and delicate woman. Barbara Harding steeled herself to the task, and after several moments of effort she succeeded in rolling the dead man against the door. The scraping sound of the body as she dragged it into position had sent cold shivers running up her spine.

She had removed the man's long sword and armor before attempting to move him, and now she crouched beside the corpse with both the swords beside her--she would sell her life dearly. Theriere's words came back to her now as they had

when she was struggling in the water after the wreck of the Halfmoon: "but, by George, I intend to go down fighting." Well, she could do no less.

She could hear the movement of several persons in the next room now. The voices of women and children came to her distinctly. Many of the words were Japanese, but others were of a tongue with which she was not familiar.

Presently her own chamber began to lighten. She looked over her shoulder and saw the first faint rays of dawn showing through a small aperture near the roof and at the opposite end of the room. She rose and moved quickly toward it. By standing on tiptoe and pulling herself up a trifle with her hands upon the sill she was able to raise her eyes above the bottom of the window frame.

Beyond she saw the forest, not a hundred yards away; but when she attempted to crawl through the opening she discovered to her chagrin that it was too small to permit the passage of her body. And then there came a knocking on the door she had just quitted, and a woman's voice calling her lord and master to his morning meal.

Barbara ran quickly across the chamber to the door, the long sword raised above her head in both hands. Again the woman knocked, this time much louder, and raised her voice as she called again upon Oda Yorimoto to come out.

The girl within was panic-stricken. What should she do? With but a little respite she might enlarge the window sufficiently to permit her to escape into the forest, but the woman at the door evidently would not be denied. Suddenly an inspiration came to her. It was a forlorn hope, but well worth putting to the test.

"Hush!" she hissed through the closed door. "Oda Yorimoto sleeps. It is his wish that he be not disturbed."

For a moment there was silence beyond the door, and then the woman grunted, and Barbara heard her turn back, muttering to herself. The girl breathed a deep sigh of relief--she had received a brief reprieve from death.

Again she turned to the window, where, with the short sword, she commenced her labor of enlarging it to permit the passage of her body. The work was necessarily slow because of the fact that it must proceed with utter noiselessness.

For an hour she worked, and then again came an interruption at the door. This time it was a man.

"Oda Yorimoto still sleeps," whispered the girl. "Go away and do not disturb him. He will be very angry if you awaken him."

But the man would not be put off so easily as had the woman. He still insisted.

"The daimio has ordered that there shall be a great hunt today for the heads of the sei-yo-jin who have landed upon Yoka," persisted the man. "He will be angry indeed if we do not call him in time to accomplish the task today. Let me speak with him, woman. I do not believe that Oda Yorimoto still sleeps. Why should I believe one of the sei-yo-jin? It may be that you have bewitched the daimio," and with that he pushed against the door.

The corpse gave a little, and the man glued his eyes to the aperture. Barbara held the sword behind her, and with her shoulder against the door attempted to reclose it.

"Go away!" she cried. "I shall be killed if you awaken Oda Yorimoto, and, if you enter, you, too, shall be killed."

The man stepped back from the door, and Barbara could hear him in low converse with some of the women of the household. A moment later he returned, and without a word of warning threw his whole weight against the portal. The corpse slipped back enough to permit the entrance of the man's body, and as he stumbled into the room the long sword of the Lord of Yoka fell full and keen across the back of his brown neck.

Without a sound he lunged to the floor, dead; but the women without had caught a fleeting glimpse of what had taken place within the little chamber, even before Barbara Harding could slam the door again, and with shrieks of rage and fright they rushed into the main street of the village shouting at the tops of their voices that Oda Yorimoto and Hawa Nisho had been slain by the woman of the sei-yo-jin.

Instantly, the village swarmed with samurai, women, children, and dogs. They rushed toward the hut of Oda Yorimoto, filling the outer chamber where they jabbered excitedly for several minutes, the warriors attempting to obtain a coherent story from the moaning women of the daimio's household.

Barbara Harding crouched close to the door, listening. She knew that the crucial moment was at hand; that there were at best but a few moments for her to live. A silent prayer rose from her parted lips. She placed the sharp point of Oda Yorimoto's short sword against her breast, and waited--waited for the coming of the men from the room beyond, snatching a few brief seconds from eternity ere she drove the weapon into her heart.

Theriere plunged through the jungle at a run for several minutes before he caught sight of the mucker.

"Are you still on the trail?" he called to the man before him.

"Sure," replied Byrne. "It's dead easy. They must o' been at least a dozen of 'em. Even a mutt like me couldn't miss it."

