

PAGE FOUR BOYS AND GIRLS

The Princess of the Purple Palace.

A Story of the Pekin Siege.
By William Murray Graydon.

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CHAPTER V.

Cut off from friends and shelter, completely encircled with foes who would show no mercy, impelled helplessly onward into the very jaws of death—no more disheartening prospect could well have faced the two lads. And they were not blind to their danger; in the chilling moment of reflection, while they gained on their pursuers, they understood what their daring feat was certain to cost them, unless, as by a miracle, some means of escape should arise.

"It's all up with us, old fellow," Dan exclaimed hoarsely. "Directly we come yonder, into the open—"

"Yes, I know," Alec interrupted. "How about the girl?—she is not dead?"

"Her face is warm and she is breathing," Dan replied as he partly lifted the covering. "Those scoundrels must have dragged her to make her unconscious. I say, do you think there is any chance for us?"

"I've got two in my mind, but the odds are a thousand to one against either of them."

"What are they?"

Alec did not answer. His teeth were set hard and his eyes fixed ahead as he tugged at the guiding lines. The walls flew by in the dizzy blur. The alley suddenly turned to the left, and the fugitives rounded the corner in safety. A minute later, after clattering through a passage on the right—there was no other way—and crossing a little bridge spanning a dry ditch, the cart swung out into a spacious square and emerged from the closely built Government quarter into the open heart of the capital.

"Now for it!" he cried. "Guard the rear, Dan, and stick tight!"

Hard and quick fell the strokes of the whip. A howling mob was seen from right and from left fresh foes sprang at the tearing vehicle. A bugle blared its murderous note, and a couple of dragoons were discharged. Dan's rifle spoke shrilly, and one of the nearest pursuers dropped in his tracks. Boxes leaped toward Alec with drawn sword, and a blinding cut from the whip sent him reeling back. Two more, who threw themselves recklessly at the mule's head, were knocked down and crushed beneath the iron-shod hoofs and wheels.

"Keep low," cried Alec, "and hold fast for your life!"

The mule jerked first to right and then to left, galloped straight on. Through the lofty archways plunged the cart, scattering a group of yelling foes who barred the way at the outer gate, and jolting over some of them as it passed from the Tartar city to the Chinese town.

Behind swelled the hue and cry, and in front lay as yet silence and darkness. For a quarter of a mile due south Alec drove at full speed down the lonely avenue. Then he swerved eastward into a narrow street, which, several hundred yards further on, made a sharp turn, and jolting over some of them as it passed from the Tartar city to the Chinese town.

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From the canal, where they had been checked for a moment, the pursuers turned unerringly into the side channel. Filling the narrow ditch from wall to wall, pattering over the flagstones and splashing through the shallow water, they swept on with headlong cries. The two lads scarcely dared to hope, as they crouched in front of the still unconscious girl. They heard the blood-thirsty threats of the Boxers, and saw overhead the lurid, flashing glare from the passing torches. It seemed impossible that they could escape discovery and death.

The ordeal lasted fully half an hour. To and fro, backward and forward urged the ravenous pack, examining every nook and cranny, and lighting up every inch of the walls. Twice they pulled aside the bushes and revealed the hole, but never dreamt that their prey could have crept through so small a space. And in the end they reluctantly departed to seek elsewhere for the foreign devils, and the hue and cry faded until it was lost with other distant sounds of the Chinese city.

"Gone at last," said Dan. "They may return, but for the present we have a breathing spell. What will become of us, I wonder? Of course they believe us dead."

"Later on we'll show them that we are very much alive," replied Alec. "Cheer up! Things might be worse, you know. As soon as it's daylight we'll have a look about, and if it's safe to sleep on here until night comes again, I'll try to reach Chow Yen's house and bring back a supply of food. And he will be sure to suggest some good plan."

"That sounds all right," said Dan. "You put forth courage into me, old fellow. I shouldn't mind if only my people knew that we had escaped."

Alec made the cheering suggestion that Chow Yen might get word to the legations, and finally, reassured by the unbroken silence of their surroundings, both lads fell asleep on the damp floor, beside the little princess for whose sake they had braved such frightful perils.

They woke to find the sun shining, and the light revealed to them what they suspected—that they were in a narrow space underneath the floor of a building. Alec took a cautious peep up and down the canal artery, and then crept to the other hole in the masonry, which looked in an opposite direction. From it he saw a paved courtyard hemmed in by blank walls, and at the far end an exit that turned sharply to the left.

"I haven't heard a sound overhead, so there can't be any people living here," Alec said to his companion. "From what I know of the neighborhood, I think it likely that we are under some merchant's warehouse."

"It would be a fine place to hide, if we could get in," said Dan.

"This is what we must do, for it really won't be safe to stop here. The dog may return and start a row, and it takes time for the Boxers to come back to search the vicinity by daylight."

Just then the Princess Loo-Lao stirred and opened her eyes. She had shaken

off the curtain in which Alec had wrapped her, and from her dress it was evident that she had been seized by the kidnappers before retiring for the night. She wore a long outer robe, richly embroidered, and confined her waist by a stomacher of gold filagree. It reached almost to her ankles, which were shrouded with pearls. With her fair complexion and regular features she was very pretty, judged either by an Oriental or European standard.

"My father! O, my father!" Those were her first words, spoken in English. She was clearly familiar with that tongue, and Dan, whom she recognized, told her briefly what had happened while she was unconscious. She listened eagerly, with dread and wonder growing in her dark eyes.

