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The Man From Brodney's

By George Barr McCutcheon

(Chapter XVII Continued)

The princess was quite serene. She lightly announced that the present state of affairs was no worse than that which she was accustomed to at home. The court of Hap-Thorberg was ever in a state of unrest, despite its outward suggestion of security. Outbreaks were common among the masses. Somehow they were suppressed before they grew large enough to be noticed by the wide world.

"We invariably come out on top," she philosophized, "and so shall we here. At home we always eat, drink and make merry, for tomorrow never comes."

Soon after breakfast was over Chase announced his intention to visit each of the gates in turn. The princess strolled with him as far as the bridge at the foot of the terrace. They stopped in the shade of a clump of trees that hung upon the edge of the stream. As they were gravely discussing the events of the night Neenah came up to them from beyond the bridge. She saluted gracefully to the "sahib," she had no eyes for royalty.

"Excellency," she began breathlessly, "is Selim who has come to have private speech with the most gracious sahib. It is to be quick, excellency, Selim is under the ground, excellency."

"Yes, excellency. It is so dark there that one cannot see, but Neenah will lead you. Selim has sent me. But come now!"

Chase felt his ears burn when he turned to find a delicate, significant smile on Neenah's lips. "Don't let me detain you," she said, ever so politely.

"Wait, please!" he exclaimed. "Is Selim hurt?" he demanded of Neenah, who shook her head vigorously.

"Then there is no reason why you should not accompany us, princess."

"I am not at all necessary to the undertaking," she said coldly, turning to leave him.

"Selim has found fuses and gunpowder in the cellars, excellency—in the secret vaults," began Neenah eagerly, divining the cause of the white lady's hesitation.

This astounding piece of news swept away the feeble barrier Neenah would have erected in her place. She consented to accompany Chase into the cellars, a spirit of adventure overcoming certain scruples which might have restrained her under other conditions.

Neenah led them through the wine cellars and down into the vaults beyond the dungeons. The princess clutched Chase's hand tightly as they stole through the black, chill corridor. She found herself wondering if the girl was to be trusted. What if she were leading them into a trap? She would have whispered her fears into Chase's ear had not a sharp "Sh!" come from the girl who was leading.

Neenah felt a queer little thrill of interest for the girl she could not explain it.

The dungeon was off to the right. They could hear the faintest murmur of voices, with now and then a laugh from the distant cells. The guard could be heard scoffing at his charges. With a caution that seemed wholly absurd to the two white people, Neenah guided them through the maze of narrow passages, dark as Erebus and chill as the grave. Chase checked a hysterical impulse to laugh aloud at the proceedings. It was like playing at a children's game.

He was walking between the two women. Neenah ahead, Geneva behind. Each clasped one of his hands. Suddenly he found himself experiencing an overpowering desire to exert the strength of his arm to draw the princess close—close to his insistent body. The touch of her flesh, the clutch of her cold little hand, filled him with the most exquisite sense of possession. The magnetism of life charged from one to the other, striking fire to the blood. He was forgetting Neenah, forgetting himself, thinking only of the opportunity and his fascination. In another instant he would have drawn her hand to his lips. Neenah came to a standstill and uttered a warning whisper. Chase recovered himself with a mighty start, a chill as if one avoiding an unseen peril sweeping over him. Geneva heard the sharp, painful intake of his breath and felt the sudden relaxation of his fingers. She was not puzzled. She, too, had felt the magic of the touch, and her blood was surging red. She knew then that she had been clasping his hand with a fervor that was as unmistakable as it was shameful.

Neenah may have felt the magnetic current that coursed through these surcharged creatures. She was smiling mysteriously to herself.

"Wait here," she whispered to Chase, ever so softly. She released his hand and moved off in the blackness of the passage. "I will bring Selim," came back to them.

"Oh!" felt faintly, tremulously, from Geneva's lips. It was a trap, after all! But it was not the trap laid by a traitor. She felt all aquiver. Her heart fluttered violently; her breath came quickly. Alone with him, and their blood leaping to the touch that thrilled!

checked his own heart throbs. A wave of exquisite joy swept over him—the joy of a temptation that knew no fear, no conscience. He found her cold little hand and clasped it in tense fingers that thrilled with the thrill of passion. He drew her close; their bodies touched and sweetly trembled.

