

THE EDGE OF HAZARD

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SYNOPSIS.

Frederick Hardy, a fashionable Boston society man, lost his wealth, was flitted by a girl and sent by a friend to take charge of an American Trading Company store in Russia. On his journey through Japan he met Stapleton Neville, supposedly an Englishman. They agreed to go together to Russia. Because of suspicious circumstances they were several times molested by the Japanese. Hardy was arrested and found upon his person were papers showing maps of Jap forts. Hardy was proven guilty. On a train he met Aisome Sano, daughter of a Jap merchant. In Neville's shoes Jap found pictures of forts, proving him to be a Russian spy. Hardy departed for Russia on a steamer, which was wrecked shortly afterward. He was rescued by a Russian steamer. On reaching Vladivostok he was well treated. He started

CHAPTER VII.

Zakouska.

The Russian steamer that took Hardy into Vladivostok was an iron tub of the tramp variety, and not a soul on board could speak a word of any tongue ever heard before by the American. He soon became aware, however, that the red-faced burly captain and his two officers meant to be kind to him, and that their idea of friendliness consisted principally in getting him to eat and drink as much and as frequently as possible. After vainly attempting to converse with him and learning only that he was American, the captain led him to the dining room and introduced him to one of the great institutions of Russia, the zakouska, a lunch of hors-d'oeuvres, washed down with much strong drink. At one end of the room, near the sideboard, a table was set, spread with dishes of sardines, sardels, caviar, chunks of pickled fish, sandwiches, and shrimp in bottles. The captain poured out two generous bumpers of a white liquid into glasses, handed one to Hardy, linked and drained the contents of the other at a gulp. Hardy swallowed the liquid, and the tears came into his eyes; he nearly strangled. He looked about for water, but in vain. He was to learn soon that water, for drinking and washing purposes, is the one thing most difficult of all to obtain in Holy Russia. Zakouska lasted, off and on, for about an hour.

By combining the utmost firmness with evident good nature, Hardy managed to pull through without getting drunk, thereby accomplishing a feat quite remarkable in a foreigner accepting Russian hospitality.

The next afternoon they entered the magnificent harbor of Vladivostok, passing the high rock, crowned with a lighthouse, that stands as a sentinel at its mouth. The city, not visible till the last moment, burst suddenly upon Hardy's view and gave him a very favorable impression of the country into which he had come to live and to retrieve, if possible, his shattered fortunes. Here, crowning the hills that dominate the harbor, was a modern, European city of houses, many of them several stories in height, evidently built of brick and stone. A couple of men-of-war, very trim in their white paint, besides numerous merchant vessels flying the Russian flag, lay at anchor in the bay, while several Chinese sampans and a junk or two, drifting about, bore witness that here the extremes of the east and the west meet and overlap. Two or three of the sampans, indeed, floated up to Hardy's ship as she cast anchor, and their long-cued owners made clamorous application to carry any one ashore who might wish to go. Hardy had already picked out the Celestial whose appearance best suited him, wondering whether he would take Japanese money, when he noticed a steam-launch rapidly approaching, and a cheerful voice hailed him.

"Is that an American on board there?"

"Yes," Hardy shouted back, thrilling with sudden delight at the sound of his mother-tongue, "how did you know?"

"By the cut of your clothes. Where is your baggage?"

"In my cabin."

"All right," said the man in the launch. "I'll have it brought out. Get in here and I'll take you ashore."

A few words of gruff Russian to the captain, and Hardy's trunks and baggage were brought out, and five minutes later he was flying ashore in the launch of the American Trading Company.

As he was leaving, the captain dashed up and wrung his hand, asking anxiously:

"Zakouska?"

"He wants to know," explained Hardy, leaning over the rail, "if I want more zakouska. I've had zakouska enough to last me a lifetime. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him 'nyet!'" came the reply, and the American shook the hands of the captain and his two kind-hearted officers vigorously, repeating many times:

"Nyet! nyet! nyet! nyet!"

CHAPTER VIII.

Enter the Princess.

"I want to go to the American consular," said Hardy, "as soon as I land, and then I should like to get located in a hotel, till I can catch the first comfortable steamer up the river. It's

fortunate for me you came out to take me off, for my knowledge of Russian is, as yet, rather limited."

