

## CHAPTER XXII

### AN UNEXPECTED OFFER

"To leave?" It was Sonia Turgeinov who spoke. "You mean--" Her eyes turned oceanward but saw nothing.

He made a quick gesture toward a break in the outline of the shore where the island swept around. "Beyond!" he said succinctly and she had no doubt as to his meaning. The tent he had put up where it could not be seen from the sea. But their boat--He looked at the little craft, a too distinct object on the sands. Those on a vessel skirting the shore could not fail to discover that incriminating bit of evidence with their glasses. And there was no way of getting rid of it. He could not destroy it with his bare hands. It was unsinkable. If he set it adrift, wind and sea would drive it straight back.

"They probably discovered our absence about daybreak and surmised correctly the direction the breeze would carry us," he muttered half bitterly. "We must go at once." These last words he spoke firmly.

"But where?" Again it was Sonia Turgeinov who questioned him. Betty Dalrymple remained silent; her eyes shone with a new inscrutable light; her cheek, though pale, had the warmth of a live pearl. She touched the sands with the tip of her shoe.

But he did not regard her, nor did he answer Sonia Turgeinov. Going to the tent, he bent over the basket of biscuits and hastily filled his pockets. Then, throwing a woman's heavy cloak over his arm, he stepped quickly to Miss Dalrymple's side.

"Come," he said laconically.

Her foot, Cinderella's for daintiness, ceased its motion; she turned at once. Around her lips a strange little smile flitted but faded almost immediately. Save for her straightness and that proud characteristic poise of the head, she might have seemed, at that moment of emergency, a veritable Griselda for acquiescence. He started to walk away, when--

"What about me?" cried Sonia Turgeinov.

"You can come or you can stay," said Mr. Heatherbloom. "The chances are that the prince will see the boat, land and get you."

"And if he doesn't?"

"There are plenty of biscuits, and I'll send back for you when I can."

"That prospect is not very inviting," she demurred. "Suppose I elect not to risk it--to go with you?"

"It is for you to decide, and quickly," he said in a cold crisp tone.

"You dismiss my fate brusly, Monsieur," she returned.

"There is no time to bandy words, Madam," he retorted warmly. "I am not oblivious to you--I trust I would not be to any woman--but every minute now is precious."

"Of course!" An instant she looked at the girl and a spark appeared in the dark eyes. Then Sonia Turgeinov's features abruptly relaxed and she waved her hand carelessly. "I have decided," she said in her old manner. "Go! My best adieus, Monsieur--Mademoiselle." With a gay courtesy. "Farewell! babes in the wood!" Her voice was once more mocking. They moved silently away but before they had gone far enough to disappear in the forest she suddenly ran toward them. "No, no!" she said in a different voice. "I have changed my mind. It is such a tiny, thing, that boat--in the glare and shine. They might not see it, and then--" She shuddered, "How frightfully lonesome!--the terrible nights--"

He made an impatient gesture. "After me, then! You, Miss Dalrymple, will come last."

"Ah, you think I am coming because I may wish to help them?" Sonia Turgeinov said quickly.

"I intend to take no chances," he returned in the same tone. And the

three moved on.

He set a sharp pace; if there was need for haste at all it was now, at the beginning of their flight. They plunged deeper into the forest; no one spoke; only the crackling under foot and certain wood sounds broke the stillness. Unfortunately the soil was soft so that their footprints might be followed by any one versed in woodcraft. At times they were forced to skirt unusually thick places, but in spite of these deviations Mr. Heatherbloom was enabled generally to keep to their course by consulting a small compass he had found in the boat. It was essential to maintain as straight a line as possible. People sometimes walked round and round in forests; he took no chance of that; better a moment lost now and then, while stopping to wait for the quivering pointer to settle, than returning, perhaps, to the very spot they had left.

As thus they advanced, often he looked around to reassure himself that the young girl, in spite of the roughness of the way, yet followed. Once Sonia Turgeinov arrested that swift backward look; her own shone with curiosity.

