Arthur W. Marchmont

The Queen's Advocate

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CHAPTER I.
THE RESCUE.

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Crack!

It was a rifle shot, sure enough, somewhere in the hills, and Chris raised his huge head with a low growl and thrust his nose against me in warning.

I was lying on the flat of my back, my hands clasped under my head, thinking lazily, as I watched the glorious sunset amid the Gravenje hills—where the play of sunset colour is at times almost as fine as in Colorado—and speculated when the storm which was brewing would break.

I had just been chuckling at the idea of what the men in Wall Street or the dandies of Fifth Avenue would have thought of Chase F. Bergwyn, millionaire, mine-owner, and financier, could they have seen me then vagabondising in the Bosnian hills. My dress was a kind of nondescript native costume, half peasant's, half miner's, very dirty and worn with my rough prospecting work; and I carried a ten days' growth of scrubby beard on my sun-tanned face. The report of the rifle stopped the chuckle on my lips.

One of my men must have been after some hill game, I guessed, and in the eagerness of the chase had disobeyed my strict orders against shooting. I was anxious not to draw any unnecessary attention to my doings. I was after another pile, in fact. When in Vienna, just before, I had been offered what appeared to be a good thing in the shape of a concession to work a rich mining district in these Bosnian hills, and, as I still had a touch of the vagabond in me, I was

roughing it in order that I might look into the thing for myself.

I knew that part of Eastern Europe pretty well. I had lived there as a lad with a relative stationed in Prague, and as I had the knack of picking up the Balkan languages, he had found me of such use that he had taken me with him on many an expedition among the hills in Bosnia, Servia, and Herzgovina.

I had delighted in the hills, and had carried my love for them across the Atlantic when things changed and I went to the States in search of fortune. After a time of pretty hard rough-and-tumble hurly-burly buffetting I had “struck it rich,” and turned up in New York wealthy enough to play a strong hand in the big gambles of Wall Street.

Then the wandering fever laid hold of me again, and, remembering my days in the Balkans, I was seized with the idea of utilising the old experiences for business purposes. There was money to be made, I believed; and I opened up communications with folks in Belgrade and Sofia, and was in Vienna, on my way to the Servian capital, when this Bosnian mining affair turned up.

The pile was there right enough, just waiting for someone to come along and harvest it. But whether the difficulties of harvesting it could be overcome, I should have to settle elsewhere; and until they were settled I didn’t wish to draw the inquisitive eyes of any blockheads of Austrian officials upon me.

There were other dangers, too. Lalwor, a hill village, was not far off, and the reports about the villagers were not pleasing. They were not likely to jump one’s claim, or do

anything of that sort, but were said to be quite ready to knock me on the head if they had an inkling that I was a rich foreigner. That at least was the opinion of the man who had acted as my guide; and probably he knew.

So that, altogether, that shot annoyed me; and I sat up, thinking no more about either New York or the sunset, but just how to find out who had fired it, and bent upon punishing him for disobedience. Not so easy this last as it would have been, had I disliked all the four men composing my party less and trusted them more.

Crack!

Another shot. This time nearer.

Chris showed greater uneasiness than before, and getting up ran forward sniffing the air. Almost immediately afterwards I heard a faint throbbing sound on the earth, uncommonly like a horse's gallop. But who could be galloping our way? No one who was at all likely to be welcome; that was certain. I scented trouble, and calling the dog back crouched with him behind a bush-covered hillock and gazed, not without some anxiety, up and down the steep, rough mountain road.

The camp—which consisted of a cottage or hut for my use, a shed for the horses, and a tent for the men—lay two or three hundred yards along a gully, which branched off at right angles from this road. I was lying at the mouth of the gully, and from my position commanded a view from the top to the bottom of the hill, about a mile in length.

Crack! crack!

Two more shots in quick succession; the throbbing sound of the hoofs came nearer and nearer; and a horse and rider

showed at the top of the hill. I caught my breath in surprise as I saw the rider was a woman, who was urging her horse, a wiry little white animal, to its utmost efforts as it dashed at break-neck speed down the steep, winding, boulder-strewn, dangerous road.