"You can start up the river day after to-morrow," replied the Vladivostok agent, "on the Alexsay, which goes as far as Blagovestchensk. You will be quite comfortable on her, and will be likely to get a room all to yourself, as I understand she is not crowded."

"That will suit me perfectly," said Hardy. "I see no reason for lingering here, fascinating as the town looks, any longer than is necessary."

"By the way," volunteered the other, "you will have quite a distinguished traveling companion, if you go on the Alexsay, the Princess Romanovna, who has been here visiting her relative, Gen. Romanoff. She has made a sensation in the garrison society here. She's a stunning-looking woman."

"Women do not interest me," re-

Romanovna being aboard, the train started slowly on its 500-mile journey to Khabarovka.

CHAPTER IX.

Into Siberia.

The journey into Siberia was begun! Siberia, that vast mysterious region whose very name has come to be synonymous with all that is most dreaded by the human race—exile, eternal farewells, the clanking of chains over endless frozen roads, the knout, despair, all the horrors of a living death!

Hardy sat in his compartment of one of the first-class cars and gazed from the window, eagerly scanning the landscape for some sign or evidence of the things that had given the country its sinister reputation. His first impression, as the train left Vladivostok behind, was a complete refutation of all preconceived notions.



Gracefully Entered the Car.

plied Hardy. "I came here to work, not to mingle in fashionable society, and, anyhow,"—suddenly remembering his changed fortunes—"it is not likely that a princess would become wildly enthusiastic over a storekeeper."

The next morning Hardy took his place in the railway train bound north through Siberia for Khabarovka, on the Amur. He had obtained a first-class compartment and sat waiting for the train to pull out on schedule time—eight o'clock.

The hour arrived but the train did not move. A quarter-past, half-past, and still there were no signs of departure. At last, impatient, he arose and stepped out into the long narrow hall that ran the entire length of the car. An intelligent-looking Russian was pacing up and down, and him Hardy asked in the best French at his command:

"What is the matter? Why do we not start?"

"On attend," replied the Russian; "they are waiting for the Princess Romanovna—ah! here she comes now!"

The American looked from the window. A droshky was driving up, and in it sat a tall, slender and exquisitely graceful woman, fairly smothered in costly flowers that filled the carriage and were piled beside her on the seat. Her face was of the purest Russian type, her complexion was marvelous, her eyes were a laughing blue, and her hair was of the color of ripe wheat.

"By Jove!" sighed Hardy, "but she's a thoroughbred and a beauty, too!"

The princess took plenty of time for her adieus, after which she languidly and gracefully entered the car. The officers brought her flowers in to her, and descended to the platform, where they stood in an adoring and sorrowful group, their caps in their hands. And then, her highness the Princess

There were no convicts anywhere in sight, no fields of ice or snow. Instead, he was journeying on a pleasant summer's day through a vividly green prairie, wide as the eye could reach, where fat cattle waded up to their knees in lush grass, and yellow dandelions, as large as tea saucers, and fierce tiger-lilies, swayed and nodded by the million in the balmy breeze. He had expected to find something different, somehow, in the aspect of Siberia itself, something sinister and forbidding. Yet this, save for the greater luxuriance of the vegetation and the profusion and brilliancy of the flowers, might have been a stretch of Minnesota or Manitoba.

Wary at last of sitting, Hardy went out into the long hall at one side of the car and walked up and down. Here he found the Russian who spoke French, also promenading, and squeezed against the wall several times to let him pass.

"Pardon, monsieur," said this gentleman as the train stopped, "but we remain here long enough to take zakouska. Perhaps you feel the need of refreshment? Do you know what the zakouska is?"

"Oh, yes," replied Hardy, laughing. "I know what zakouska is very well. I should indeed like some."

"Have you secured your compartment on the Alexsay?" asked the Russian.

"No," replied Hardy, "why? Will the boat be crowded?"

"I hardly think so, but the Princess Romanovna is going on her, and it is likely that all the best accommodations will have been reserved for her. Fortunately, she does not seem to be traveling with much of a suite. Her highness will probably require two or three cabins for herself, a couple for her baggage, one for each of her two maids, and one for her man."