"Are you afraid?" he whispered in tones he had never heard before.

"Yes," she murmured convulsively—"of you! Please, please, don't!"

At the same time she tightened her clutch upon his hand and crept closer to him, governed by an unquenchable craving. Chase had the sensation of smothering. He could not believe the senses which told him that she was responding to his appeal.

"Genevra," he murmured, almost gasped, in his delirium. His arms went about her slender figure suddenly, and she was strained to his breast, locked to him with bonds that seemed unbreakable. Her face was lifted to his. The blackness of the passage was impenetrable, but love was the guide. He found her lips in one wild, glorious kiss.

A door creaked sharply. He released her. Their quivering arms fell away. They drew ever so slightly apart, still under the control of the influence which had held them for that brief moment. She was trembling violently. A soft, wailing sigh as of pain came from her lips.

Then the glimmer of a light came to them through the half open door at the end of the passage. They gazed at it without comprehension, dumb in their sudden weakness. A shadowy figure came out through the door, and Selim's voice, low and tense, called to them.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "It is too late," she replied. Then his hand sought hers again, and, dizzy with emotion, he led her up to the open door. As they passed into the huge, dimly lighted chamber he turned to look into her face. She met his gaze, and there were tears in her eyes. Selim was ahead of them. She shook her head sadly, and he understood.

"Can we ever forget?" she murmured plaintively.

"Never!" he whispered.

"Then we shall always regret—always regret!" she said, withdrawing her hand. "It was the beginning and the end."

"Not the end, dearest one—if we are always to regret," he interposed eagerly. "But why the end? You do love me! I know it! And I worship you—oh, you don't know how I worship you, Geneva! I—"

"Hush! We were fools! Don't, please! I do not love you. I was carried away by—Oh, can't you understand? Remember, what I am! You knew and yet you have degraded me in my own eyes. Is my own self respect nothing? You will laugh and you may boast after I am married to—"

"Genevra!" he protested as if in great pain.

"Excellency," came from the lips of Selim at the lower end of the chamber, breaking in sharply upon their little world. "There is no time to be lost. Time to be lost! And he had held her in his arms! Time to be lost! All the rest of time was to be lost! 'They may return at any moment.'"

Chase pulled himself together. He looked into her eyes for a moment, finding nothing there but a command to go. She stood straight and unyielding on the very spot which had seen her trembling with emotion but a moment before.

"Coming, Selim," he said, and moved away from her side as Neenah came toward them from the opposite wall. Geneva did not move. She stood quite still and numb, watching his tall figure crossing the stone floor. Ah, what a man he was! The little Persian wife of Selim, after waiting for a full minute, gently touched the arm of the princess. Geneva started and looked down into the dark, as usual, smiling eyes. She flushed deeply and hated herself.

"Shall we go back?" she asked nervously. "I—I have seen enough. Chase, Neenah. Lead me back to—"

"Most glorious excellency," said Neenah, shaking her pretty head, "we are to wait here. The sahib and Selim will join us soon."

"Where are they going?" demanded the princess, a feeling of awe coming over her. "I don't want to be left here alone." Chase and Selim had opened a low, heavy iron door at the lower end and were peering into the darkness beyond.

"Selim will explain. He has learned much. It is the secret passage to the coast. He is not afraid."

Genevra looked about her for the first time. They were standing in a long, low room, the walls of which reeked with dampness and gave out a noxious odor. A single electric light provided a faint, almost monotonous light. Selim raised a lighted lantern as he led Chase through the open door. Behind Geneva were enormous casks, a dozen or more, reaching almost to the ceiling. A number of boxes stood close by, while on the opposite side of the chamber four small iron chests were to be seen, dragged out from recesses in the distant corner. Observing her look of

wonder, Neenah vouchsafed a casual explanation.