Next, two horsemen came into sight and, with a loud shout, one of them reined up, and taking deliberate aim fired at the fugitive woman. My eye was on her as the shot rang out, and I saw the little white beast start, and swerve as if hit. The next instant the blood began to run freely over the flank, and the horse's gait told me it was badly wounded.

The men behind saw it, too; and the brute who had fired the shot shouted to his companion, and then continued the pursuit.

The chase was all but over. The white horse struggled on gamely, but as it neared the gully where I lay the pace slackened ominously. Its rider looked back at her pursuers, and then across the ravine; and then, to my further amazement, I saw that she was no more than a girl in years —and a very pretty one, too; her face flushed with the excitement of the mad gallop, her eyes wide with alarm, and her features set with the courage of desperate resolve.

Her pursuers realised her plight; and being now sure of capturing her, slung their guns and rode down the ugly path very cautiously.

I made ready to take my share in the business. I had my revolver in my hip pocket, and drew it out, but did not show myself. My intention was to let her pass and then get between her and the men. But her horse was done. The

bullet had evidently found the artery, for the blood was spurting out fast; and just before she reached the spot where I crouched the poor beast lurched badly and half sank on its quarters. The rider had only time to jump cleverly and quickly from the saddle when the end came, and the gallant little horse rolled over.

She must have given up all for lost then; but she showed no sign of faltering courage. One swift, desperate glance round she gave, as if in search of some chance of escape, and I saw her face was pale and set, but full of determination. Then, drawing a dainty little stiletto from her dress, she stood at bay behind the body of the dying horse with a calmness all eloquent of pluck and nerve.

Meanwhile, with Chris at my heel, and keeping as much as possible under cover, I crept forward until I was opposite to her. The men dismounted when they were still some fifty yards or so above her, and they were rushing forward to close upon her when I showed myself, with Chris growling ominously at my side.

The surprise caused by my unexpected appearance gave me a moment’s advantage.

“Have no fear. The dog will guard you,” I called to her as I passed. “Guard, Chris, guard, good dog,” I told him; and instantly understanding me, he ran to her side.

“Thank God,” I heard her murmur as I sprang toward the men, with my revolver levelled at them.

“You may give it up,” I cried; but that was not their view. One of them swung his gun round on the instant, and was in the act of levelling it at me when I fired, aiming low, and shot him in the leg, bringing him to the ground.

His companion hesitated at this, then clubbed his gun and appeared to be about to attack me, when he suddenly changed his mind and made a dart for the horses. I dashed after him, and as he vaulted into the saddle I fired at his horse and wounded it. Uttering a cry of rage, he leapt with extraordinary agility to the unwounded horse, and might then have got off had not the reins of both animals become entangled. Before he could disengage them I had closed up to him.

I called to him to surrender, but he had plenty of fight in him, and, taking me no doubt for the peasant I looked, he first struck at me furiously with his gun, and then tried to ride me down.

I checked that effort with a bullet in his horse’s head, however, and threatened to put one into the man himself if he did not submit. But still he would not.

Leaping free of the falling horse he surprised me by running back down the hill helter-skelter towards the girl, who stood watching us with breathless interest. I thought he meant to attack her, and, wild with sudden anger, I rushed after him. He had apparently remembered, however, that his comrade’s gun was loaded and his object was to secure it.

But Chris stopped this. The weapon lay near the girl and Chris sprang forward and snarled so savagely looking so formidable and dangerous, that the man hesitated, and before his hesitation was over I caught up and closed with him. Over and over we rolled in the dusty road in a fierce, hand-to-hand tussle, writhing, kicking, and sprawling as we gripped each other in that desperate wrestle. But I had the

advantage of method. I was Cumberland bred, and in my boyhood had learnt some tricks and falls which had stood me in good stead before now in many a “scrap” in my rough-and-tumble mining days in Colorado and Montana.