"How brave you were!" she said. "My father shall reward you as you deserve. But alas! he has been taken from me! It was a false and lying message that summoned him to the palace—he is in the power of the wicked Empress-Dowager, who hates and fears him. I must go to the Emperor and tell him of my father's danger. Take me, I implore you, to the gates of the Forbidden City."

The lads exchanged perplexed glances. "You shall see your father again," Dan replied, "but first we must all try to reach the shelter of the legations, and that can be done only by night."

The girl made no answer. Already she had leaped into an indifferent, dreamy mood, and lay with half-closed eyes. The effects of the potent drug had by no means passed off, and her senses were clouded again.

"That's a relief," whispered Dan. "It will be all the better if she don't pull round in a hurry."

Alec laughed grimly. "I wonder," he said, "if two chaps were in such a fix as we are. A Chinese princess on our hands—it's a rum go! But we must face it. And now to find safer quarters."

This was accomplished with less difficulty than was anticipated. A thorough tapping of the floor overhead discovered a loose board, by means of which the lads, after a careful reconnoitering, climbed into a large, dimly lit room. It was a warehouse belonging to some prosperous tradesman, and along the walls were piled bales of silk, satins and brocades, wrapped in paper and sealed.

"This is what I call luck," said Dan. "Yes, it's as snug a place as we could wish for," Alec replied.

Without delay the Princess Loo-Lao was brought here—it was the 14th of June—a distant clamor was heard at intervals, and several times a dog barked in the vicinity. They detected a strong smell of something burning, and the sky was obscured by volumes of black and yellow smoke. The configuration was still raging with deadly fury.

"I'm off now, old fellow," Alec then said. "And quite time, too."

"Better take me with you," urged Dan. "No, that won't do. The girl must not be left alone, and besides, it will be easier for one to get through than for two. Don't worry, I shan't be gone long."

He spoke cheerfully, but his heart was heavy, as, after a few parting words of advice, he lowered himself to the floor and thence to the space under the building, which gave him speedy access to the courtyard. The task that he was about to undertake bristled with perils, though fortunately the distance to be traveled was not very great, and at this hour the Chinese city was comparatively quiet. The canal by which the fugitives had eluded their pursuers was not the same that had helped Kim Son on a previous occasion. It lay a quarter of a mile to the east of the Grand avenue, and that central thoroughfare had to be crossed before Alec could reach Chow Yen's house in the street of the Book-sellers.

"I must succeed," he vowed, as he crept out of the dark court. "If anything happens to me what will become of Dan and the little princess?"

Equally trying, perhaps, was the lot that fell to Dan. While the girl slept peacefully on he crouched among the bales, waiting with keenest anxiety for his friend's return, and depressed by all sorts of fears. The minutes wore heavily, nor was he far wrong when he guessed that they had grown to several hours.

But happily the trying vigil was nearly over. Five minutes later, with a slight creaking the loose plank in the floor was forced upward.

"All right," came Alec's familiar voice. "There was a gurgling, clinking noise as he climbed over the bales to his companion's side. "Luck's the word," he said. "I had to make a detour going and returning, or I should have been here long ago. I've got two bottles of water, and food to last for 24 hours. And good old Chow Yen is

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off the curtain in which Alec had wrapped her, and from her dress it was evident that she had been seized by the kidnappers before retiring for the night. She wore a long outer robe, richly embroidered, and confined her waist by a stomacher of gold filagree. It reached almost to her ankles, which were shrouded with pearls. With her fair complexion and regular features she was very pretty, judged either by an Oriental or European standard.

"My father! O, my father!" Those were her first words, spoken in English. She was clearly familiar with that tongue, and Dan, whom she recognized, told her briefly what had happened while she was unconscious. She listened eagerly, with dread and wonder growing in her dark eyes.

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The lads exchanged perplexed glances. "You shall see your father again," Dan replied, "but first we must all try to reach the shelter of the legations, and that can be done only by night."

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coming here after dark tomorrow night. He will bring disguises for the three of us, so that we can safely cross the city to the legations. The princess must be rigged out as a boy. And another thing—Chow Yen will try to get a message through at once to your father."

"Hurra, you've done splendidly!" exclaimed Dan. "And what is the news?"

"Bad enough. The legations have not been attacked again, but this afternoon the Boxers massacred thousands of native Christians and destroyed acres of houses in the neighborhood of the South Cathedral; that was the fire we saw. And the imperial authorities have put a price on our heads. I mean on yours and mine; the princess is to be taken alive. Both soldiers and the Boxers are searching for us, but fortunately they believe that we pushed on to the end of the ditch and found shelter in another part of the town."

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"I'm off now, old fellow," Alec then said. "And quite time, too."

"Better take me with you," urged Dan. "No, that won't do. The girl must not be left alone, and besides, it will be easier for one to get through than for two. Don't worry, I shan't be gone long."

He spoke cheerfully, but his heart was heavy, as, after a few parting words of advice, he lowered himself to the floor and thence to the space under the building, which gave him speedy access to the courtyard. The task that he was about to undertake bristled with perils, though fortunately the distance to be traveled was not very great, and at this hour the Chinese city was comparatively quiet. The canal by which the fugitives had eluded their pursuers was not the same that had helped Kim Son on a previous occasion. It lay a quarter of a mile to the east of the Grand avenue,