"It is the wine cellar and the storeroom. The iron chests contain the silver and gold plate that came from the great rajah of Murpat in exchange for the five huge rubies which now adorn his crown. The old sahibs stored the chests here many years ago, but few know of their existence. See! They were hidden in the walls over there. Von Blitz has found them."

"Von Blitz?" in amazement.

"He has been here. He has carried away many chests. There were twenty in all."

"And—he will return for these?" queried the princess in alarm.

"Assuredly, most glorious one. Soon, perhaps. But be not afraid. Selim can close the passage door. He cannot get in. He will be fooled, eh? Why should you be afraid? Have you not with you the most wonderful of the most brave sahib? Would he not give his life for you?" The dark eyes sparkled with understanding—aye, even mischief. Geneva felt that this oriental which knew everything. For a long time she looked in uncertain mood upon that smiling, watchful face. Then she said softly, moved by an irresistible impulse to confess something, even absurdly:

"Oh, if only I were such as you Neenah, and could live forever on this dear island!"

"But, most high, there are a princess here. There is no one to whom the most gracious one could be sold. No one who could pay more than a dozen rubies. Women are cheap here and you would be a won-der, not a most beautiful princess."

"I would not care to be a princess, perhaps."

"You love my Sahib Chase?" demanded Neenah abruptly, eagerly.

"Neenah!" gasped Geneva, with startled look. Neenah looked intent, then bent over to kiss the hand of the princess. The latter laughed almost aloud in her confusion. She caught herself up quickly and said with some asperity: "You foolish child, I am to become a prince's wife. How can I love your sahib? What nonsense! I am to marry a prince, and he is not to pay for me in rubies."

"Ah, how wonderful!" cried Neenah, with ravishing wonder. "A prince for a husband and the glorious Sahib



Neenah von Blitz stepped into the light. Chase for a lover all your life! Ah! The exclamation was no less than a sigh of rapturous indorsement.

The princess stared at her first in consternation, then in dismay. Before she could find words to combat this alarming prophecy, so ingeniously presented to her reflections, Selim and Hollingsworth Chase returned to the chamber. She was distressed, even confounded, to find that she was staring at Chase with a strange, abashed curiosity growing in her eyes—a stare that she suddenly was afraid he might observe and appreciate. A wave of revulsion, of shame, spread over her whole being.

With the swiftness of lightning she recalled the things that had been said of more than one grand dame in Europe—aye, of women at her own court. Even a princess she had known who—but for shame! she cried in her heart. It could not be. Despite herself a cruel, distressing shyness came over her as he approached, his eyes glowing with the light she feared, yet craved. Was this man to remain in her life? Was he? Would he come to her and wage the unfair war? Was he honest? Was he even now coveting her as other men had coveted the women she knew and despised? She found herself confronted by the shocking conviction that he knew she could never be his wife. He knew she was to wed another, and yet—It was unbelievable.

She met his eager advance with a quick, shrill laugh of defiance and noted the surprise in his eyes. Dim as the light was, she could have sworn that the look in those eyes was honest. Ah, that silly Neenah! The reaction was as sudden as the revolt had been. Her smile grew warm and shy.

"Von Blitz has been here," he was saying half diffidently, still searching deep in her eyes. "He's played hob. And he's likely to return at any minute."

"Then let us go quickly. I have no desire to meet the objectionable Mr. Von Blitz. Isn't it dreadfully dangerous here, Mr. Chase?"

"Mr. Chase?" he said, with his winning smile. "Now?"

"Yes, now and always Mr. Chase," she said steadily. "You know that I cannot be otherwise. I can't always be a fool."

His face turned a deep red; his lips parted for effort to this truculent estimate, but he controlled himself.

"Yes, it is dangerous here," he said quietly, answering her question. "As soon as Selim bars that door upon the inside we'll go. I was a fool to bring you here."

"How could you know what the dangers would be?" she asked.

"I'll confess I didn't expect Von Blitz," he said dryly.

"But you did expect"—she began, with a start, biting her lips.

"There's a vast difference between expectation and hope, princess." Neenah had joined Selim at the door when the men re-entered the chamber. Now she was approaching with her husband.

