

## A RANSOM

"It is quite certain that they will shoot me," said Princess Karoly, looking her fellow prisoner squarely in the face. "My husband will never pay all those francs down for me. He will not think me worth it."

"The cur!" said the Irishman fiercely. The princess laughed softly. "How do you know that I am worth it?" she asked lightly. "Believe me, Mr. Gildea, the world will say my husband is well rid of me. I was going to demand a separation from him in the autumn, and now—Ah, well! A scandal will be prevented, and the best of messieurs les brigands' drugs is that their effect is lasting."

"Lasting indeed!" Gerald Gildea's eyes laughed back into hers. Then they grew grave again. "I'm glad little Lucy's ransom was so promptly paid."

"Are you engaged to her?" the princess asked quickly. "They told me so—in Ajaccio."

"They told you lies in Ajaccio, madame. Lucy is heart free for me." "Oh!" And the princess laughed softly to herself. "And when will they pay your ransom, Mr. Gildea?"

"When yours is paid, madame." "At the Greek kalends?" The princess' face was white under her sunburn, but her eyes laughed still. Gildea bent his head gravely.

"At the Greek kalends, princess. Did you expect it to be otherwise?" "I—I—no. What need for more lies now, when we are going to die, Gerald?"

"No need at all—now. Do you know, princess, I have never heard your Christian name?"

"Have you not? It is not a pretty name—Zenobia."

"It is an imperious kind of name. It suits you."

"You think so? Ah, never mind! How old are you, Gerald? Twenty-five? And I am thirty. Neither of us old, and yet neither of us very sorry that we shall have our throats cut in a day or so."

"Hush! Do not speak of it." "Have you a mother, Mr. Gildea, or a sister?"

"Both," Gerald Gildea answered, and for a moment there came into his blue eyes the shadow of a half conquered pain. It had beset him for an hour or two before, when the American girl's ransom had arrived and she had turned to him for one moment with a dumb entreaty in her eyes. She was going back to home and friends, her look seemed to say. Would not he at least send word to those who loved him of the peril in which he stood? The money would be paid at once, Gerald Gildea knew, but then he must leave behind the princess, she whom her friends called the loveliest and her enemies the worst woman in Russia. It was only death the princess need fear, Gildea knew, too, for he was aware that she had one bosom friend that would help her from any worse fate. And, so thinking, he made up his mind to abide the end with her.

"Our jailers are busy playing morra," said the princess, breaking in upon his thoughts. "Shall we play, too, Gerald? You do not know how? Fie! Come, shut your eyes and guess how many fingers I hold up—Well, what are you thinking of to make you look so grave? A woman? Tell me her name."

"Alice and Honor."

The princess' straight brows met in a frown.

"Two women?" she said, with an odd little laugh. "Are they pretty women, then? Tell me about them."

"My mother is lovely, not pretty," Gerald Gildea said gravely. "Honor is not pretty either, but she has the pleasantest face in the world."

"You speak as if you were sorry for her," the princess said in an altered voice. "Is your sister delicate?"

"She is a hopeless cripple. At least she will never be able to walk as long as she lives. But I ought not to have called her hopeless. There never was a merrier creature than my sister Honor."

"And your mother? Her name is Alice, you said. Tell me about her, Gerald."

"My mother—I have nothing to tell of her, princess."

"You said she was lovely. Is she fair or dark like you?"

"Dark like me—darker, I think. Do not let us speak of my mother, princess."

"Ah!" the princess said under her breath. Then she leaned forward

and leaned her hand on the Irishman's locked fingers. "My dear!" she whispered softly as her hand was taken and held tightly. "My dear!"

The banditti were still playing morra, though the moon was well up in the sky, and the losers were cursing in good set terms. But the prisoners were sleeping—that is to say, Gerald Gildea was sleeping as soundly as a child, with a heap of grass for a pillow, but though the shadow of a great rock was over the princess also, she was wide awake, and not a word of their captors' talk had she lost as she sat crouched in the shadows looking up at the slender sickle of the moon with wide, intent eyes. Presently she put her fingers into her ears to shut out the loud laughter and louder oaths, but the thoughts would not fall into coherent shape even then. Something thus they ran:

"They will kill us tonight. I heard them say so. I wonder if Gerald knows. How can he sleep like that? I am not a coward, yet I could not sleep. Or am I a coward, after all? I hardly know. Oh, me, I know nothing! I have wasted my life. What will Ivan say, I wonder? He can install La Mascotte in my rooms now. And how ill the blue satin will go with her red hair! Perhaps Ivan will be sorry for a little. He was fond of me once. Poor Ivan! I dare say it was more than half my fault that we were so unhappy. I wonder what they will do with us when we are dead. Will they bury us or throw us into the sea? They'll bury us, perhaps, because of the hue and cry. Are they moving over there? I think they are. I wonder I am not more frightened if I am a coward." She closed her eyes for a moment, murmuring an incoherent little prayer.

"Forgive me—and him—and make us happy somewhere, dear heaven. And make Ivan happy, too, and comfort those two women, Honor and Alice. And because he stayed for my sake, do thou lay his death at my door. Amen, amen!"

Then she opened her eyes and took her fingers from her ears, for, as she said to herself, it did not become a Karoly to die huddled up like a rabbit in a burrow. They were whispering together again, and she listened eagerly.

"They have been drinking," she said to herself, patting her hand to the friend that lay snugly in the bosom of her gown. "What is it they say? Whose beauty do they want to spoil? Please God, mine."

Then a wavering footstep came toward her, and a cold fear suddenly smote the princess, holding her fast so that she could not speak or shriek, though in some occult way she knew that her companion in danger was awake. Gildea rose up on his elbow and waited quietly. In her corner the princess crouched, listening intently. She could hear steps and whispers, and though not a sound came from Gildea she knew that they were about their devil's work. There was a dull silence, and then a very faint moan scarcely more than a sigh, but Princess Karoly heard it and leaped to her feet, thrusting her hand into her bosom. She went straight to the place where he lay, gave one steady look into the blinded eyes, and then, with something like a smile on her lips, drew her hand from her bosom and sent a merciful bullet straight into his heart. Then she dropped on her knees and caught the brown head to her bosom, kissing the marred face with heartbroken kisses and whispering tender words into the ears that could not hear her—tender words that now her husband hears her murmuring in her sleep o' nights. For, five minutes after her bullet had found its billet in Gerald Gildea's heart, a mule came down the road from Ajaccio, laden with her ransom money. Again fate had been unkind to Princess Karoly.

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