"And will she be given all this, even if the rest of us are compelled to sleep on the decks?"

"Certainly," replied the Russian. "Her highness is—her highness."

Hardy was about to declaim against a government where the aristocracy enjoyed such privileges, but, fortunately, his French was not quite equal to his indignation, and in the moment of hesitation he remembered Consul Greener's warning.

"And who in the world is the Princess Romanovna?" he asked, with a slight tinge of sarcasm. He would have liked to say "who in the dickens," but he did not know the French for "the dickens."

"The Princess Romanovna," explained the Russian, "belongs to one of the oldest families in the empire. She is a distant relative of the czar, who is my imperial master"—and here he took his hat off. "She is immensely rich and has city palaces at Moscow and Petersburg, besides a country estate near the former city. She is as wealthy as she is beautiful."

"She must be very wealthy, then," said the American, with conviction.

The Russian smiled. "Monsieur speaks the truth," he said. "He is also like all Americans, very gallant. When we take zakouska again, we will drink to the Princess Romanovna."

"With pleasure," said Hardy.

After two very comfortable nights the train bearing Frederick Courtland Hardy arrived, about noon, at Khabarovka, on the lordly Amur. It had been raining and the low wooden station resembled an ark stranded in seas of black mud.

Hardy found an agent of the company awaiting him here, a San Franciscan, who nearly fell on his neck at seeing a fellow countryman and hearing again the English language spoken. He did not know that Americans could become so demonstrative. His goods were loaded upon a telega, a sort of long boat upon wheels and without springs, and were sent away to the Alexsay at its wharf, two or three miles distant, while Hardy and the agent took seats in a droshky and tore furiously away to the company's store, over rocks and through ruts

"There is a little spice of danger attending the journey," said the agent, on taking leave; "the ship that went up ahead of this was fired on by Manchurian brigands. I saw several bullet holes in her side myself, made by rifle balls. But I hardly think you need feel much apprehension. Since the Cossacks destroyed Aigun and killed every living man, woman and child that could not get away the Chinese have been pretty quiet. That taught them a lesson they will not soon forget. I have heard it rumored that they have been somewhat emboldened of late by Japanese agitators who are working among them. The Japanese, they tell me, are talking of war with Russia. Foolish people! The Russians would eat them up. Japan would be a Russian province two months after the declaration of hostilities. 'Twould be a pity, too—Japan is a picturesque country, as I remember it."

Hardy laid under his bed that night an American rifle, the property of the Trading Company, taken by the agent's advice from the stores in Khabarovka.

He slept soundly, but had a vivid dream of the Princess Romanovna and Aisome racing over a Siberian meadow, the one in a droshky and the other in a jinrikisha.

CHAPTER X.

Her Highness Smiles.

The trip from Khabarovka to Blagovestchensk occupied five days and was uneventful when compared with the more exciting happenings that befell Courtland Hardy and his fellow passengers farther on. Still, two or three things occurred worthy of record; one, at least, that Hardy himself regarded as epochal in his life. He came into direct contact with the Princess Romanovna and acquired a nodding acquaintance with her. As this befell on the first day out, and as she nodded to him once each day, namely, in the morning, his good fortune brought to him four nods and as many very sweet smiles between Khabarovka and Blagovestchensk. It was perhaps fortunate that he could not



Hardy Offered the Revolver to the General.

and puddles, the mud spraying in a centrifugal shower from the bumping and whizzing wheels.

"Tell him to drive slower," shouted Hardy. "We have plenty of time."

"No power on earth could make a Russian cabman drive slow," replied the agent; "they are the lineal descendants of Jehu, and their speed is a part of their natures. You might as well try to make the Amur run up hill."

That night, in darkness as black as ink and in a drizzling rain, Hardy went on board the Alexsay, to begin his long journey up the Amur. The water, the agent informed him, was rising, owing to the recent rains, and there would be little danger of grounding. The trip to Blagovestchensk should be made in five days.

talk to her, as she might have discouraged any advances. Anything of this kind would have hurt his pride, for the Courtland Hardys maintain the fiction of family superiority, and, in their hearts, believe themselves "just as good as anybody," as the old song says of My Aunt Sally.