"May Allah bless you and profit for himself, excellencies," said the good Selim. Neenah plausibly had advanced her suspicions to the brown body servant. Geneva blushed, and then her eyes blazed. She gave the girl a scornful look. Neenah smiled happily, unrepentantly, in return.

"Allah help us, you should say, if Von Blitz returns," interposed Chase astutely. "Is the door barred?"

"No, excellency. The bars have sprung. I cannot drop them in place, as you know, the lock has been blown away. The charge sprung the bolts. We must go at once."

"Then there is no way to keep them out of the chateau?" cried Geneva anxiously.

"They can go no farther than this room," explained Selim. "We lock the double iron doors from the other side—be door through which you came, most glorious excellency—and they cannot enter the cellars above. This is the chamber which opens into the underground passage to the coast. The passage was made for escape from the chateau in case of trouble and was known to but few. My father was the servant of Sahib Wyckholme, and I used to live in the chateau."

"Once there was a boat, a launch, which lay hidden below the cliffs on the north coast. The passage led to this boat. It was always ready to put out to sea. But one night it was destroyed by the great rocks which fell from the cliffs in an earthquake."

When I came here I at once thought of the passage. You will see that the doors into the cellar cannot be opened from this chamber. The locks and bolts are on the other side. I knew where the keys were hidden. It was easy to unlock the doors and come into this room. I found that some one had been here before me. The door to the passage had been forced open from without, cracked by dynamite. Many of the treasure boxes have been removed. Von Blitz was here not an hour ago. He wears boots. I saw the footprints among the naked ones in the passage. They will come back for the other chests. Then they will blow up the passageway with powder, and escape from the chateau through it will be cut off. I have found the keys of powder in the passage and have destroyed the fuses. It will be of no avail, sahib. They will blow it up at the other end, which will be just the same."

"There's no time to be lost," cried Chase. "We must bring enough men down here to capture them when they return—shoot 'em if necessary. Come on! We can surprise them if we hurry."

They were starting across the chamber toward the door when a gruff, apophrical oath came rolling up to the chamber through the secret passage. Quick as a flash Selim, who realized that they could not reach and open the door leading to the stairs, turned in among the huge wine casks, first blinding his lantern. He whispered for the others to follow. In a moment they were squeezing themselves through the narrow spaces between the dark, strong smelling casks, back into a darkness so opaque that it seemed lifeless.

"They won't suspect that we are here," whispered Selim as the door to the passage creaked. "Keep quiet! Don't breathe!"

The single electric light was still burning as Selim had found it when he first came. The door swung open slowly, heavily, and Jacob von Blitz, mud covered, reeking with perspiration and panting savagely, stepped into the light. Behind him came a man with a lantern and behind him two others.

They were white men, all. Von Blitz turned suddenly and cursed the man with the lantern. The fellow was ready to drop with exhaustion. Evidently it had been no easy task to remove the chests.

CHAPTER XXII.

SEVERAL PHILOSOPHERS.

THE four white men sat down upon the chests. Von Blitz alone being visible to the watchers. They were fagged to the last extreme.

"This is der last," panted Von Blitz, blowing hard and stretching his big arms. "I fix him," he growled. "His time vill come, by tam! I let him know he can't take my wives away mit him. Der dog! I fix him some day purdy soon. Und dem tam vimmins! Der run away mit him, eh? Ach, Gott, if I could only put my hands by der necks yet!"

"Vat for you fret, Jacob?" growled one of the others. "You couldn't take dese vimmins back by Europe mit you. I tink you got good luck by losing dem. Milder Chase can't take dem back needer. Don't fret."

"Vell," said Von Blitz, arising, "come on, boys. Dis is der last of dem. Den we blow der tam ting up. Grab hold

dere, Joost. Up mit H. Jan. Vat? Not?"

"Gott in himmel, Jacob, vat a minutes! My back is broke!" protested Joost stubbornly. Von Blitz swore steadily for a minute, but could not move the impassive Boers.

"Vat for you tink I vant you in on dis, you svine? To set around und dream? Nobody else knows about dis treasures, und ve got it all for ourselves—ve fear und no more, und you say, 'Vat's der hurry?' It's all ours. Ve divide it oop in der cave mit all der money ve get from der bank. Vat? Yes? Ien, ven der time comes, ve send it all by Australia und no von is der vicer. Der natives von't be alive to care about it."