I got my grip of him presently, and bit by bit moved my hands up till my fingers were playing on his windpipe, and he was seeing stars as I dashed his thick head again and again on the hard road, until all the fight and all his senses too were knocked out of him.

Then I rose, and taking the reins from the girl’s horse, I tied him up securely with them.

All this time I had not spoken to her, except that first sentence; but I had caught her great grey eyes fixed upon me questioningly as she followed every action. Before going to her I had a look at the man I had shot, and found his leg was broken between the knee and the ankle. I had some rough knowledge of surgery—one picks up such things knocking about the world as I had—so I probed about with my knife and found the bullet, which was in the muscular calf, cleansed the wound as best I could, and set the bone. Then I placed him in as comfortable a position as I could, and told him not to move until I could do more.

This done, I rose and went to the girl. She was now leaning against a boulder by the wayside, deathly pale, and to my infinite concern I saw that her dress was all blood-stained. One of the coward’s bullets must have hit her, I thought.

“Are you hit?” I asked. I spoke in Serb, as I was more familiar with that than any other of the Balkan languages.

“No. It is the blood from this poor beast.”

“Thank God for that. You’re very pale, but you won’t have any more trouble from the men. I’ll see to that.”

Instead of replying she appeared in some way to resent my tone of reassurance, and looked at me steadily with this curious expression of resentment mingled with gratitude and some fear. But she had made friends with Chris, and the great fellow was pushing his head against her as she stroked him.

“You were very brave,” I said after a pause, during which I could not keep my eyes off her. She was indeed a beautiful girl, with a figure of queenly grace, and I daresay some of the intense admiration I felt may have shown in my glance. I had never seen so lovely a face.

“If that man is much hurt you had better see to him,” she said, with a distinct note of command in her voice.

“His leg’s broken. I’m going to improvise a splint, and then get help.”

“Help?” Quick suspicion prompted the question. “Do you live about here?”

I shut down a smile. She took me for a peasant; and well she might, I thought, as I glanced down at my clothes, dust-stained, torn, and dishevelled.

“There is a cottage close here and a tent,” I answered, evading her question and her glance. There was clearly a mystery about her to be solved. It was as evident as that she herself was well-born, and accustomed to give orders for which she expected prompt obedience. But leaving all explanations over for the time, I set about making the splint.

Returning to the men’s horses I took off the bridle and saddle of the dead one, cut away the saddle flaps, and

carried them and the reins to the injured man. The flaps made good splints, and I bound them tightly with the reins round his leg. He had borne all my crude surgery work with such stoicism that I guessed he was a Turk, and spoke to him in the little Turkish I knew, telling him I would get help and have him removed directly. He grunted something about being all right, and soon was smoking as placidly as though nothing had happened, and a broken leg was one of the usual events of daily life.

I returned then to the girl, who was sitting on the ground with her hands clasped over her face. I guessed she was as desperately puzzled as I was what to do next.

She sprang up quickly as I approached, and again stared at me with much the same expression of anxiety and doubt.

“You seem very clever and resourceful,” she said. “Can yet get me a horse?”

“What for? To lose yourself in the darkness among the hills?”

“I can pay you—later, I mean. I have no money on me. Tell me how to send it to you, and I will give you any price you name. And I will add to it a generous reward for what you have done already.”

“Do you think you are strong enough to travel yet? You are still very white, and trembling like a leaf. You are scarcely used to this sort of thing, you see.”

“I can judge that for myself,” she answered, almost haughtily, making a great effort to rally her shaken nerves.

“I don’t think you are. You don’t realise yet how much this thing has shaken you.”

“I am not accustomed to be contradicted in this way.”

“You are very near contradicting yourself by fainting,” I answered. I could see it plainly. “How long have you been without food?”

“I do not wish you to question me. Can you get me a horse, or must I try to walk? I must have a horse.”

“There’s another reason. If you know anything of these hills you’ll know what a storm means among them; and there’s one brewing now. Listen.” As I spoke we heard the rumbling of distant thunder among the hills.

“I cannot stay here, in any case,” she shot back quickly. Then, after a pause, “Who are you? Your name, I mean?” This in her sharp imperious manner.