"We want to go carefully, Byrne," cautioned Theriere. "I've had experience with these fellows before, and I can tell you that you never know when one of 'em is near you till you feel a spear in your back, unless you're almighty watchful. We've got to make all the haste we can, of course, but it won't help Miss Harding any if we rush into an ambush and get our heads lopped off."

Byrne saw the wisdom of his companion's advice and tried to profit by it; but something which seemed to dominate him today carried him ahead at reckless, breakneck speed--the flight of an eagle would have been all too slow to meet the requirements of his unaccountable haste.

Once he found himself wondering why he was risking his life to avenge or rescue this girl whom he hated so. He tried to think that it was for the ransom--yes, that was it, the ransom. If he found her alive, and rescued her he should claim the lion's share of the booty.

Theriere too wondered why Byrne, of all the other men upon the Halfmoon the last that he should have expected to risk a thing for the sake of Miss Harding, should be the foremost in pursuit of her captors.

"I wonder how far behind Sanders and Wison are," he remarked to Byrne after they had been on the trail for the better part of an hour. "Hadn't we better wait for them to catch up with us? Four can do a whole lot more than two."

"Not wen Billy Byrne's one of de two," replied the mucker, and continued doggedly along the trail.

Another half-hour brought them suddenly in sight of a native village, and Billy Byrne was for dashing straight into the center of it and "cleaning it up," as he put it, but Theriere put his foot down firmly on that proposition, and finally Byrne saw that the other was right.

"The trail leads straight toward that place," said Theriere, "so I suppose here is where they brought her, but which of the huts she's in now we ought to try to determine before we make any attempt to rescue her. Well, by George! Now what do you think of that?"

"Tink o' wot?" asked the mucker. "Wot's eatin' yeh?"

"See those three men down there in the village, Byrne?" asked the Frenchman. "They're no more aboriginal headhunters than I am--they're Japs, man. There must be something wrong with our trailing, for it's as certain as fate itself that Japs are not head-hunters."

"There ain't been nothin' fony about our trailin', bo," insisted Byrne, "an' whether Japs are bean collectors or not here's where de ginks dat copped de doll hiked fer, an if dey ain't dere now it's because dey went t'rough an' out de odder side, see."

"Hush, Byrne," whispered Theriere. "Drop down behind this bush. Someone is coming along this other trail to the right of us," and as he spoke he dragged the mucker down beside him.

For a moment they crouched, breathless and expectant, and then the slim figure of an almost nude boy emerged from the foliage close beside and entered the trail toward the village. Upon his head he bore a bundle of firewood.

When he was directly opposite the watchers Theriere sprang suddenly upon him, clapping a silencing hand over the boy's mouth. In Japanese he whispered a command for silence.

"We shall not harm you if you keep still," he said, "and answer our questions truthfully. What village is that?"

"It is the chief city of Oda Yorimoto, Lord of Yoka," replied the youth. "I am Oda Iseka, his son."

"And the large hut in the center of the village street is the palace of Oda Yorimoto?" guessed Theriere shrewdly.

"It is."

The Frenchman was not unversed in the ways of orientals, and he guessed also that if the white girl were still alive in the village she would be in no other hut than that of the most powerful chief; but he wished to verify his deductions if possible. He knew that a direct question as to the whereabouts of the girl would call forth either a clever oriental evasion or an equally clever oriental lie.

"Does Oda Yorimoto intend slaying the white woman that was brought to his house last night?" asked Theriere.

"How should the son know the intentions of his father?" replied the boy.

"Is she still alive?" continued Theriere.

"How should I know, who was asleep when she was brought, and only heard the womenfolk this morning whispering that Oda Yorimoto had brought home a new woman the night before."

"Could you not see her with your own eyes?" asked Theriere.

"My eyes cannot pass through the door of the little room behind, in which they still were when I left to gather firewood a half hour since," retorted the youth.

"Wot's de Chink sayin'?" asked Billy Byrne, impatient of the conversation, no word of which was intelligible to him.

"He says, in substance," replied Theriere, with a grin, "that Miss Harding is still alive, and in the back room of that largest hut in the center of the village street; but," and his face clouded, "Oda Yorimoto, the chief of the tribe, is with her."

The mucker sprang to his feet with an oath, and would have bolted for the village had not Theriere laid a detaining hand upon his shoulder.

"It is too late, my friend," he said sadly, "to make haste now. We may, if we are cautious, be able to save her life, and later, possibly, avenge her wrong. Let us act coolly, and after some manner of plan, so that we may work together, and not throw our lives away uselessly. The chance is that neither of us will come out of that village alive, but we must minimize that chance to the utmost if we are to serve Miss Harding."