"I don't like der scheme to rob der bank," growled Jan. "If der peeples get on to us, dey could cut us to pieces."

"But dey von't get on to us, you fool. Dey wouldn't take it themselves if it was handed to dem. Dey're too honest—yes. Vell, don't dey say ve're honest too? Vell, vat more you vant? Dey don't know how much money und rubies dere is in der bank. Ve von't take all of it—und dey von't know der difference. Ve burn der books. Dis is all. Ve get in by der bank tonight, boys."

"I don't like id," said Joost. "Id's stealing from our friends, Jacob. Besides, if der oder heirs should go before der government mit der story, vat den?"

"Der oder heirs vill never get der chance, boys. Dey vill die mit der plague—ha, ha! Sure! Dere von't be no oder heirs. Basula says it must be so. Ve can't vat, boys. It vill be years before der business is settled. Ve must get vat ve can now und vat for der decision afterwards. Brodney has wrote to Basula, saying dat der Chase feller is to stay here velder ve vant him or not. He says 'Chase is a good man! By tam, it no me cry to tink of vot he has done by me—dat good man!'"

To the amazement of all the burly German began to blubber.

"Come on, Jacob," said Jan gruffly.

Von Blitz shook his fist at the door across the chamber and thundered his final maledictions.

"Sir John says in der letter to Milder Chase dere is a movements on foot in London to settle der contest out of court," volunteered Joost.

"Sure, but he also say dat ve all may die mit old age before it is over yet."

"Don't forget der plague!" said Jan.

They groaned mightily as they lifted the heavy chests to their shoulders and started for the door.

"Close der door, Jan," commanded Von Blitz from the passage. "Ve vill light der fuse ven ve haf got beyond der first bend. Vat? Look! By tam, von of you svine has broke der fuse. Vat! Ve vill fix him now."

The door was closed behind them, but the listeners could hear them repairing the damage that Selim had done to the fuse.

Led by Selim, the four made a rush for the door leading into the chateau. They threw it open and passed through, flying as if for their lives. No one could tell how soon an explosion might bring disaster to the region; they put distance between them and the powder keg. Selim paused long enough to drop the bolts and turn the great key with the lever. At the second turn in the narrow corridor he overtook Chase and the scurrying women.

"Is there nothing to be done?" cried the princess. "Can we not prevent the explosion? They will cut off our means of escape in that!"

"I know too much about gunpowder, princess," said Chase dryly. "To fool with it. It's like a snake. It kicks hard. Glad, it was hard to stand there and hear those brutes planning it all and not be able to stop them!"

The princess was once more at his side. He had clasped her arm to lead her securely in the wake of Neenah's electric lantern. She came to a sudden stop.

"And pray, Mr. Chase," she said sharply, as if the thought occurred to her for the first time, "why didn't you stop them? You had the advantage. Von and Selim could have surprised them—you could have taken them without a struggle!"

He laughed softly, deprecatingly, not a little impressed by the justice of her criticism.

"No doubt you consider me a coward," he said ruefully.

"You know that I do not," she protested. "I—I can't understand your motive; that is all."

"You forget that I am the representative of these very men. I am the trusted agent of Sir John Brodney, who has refused to supplant me with another. I can't very well represent Sir John and at the same time make prisoners or corpses of his clients, even though I am being shielded by their legal fees. I'll not have Von Blitz saying, even to himself, that I have not only stolen his wives, but have also cast him into the hands of his Philistines. It may sound quixotic to you, but I think that Lord Deppingham and Mr. Browne will understand my attitude."

"But Von Blitz has sworn to kill you," she expostulated, with some heat. "You are wasting your integrity. I must say, Mr. Chase."

"Would you have me shoot him from ambush?" he demanded.

"Not at all. You could have taken him captive and held him safe until the time comes for you to leave the island."

"He would not have been my captive in any event. I could do no more than deliver him into the hands of his enemies. Would that be fair?"

(To Be Continued)