“My name is Bergwyn.” I slurred the pronunciation intentionally. I had strong reasons for not wishing anyone to know I had been on the hills on my mission.

But the effect of the name upon her was remarkable; and her agitation was too great to be concealed even by the effort she made. She appeared completely unnerved; and while her eyes opened wide in unmistakable fear, she shrank from me as though I were a pestilence incarnate.

“Bourgwan—the—the brigand? I have heard of you.” The words were just a whisper, uttered with a catch of the breath all eloquent of terror.

“No, I’m not——” I began with a smile intended to reassure her; but before I could finish the sentence her own unfortunate guess had completed her undoing, and with a little gasping sob down she went in a heap to the ground unconscious, to my utter consternation.

Disconcerting as her collapse was, it nevertheless had the result of deciding me what to do. Another clap of

thunder came at the moment; and, without waiting to think any longer, I picked her up and set off as quickly as I could along the ravine to the camp.

She had not recovered consciousness when I reached the cottage; and as there was but one room in it, I laid her on the bed, bundled my few things together, tossed them out of sight, and leaving the dog with her, I went over to the tent.

I found my four men asleep there, and waking them with an impartial kick or two, sent them down to bring up the prisoner and his wounded companion.

Then I began to realise what a really awkward matter it was likely to be to have a girl, and such a girl, quartered upon us. I was not by any means sure of my own men, even. They had been chosen by the guide; but even he had deemed them so worthless and unreliable that he had gone off that morning in search of others. Without him my position was very grave. He was already a couple of hours overdue; and with this storm coming up it was long odds that he would not arrive until the next morning at the earliest.

Still the thing had to be faced. I must take my chance in the tent with the men that night, and trust to my own authority and vigilance and wits.

I went back to the cottage, and was alarmed to find the girl still unconscious; so I got some brandy, and supporting her head managed to get a few drops between her lips. This soon had an effect, and after a repetition of the remedy she opened her eyes with a deep, long-drawn sigh, and gave a

great start as she found me bending over her and herself on the bed in the hut.

“It’s all right,” I said, soothingly. “You fainted, probably from exhaustion and the fright you had, and I brought you here. It was the only thing I could do. You are perfectly safe, and the best thing you can do is to be quiet until you can eat something. As soon as you’re well enough I’ll find you a horse and send you wherever you want to go.”

She listened very quietly, and smiled. A rare thing, that smile of hers.

“I want you to feel you can trust me. I am not that brigand, Bourgwan, or any other brigand, as it happens; although my name is sufficiently like his to cause you to make the mistake you did about it. It’s all very rough here; but it’s the best we can do for you. Now, do you think you can feel safe enough to eat and drink something without believing we mean to poison you?”

“Don’t.” It was only a whisper, but it was good hearing.

“I’ve had to give you a little brandy. Here’s some more, if you’ll like it; and I can get you some preserved milk and biscuits presently. Shall I leave you alone here?”

The light had gone as the storm gathered; and just as I spoke the storm burst right overhead with a flare of lightning that filled the small room with lurid light, followed by a deafening clap of thunder which seemed almost to shake the earth until the hut trembled.

But she showed no fear of the storm; so that I gathered she was used to the violence with which they raged in that district. She sat staring out of the one narrow window wistfully and disconsolately.

“I cannot go?” she said, making it almost a question.

I threw the door wider open, and pointed to the rain that was coming down in sheets—just like a tropical downpour.

“Quite impossible—you can see.”

She rose and looked out, shuddered, and then went back to the bed with a sigh of disappointment. Some moments passed then. The storm raged furiously: the lightning flaring and flashing with intense brilliance, filling the sordid little dingy room almost continuously with its vivid blue light; the thunder pealing and crashing and roaring as though the very heavens would split; and the rain sweeping and swirling down like a flood.

And within there was silence between us: she sitting dead still on the low pallet, the dog haunched by her side; and I standing, very ill at ease, near the door, not knowing what to say or do next, and feeling very much of an awkward fool. I wanted to know that she trusted me, and would have given anything for a word from her to show she did; while at the same time I felt I would have bitten my tongue out rather than have asked for such a word.