"Well, wot's de word?" asked the mucker, for he saw that Theriere was right.

"The jungle approaches the village most closely on the opposite side--the side in rear of the chief's hut," pointed out Theriere. "We must circle about until we can reach that point undetected, then we may formulate further plans from what our observations there develop."

"An' dis?" Byrne shoved a thumb at Oda Iseka.

"We'll take him with us--it wouldn't be safe to let him go now."

"Why not croak him?" suggested Byrne.

"Not unless we have to," replied Theriere; "he's just a boy--we'll doubtless have all the killing we want among the men before we get out of this."

"I never did have no use fer Chinks," said the mucker, as though in extenuation of his suggestion that they murder the youth. For some unaccountable reason he had felt a sudden compunction because of his thoughtless remark. What in the world was coming over him, he wondered. He'd be wearing white pants and

playing lawn tennis presently if he continued to grow much softer and more unmanly.

So the three set out through the jungle, following a trail which led around to the north of the village. Theriere walked ahead with the boy's arm in his grasp. Byrne followed closely behind. They reached their destination in the rear of Oda Yorimoto's "palace" without interruption or detection. Here they reconnoitered through the thick foliage.

"Dere's a little winder in de back of de house," said Byrne. "Dat must be where dem guys cooped up de little broiler."

"Yes," said Theriere, "it would be in the back room which the boy described. First let's tie and gag this young heathen, and then we can proceed to business without fear of alarm from him," and the Frenchman stripped a long, grass rope from about the waist of his prisoner, with which he was securely trussed up, a piece of his loin cloth being forced into his mouth as a gag, and secured there by another strip, torn from the same garment, which was passed around the back of the boy's head.

"Rather uncomfortable, I imagine," commented Theriere; "but not particularly painful or dangerous--and now to business!"

"I'm goin' to make a break fer dat winder," announced the mucker, "and youse squat here in de tall grass wid yer gat an' pick off any fresh guys dat get gay in back here. Den, if I need youse you can come a-runnin' an' open up all over de shop wid de artillery, or if I gets de lizzie outen de jug an' de Chinks push me too clost youse'll be here where yeh can pick 'em off easy-like."

"You'll be taking all the risk that way, Byrne," objected Theriere, "and that's not fair."

"One o' us is pretty sure to get hurted," explained the mucker in defense of his plan, "an, if it's a croak it's a lot better dat it be me than youse, fer the girl wouldn't be crazy about bein' lef' alone wid me--she ain't got no use fer the likes o' me. Now youse are her kin, an' so youse stay here w'ere yeh can help her after I git her out--I don't want nothing to do wid her anyhow. She gives me a swift pain, and," he added as though it were an after-thought, "I ain't got no use fer dat ransom eider--youse can have dat, too."

"Hold on, Byrne," cried Theriere; "I have something to say, too. I do not see how I can expect you to believe me; but under the circumstances, when one of us and maybe both are pretty sure to die before the day is much older, it wouldn't be worth while lying. I do not want that damned ransom any more, either. I only

want to do what I can to right the wrong that I have helped to perpetrate against Miss Harding. I--I--Byrne, I love her. I shall never tell her so, for I am not the sort of man a decent girl would care to marry; but I did want the chance to make a clean breast to her of all my connection with the whole dirty business, and get her forgiveness if I could; but first I wanted to prove my repentance by helping her to civilization in safety, and delivering her to her friends without the payment of a cent of money. I may never be able to do that now; but if I die in the attempt, and you don't, I wish that you would tell her what I have just told you. Paint me as black as you can--you couldn't commence to make me as black as I have been--but let her know that for love of her I turned white at the last minute. Byrne, she is the best girl that you or I ever saw--we're not fit to breathe the same air that she breathes. Now you can see why I should like to go first."

"I t'ought youse was soft on her," replied the mucker, "an' dat's de reason w'y youse otter not go first; but wot's de use o' chewin', les flip a coin to see w'ich goes an w'ich stays--got one?"

Theriere felt in his trousers' pocket, fishing out a dime.

"Heads, you go; tails, I go," he said and spun the silver piece in the air, catching it in the flat of his open palm.

"It's heads," said the mucker, grinning. "Gee! Wot's de racket?"

Both men turned toward the village, where a jabbering mob of half-caste Japanese had suddenly appeared in the streets, hurrying toward the hut of Oda Yorimoto.

"Somepin doin', eh?" said the mucker. "Well, here goes--s'long!" And he broke from the cover of the jungle and dashed across the clearing toward the rear of Oda Yorimoto's hut.