"How in heaven's name did you do it, Monsieur?" she asked suddenly, drawing nearer. "Get out of that cell, I mean. When last I saw you on the ship, you were as securely fastened as a prisoner in the fortress at Petersburg. Of course you must have had some one to help--"

He answered coldly, recalling a promise to protect Francois. He could,

however, and did, tell her the truth in this without involving the youth. "When the third officer, my jailer, came to the cell and released my hands--well, I did the best I could, surprised him, got the keys and left him there in my stead. A little Jap trick for handling men that I learned in San Francisco long ago," he added.

Her dark eyes lingered on him not without a trace of admiration.

"Mademoiselle is fortunate, indeed, in her champion," she murmured. "And yet that does not explain the preparations for departure--the provisions in the boat--other little details. How came you by that compass, for example?"

"It explains all that will be explained."

"Which means, once more, you do not trust me?" She shrugged. "Eh bien!" And again they went on in silence.

Toward noon, reaching a fringe of the forest, they found before them a wide open space where the ground was higher and dry, but the walking more difficult. The grass, long and tenacious, twined snake-like around their ankles; they had to go more slowly, but reached, at length, the top of the eminence. Here Mr. Heatherbloom stopped. They ate their biscuit and rested, but only for a brief while. Scanning the distance, in the direction they had come, he suddenly discerned moving forms on the farthest edge of the open space--forms which advanced toward them. No doubt as to their purpose could be entertained; his excellency had

landed and was already in pursuit. A smoldering fire leaped from Mr. Heatherbloom's eyes while rage that she should thus be driven harder filled his breast. Fool! that he had not killed the prince when opportunity had offered that night in the cabin. His clemency might--probably would--cost her dear.

"We've got to go on, and faster," said the young man. His hands were clenched; his arms were stiff at his side. "Can you do it?" he asked Betty Dalrymple. She answered; standing in a green recess, she had never appeared more beautiful to him than in that moment of peril. Green and red things flashed behind her--tiny feathered creatures that shone like jewels. The dewdrops from the branches in sunless places were glistening brilliants in the gold of her hair. But he had no time to gaze. The figures were drawing nearer.

"You used to be able to run, Betty. It seems as if it's all my fault"--hoarsely--"but you'll have to do so now."

Again that ready response from her! Did she, in the excitement of the moment, call him by a Christian name not Horatio? He did not take cognizance of it; neither did Sonia Turgeinov seem to.

The latter spoke quickly: "I remain here."

"Of course," said Mr. Heatherbloom, with a glance back toward the open space.

She overlooked the significance or bitterness in his accent. "Keep to the right," she said swiftly. "Believe me or not, I'll send them to the left. It's your only chance. Otherwise they would overtake you in an hour. Among the prince's men are Cossacks trained to feats of endurance."

"You would do that?" He looked at her quickly. The dark eyes did not swerve from the gray ones.

"Did I betray you on the boat?" said Sonia Turgeinov rather haughtily.

"No," he conceded.

"And yet I knew you! You know that," she affirmed.

"Yes; you knew me." Slowly.

"Did I tell his excellency who you were, when he had you, a prisoner?" she demanded.

And--"No," he was obliged to say again.

"See." She took from her breast a tiny cross. "I had that as a child. Would I kiss it, and--tell you a lie in the next breath?" He did not answer. "I have lived up to the letter of my contract with his

excellency. It is at an end. Perhaps I am a little sorry for my own part"--with a laugh slightly reckless--"or maybe"--with a flash of seriousness--- "I have become, in the least, afraid. Your laws are very severe, and--I had not counted on mademoiselle's steadfast resistance to--mon Dieu!--a prince who had been considered irresistible--whose principality is larger than one of your states--who would have made her, in truth, a czaritza. I had fancied," in a rush of words, "the mad episode might end as it did in the prince's favorite Fire and Sword trilogy, with wedding-bells and rejoicing." She paused abruptly. "I had also not counted on the all-important possibility that mademoiselle might have bestowed her heart on another--"

"Madam!" It was Betty Dalrymple who spoke quickly.

Sonia Turgeinov laughed maliciously. "Go," she said, "or"--almost fiercely--"I may change my mind."

They went; Sonia Turgeinov turned and looked out over the open space. The approaching figures were now much nearer.