Yet out it came, nevertheless.

“You feel better and—and safe?” I asked.

The lightning showed me that she moved slightly, turned her head and glanced toward me just for an instant, but said nothing.

“I’ll get you something to eat,” I murmured fatuously, and went out and pelted through the rain to the tent.

I had got some biscuits and a tin of milk, when a thought occurred to me. The men had not returned, and their guns piled in a corner of the tent caught my eye as I was leaving.

I made a bundle of them and carried them away. I could trust my men just as well if they had no firearms.

When I got back to the hut she was sitting on the side of the bed and had quite shaken off the faintness.

“You need not have gone through the rain—but I suppose you are used to it?” she said.

“A man in my position has to get used to anything. Here are the biscuits and the milk. I’ve some tinned meat in the cupboard here. Can you eat?”

“What are those?” she cried, pointing to the guns.

“The men’s guns. Best to keep them in the dry, you see.” I spoke as indifferently as I could; but she was very quick, and by the light of the storm I saw her eyes upon my face, with a sharp, piercing look.

“That’s not your reason. I hear it in your voice. Is there anything more to fear?”

“No.” It was a lie, of course, but I uttered it stoutly, feeling the need of it. “If you’ll eat some of this and get some strength back, I’ll explain the position presently.”

“What’s that?” she asked, starting and listening.

In an interval of the storm I heard the voices of the men raised in high tones.

“Nothing, only the men with the prisoner,” I replied calmly; but I didn’t understand the reason for the high voices, and didn’t like it. “I’ll just go and see them.”

“Don’t go, please.” Half command, in the same imperious tone I was getting to know well; but unmistakably also half entreaty. It was the note I had been waiting for so eagerly, and I felt myself go hot with pleasure. She did trust me.

“As you wish,” I answered. “But I had better go.”

There was a pause, and then she said, in a quiet level tone:

“You must do as you think best, of course.”

“Chris here will answer for your safety. Try and eat something,” I said; and with that I ran back again to the tent.

In a moment I saw something was wrong. My four men were clustered near the fellow whose leg I had broken, quarrelling angrily, with many gestures; while the man I had made prisoner was not in the tent at all.

“Where’s the other man?” I asked.

They all turned at the sound of my voice, and one of them, with whom I had before had some bother, took the question to himself. He shrugged his broad shoulders, first scowled, and then laughed insolently.

“He’s escaped,” he said, his tone a mixture of doggedness and defiance.

The trouble I had been looking for had come, just when it was most unwelcome.

CHAPTER II.
KARASCH.

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I had had to deal with worse trouble than this before, however, and to tackle far more dangerous men than the fellow who, having sounded the first note of rebellion, stood eyeing me with lowering brows, while his fingers played round the haft of the knife he carried.

These Eastern Europeans can be dangerous enough in a crowd, or in the dark, or in any circumstances which offer a chance of treachery. But they don't fight well alone or in the open. That's where they differ from the desperadoes of the West and the mining camps; and I knew it.

The tent was a very large one, affording plenty of room for a scrimmage, and as I walked straight up to the man, keeping my eyes fixed on his, the rest drew back a little. That's another peculiarity of the people of the hills. They will back up a companion so long as the man in command is out of the way, and then back down quite as promptly when the music has to be faced.

"See here, Karasch," I said to the ringleader; "I don't want any more trouble with you—or with anyone else; but I'm not taking any insolence from you. Mind that, now. What do you mean by saying the prisoner escaped?"

Before he answered he glanced round at his companions.

"He ran away," he muttered.

"I tied him up so that he couldn't run. Who set him free? Whoever did that will answer to me."

“Karasch did it,” answered one of the others. Then I guessed the reason of the high words I had heard, and that the speaker, whose name was Gartski, had been against the thing in opposition to the rest.

“Why did you do it, Karasch?”

“Because I chose to; I’m no wench minder,” he replied with an insolent laugh.