It was during one of the long delays caused by the necessity of taking on wood, that Hardy's acquaintance with the princess began. The Alexsay was a stern-wheeler, drawing 3½ feet of water, and she stopped five or six times each 24 hours for a fresh fuel supply, the men bringing it, two and two, on long bars down the steep bank and across the springy plank to the deck.

Learning that there would be a stop of about three hours, Hardy went out

with one Julius Smulders to take a long walk in the woods, to gather wild flowers and to catch a sight of one of the cuckoos, that fill the forests of Siberia with their strange cries, exactly as though millions of invisible Swiss clocks were hanging among the trees. On their return, the two men heard the sound of shooting.

"My God!" cried the American, his face blanching as he thought of the princess. "I believe the brigands have attacked the boat."

He ran toward the sound, followed by Smulders, and beheld Gen. Catkoff shooting at a bottle on a stump at a distance of 20 paces. The general was military governor of Irkutsk, now on his way to his post, from which he had been absent three months. He was a gray, corpulent man, with a kindly face, the only person aboard of sufficient rank to associate intimately with the princess, in whom he seemed to take a fatherly interest. He fired now five times and missed, much to the amusement of the princess, who stood near. In fact, her derisive laughter so irritated the pompous general that he threw the weapon spitefully on the ground and began to explain volubly to his fair tormentor.

"What does he say?" asked the German of a Viennese opera singer from Vladivostok, who was also one of the spectators; and a moment later he explained to Hardy.

"He says it's an American pistol from Vladivostok, and that it's no good."

Courtland Hardy picked up the weapon and examined it. It was not an expensive model, but a practical arm of honest blue steel. He tossed it familiarly in his hand and then said to Smulders: "Will you ask our fair interpreter here to present my compliments to the general, and tell him that I am an American and beg the privilege of proving the excellence of this American weapon?"

As the Viennese addressed the general, Hardy lifted his hat gracefully. The princess clapped her little hands, nodded pleasantly at the American and cried: "Bravo! Bravo!" It was she, evidently, who persuaded the general to reload the weapon and accede to the request.

Now, as usual, there was a group of peasant women standing about, who had come down to the boat from the Lord knows where, to sell milk. Hardy tossed 50 copecks on the ground, and, picking up five bottles, walked to a log near the stump, where he set them in a row. Then he returned to the group standing about the general and commenced firing. The distance was in reality not great nor the feat difficult for so good a shot. The effect, however, was spectacular, for between the rapid "cracks" of the weapon could be heard the "ching, ching, ching" of the breaking bottles.

Hardy offered the revolver to the general with a polite salute, but the latter generously complimented his marksmanship and begged that he would keep it, adding to the gift the box of cartridges which he produced from a coat pocket. The American was somewhat embarrassed. His pride was averse to the acceptance of the gift, yet he was unable to explain that he meant no offense. He stood offering the pistol to the Russian, while the latter pressed the cartridges on him. The princess relieved the situation by taking the cartridges and handing them to Hardy with a beseeching little moue. He accepted with a courtly bow, as graceful as though he were saluting a cotillion partner. The princess replied in kind and walked away on the arm of the general.

The only other incident worth recording happened at night, after all the passengers had retired. A party of hidden marauders fired on the boat, and one of the bullets passed through Hardy's cabin window. That they were Chinese was evident from a war-arrow, with its iron point, that was found sticking to the rail the next morning.

"They are becoming very restless," said Smulders, in his broken English, "but they will hardly dare much to do"—and he pointed to a long line of dusty Cossacks that were trotting along the military road that skirts the Amur. "The river is well guarded, and if they make depredations, the Cossacks take terrible vengeance. I am glad that they did not harm my Chulia."

Julia was the name of a Viennese singer on board, with whom Smulders was fast becoming infatuated.

A little way below Blagovestchensk they passed the blackened ruins of Aigun, the once populous Chinese city which the Cossacks had destroyed not very long before.

"They found the bodies of 4,000 men, women and children in the ruins," explained Smulders, "and into the river they thousands have driven. That scare the Chinese, but they also not like it much."

"I should think," said Hardy, "that they would be vexed at such treatment, to say the least."

He looked carefully at his rifle and pistol that very day.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)