I did not hesitate a second, but while the laugh was still on his lips I struck him full in the face as hard as I could hit him, and down he went like a ninepin. He scrambled up, cursing and swearing and spitting out the blood from his mouth, and made ready to rush at me with his long knife, when I covered him with my revolver.

“Put that knife down, Karasch,” I cried, sternly. “Don’t try any monkey tricks with me. And you others, choose right now which side you’re on. I’ve been looking for this trouble for a couple of days past, and I’m quite ready for it.”

Gartski came to my side, and one of the others, Petrov, drew to Karasch; the fourth, Andreas, remaining undecided.

“You’re faithful to me, Gartski?” I asked. My guide had told me before that he was, so I felt certain of him.

“My life is yours,” he answered simply.

“Good; then we’ll soon settle this. Wait, Karasch. There isn’t room for two leaders in this camp, and we’ll settle this between us—you and I alone—once for all.”

I took Gartski’s knife and handed him my revolver.

“If anyone tries to interfere in the quarrel, shoot him, Gartski,” I said, and knife in hand I turned to the others. “Now, Karasch, if you’re man enough, we’ll fight on equal terms.”

“Good,” said the other two. It was a proposition fair enough to please them all, particularly as his supporters believed Karasch could account for me pretty easily in such a fight.

He was quite ready for the tussle, and we began at once. The tent was so gloomy—we had only the dim light from a couple of lanterns—that it was with some difficulty I could keep track of his eyes as he crouched down and moved stealthily around, watching his opportunity to catch me at a disadvantage for his spring, his long ugly knife reflecting a gleam now from one and now from the other of the lanterns as he moved.

The storm was still raging furiously, and now and again a lurid glare of the lightning would light up the tent for an instant so vividly that the place seemed almost dark by contrast the next moment.

The men drew to one side watching us, and the wounded prisoner, stoic as he had shown himself in his pain, propped himself up on one arm and followed the fight with close interest.

My antagonist’s fighting was in the approved cat-like method. Crouching low, he would move, with lithe, stealthy tread, for a step or two, then pause, then spring suddenly in a feinted attack, then as quickly recover himself, and begin all over again.

Fortunately I was no novice at the game; but I had learnt the thing in another school. A Mexican had taught me—an adept with the knife, with half a score of lives to the credit of his skill. I stood all the time quite still; every nerve at tension, every muscle ready for the spring when the

moment came, but wasting no strength in useless feints. The less you do before the moment comes, the more you can do when it does come.

Never for an instant did my eyes stray from his; noting every change of expression; watching every movement, step, and gesture; almost every breath he drew; and using every second to find the weak spot in his attack.

I soon saw his purpose. He was striving to make me give ground and drive me back to where I should have no elbow room for free movement. But I did not yield an inch, not even when he sprang so near me in one of his feints as to make me think he meant business at last.

Instead of giving ground I began to take it. Twice he made as if to rush at me and each time as he leapt back I stepped a pace forward. As the tent was too small to admit of his circling me, he saw that he was losing ground; and I noticed a shadow of uneasiness come creeping to his eyes.

Then I saw my plan, and the real shrewdness of the Mexican’s tactics. My opponent’s method had a serious flaw. During the moment that he was recovering himself after his feints he was incapable of attack, and if I could close with him at one of those moments I should have him at an immense disadvantage.

With this thought I drew him on. When his next feinting spring came I fell back a pace, and I could tell by the renewed light in his eyes that he felt reassured and confident. He had made me give way, apparently, and felt he could easily drive me back until he would have me at his mercy.

The next time I repeated the manœuvre, and then a grim grin of triumph lighted his face. He crouched again and moved about me, stalking me to drive me into an awkward corner of the place, his eyes gleaming the while with fierce confidence and murderous intent.

Inspired by this over-confidence, he sprang at me again, this time too far, calculating that I should again give way. But I did not, and as he jumped back hurriedly to retrieve the mistake I closed on him, caught his right wrist with my left hand, and pressed him back, chest to chest, holding my right hand away from his left which groped frantically and desperately to clutch it.

In that kind of tussle he was no match for me. I had all a trained wrestler's tricks with my legs, and tripped him in a moment so that he went down with his left arm under him. I heard the bone snap as we fell and I tore the knife from his grip.

His life was mine by all the laws of combat in that wild district, and for a moment I held my weapon poised ready to strike home to his heart.

To do him justice he neither quailed, nor uttered a sound. If he had shown a sign of weakness I think I should have finished the thing as I was fairly entitled to, and have killed him. But he was a brave fellow, so I spared him and got up and turned to the rest.

"Do either of you dispute my leadership?" I said to the others. But they had had their lesson, and had apparently learnt it thoroughly.

"It was Karasch's doing, and his only," said Petrov, who had formerly taken sides against me.

“Get up, Karasch,” I said, in a short sharp tone. He got up, and I saw his left arm was dangling uselessly at his side. “Now tell me why you set that prisoner free?”

“You can fight. Your muscles are like iron. I’ll serve a man who can fight as you can,” he growled.

“That’s a bargain,” said I. “Here;” and I held out my hand. He looked at me in surprise.

“By the living God,” he muttered, as he put his hand slowly into mine.

“Here’s your knife,” I said next, returning it to him.

He drew back, his surprise greater even than before.

“You trust it to me?” He took it in the same slow hesitating manner; and then with a quick change of manner he set his heel on it and with a fierce and savage tug at the haft, he broke the bright blade in two.

“It’s been raised against you; and I’m your man now and for always,” and down he went on one knee, and seizing my hand kissed it, and then laid it on his head.

Demonstrative folk these rough wild hill men of Eastern Europe, and I knew the significance of this act of personal homage.

So did the others who had watched this quaint result of the fight with the same breathless interest as they had followed the fight itself.

“If you serve me well you’ll find I can pay better than I can fight, Karasch,” I said, as he rose.

“I’m not serving for pay now,” he replied simply. “I serve you. My life is yours. Gartski, go and saddle a couple of the horses.”

“What for?” I asked.

“I’ll go and find the prisoner. He can’t have ridden far in this storm; and I know his road.”

“But your arm is broken.”

“We can tie it up while he gets the horses.”

“Tell me why you set him free, Karasch,” I said, as Gartski and Andreas went out. “And while you talk I’ll see to your arm.” I examined it, and found the fracture in the upper arm; and having set it as best I could I dressed it and bound it up while he spoke.

“On account of the woman,” he said. “I know the man, and he told me about her. She’s a witch and a thief and worse, and comes from Belgrade. She murdered a child, and was being sent to Maglai, in the hills, to be imprisoned; and this morning cast a spell over the men who were taking her and escaped. They were to have a big sum of money if they got her safe to Maglai, and the man promised me a share of it if I’d let him go back and bring his friends here to retake her. I have no mercy for a witch. God curse them all;” and he crossed himself earnestly and spat on the ground.

“She is no witch, Karasch, but just a girl in a plight.”

“A witch can look just as she pleases. You don’t know them, Burgwan”—this was how they pronounced my name. “She was an old woman when she left Belgrade. My friend told me that; and she’s been growing younger every hour. She’s known to be a hundred years old at least. She’s cast her spell over you.”

This was true enough; although not in the sense he meant. He was so obviously in earnest that I saw it was useless to attempt to argue him out of his superstition.

“Well, witch or no witch, spell or no spell, I am going to see her into safety,” I answered firmly.

“You’ll live to rue it, Burgwan. If I help you, it’s because I serve you; not to serve her, God’s curse on her;” and he crossed himself again and spat again, as he always did when he spoke of her. “If you want to be safe from her spells and the devil, her master, you’d better twist her neck at midnight and lop off her hands. It’s the only way to break the spell when once cast.”

“Ah, well, I’ll try and find another way. And I’ll take all the risks. Was that what you were all wrangling about when I came in the hut just now?”

“Yes. She’s done harm enough, already. That man’s broken leg, three good horses killed, and now my arm;” and he cursed her again bitterly. “It’ll be you next,” he added.

“It’ll not be my arm that she breaks,” was my thought.

“What he says is true,” interposed the man whom I had shot. “She’s a witch and a devil. Else how did she know when to escape and how to ride here to you?”

“Answer that, Burgwan,” said Karasch, confidently. “How could she know, if she weren’t a witch?”

Gartski came in then to say the horses were ready, and his entrance made any reply unnecessary, for Karasch rose at once, went out and mounted.

“I’ll bring him back,” he said, “I know I can find him unless that devil blinds the track.”

“Why should she do that, as it’s for her own advantage?” I asked; but he and Andreas were already moving off, and his answer was lost in the night air.

The storm had passed and the rain ceased, and as I watched the two men ride off, the moon came out from behind the clouds, so that I could follow the horses for some distance down the ravine. As soon as they had passed out of sight I turned to the hut.

I did not enter, but stood near the little window and leant against the wall thinking. The tale I had heard concerning the girl had made me very thoughtful. Those who know anything of the ignorant superstition of the peasantry of the Balkans will best appreciate the danger to her of that grim reputation. I had heard scores of stories of men and women who had been done to death with merciless barbarity for witchcraft. The mere charge itself was enough to turn from them any chance of fair trial and justice: and I knew there was not one of the men with me who would not have thought he was doing a Christian act to strangle her. To kill her was to aim a blow at the devil: the accepted duty of every God-fearing man and woman.

But it was not so much her danger that set me thinking then as the reason which must lie behind the accusation. Who could have been devilish enough to set such a brand upon her; and why? Did she know her reputation? There must have been some black work somewhere to account for the plight to which such a girl had thus been reduced.

High-born and gently nurtured she certainly was; accustomed to command and to be obeyed, as she had given abundant proofs; endowed with beauty and grace far beyond the average of her sex; and with innocence and purity stamped on every feature and manifesting itself in every act! Great enough to have powerful enemies,

probably, I guessed; and in that I looked to find the key to the problem.

I was in the midst of these somewhat rambling thoughts when the casement was pushed open gently.

“Is it you, Burgwan?”

“Yes, it is.”

“What are you doing there?” I was beginning to listen now for the little note of command in her voice.

“I am on watch.”

“I have turned you from your cottage.” This was half apologetic: followed directly by the other tone. “You will be well paid.”

“Thank you.” It was no use protesting. It seemed to please her to feel that she could repay me for any trouble; and it did no harm to humour her.

“The storm is over. Can we not start?”

“Where would you go?”

She hesitated. “I wish to get to the railway.”

“To go where?”

“Do not question me.”

“I beg your pardon. I am not questioning you in the sense you imply. There are two lines of railway about the same distance away. One leads to Serajevo, the other to Belgrade.”

“How far away?”

“The former perhaps twenty miles; the other I don’t know.”

She caught her breath at this. “Where am I, then?”

“In the middle of the Gravenje hills.”

“God have mercy on me.” It was only a whisper; but so eloquent of despair.

“You need not despair. It is as easy to travel forty miles as thirty; and twenty are not much worse than ten. I will see you through.” But this touched her dignity again.

“You shall be well paid,” she repeated. I let it pass, and there came a pause.

“Can we not start?”

“You have not told me for which railway; but it doesn’t matter, as we cannot start to-night.”

“Why not?” The imperative mood again.

“My guide is not here.”

“Your guide?” Suspicion and incredulity now. “Do you mean to say you don’t know your own country? Do you expect me to believe that? It is a mere excuse.”

“Have you found me deceive you yet in anything?”

“There may have been no cause yet.”

“Will it not be more just to wait until you do find cause then?”

Another pause followed.

“I don’t wish to anger you,” she said, with a touch of nervousness; and as if to correct the impression, she added: “Perhaps you do not think I can keep my promise to pay you.”

“You may disbelieve me, but I don’t disbelieve you. I have told you no more than the truth.”

“But why do you need a guide?” she asked after a moment’s thought.

“Because I don’t know the way, and don’t care to trust to the men here now.”