

THE EDGE OF HAZARD

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BY GEORGE HORTON



"How Much Water Is There in the Shilka?"

SYNOPSIS.

Frederick Hardy, a fashionable Boston society man, lost his wealth, was jilted 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 Aisone Sino, 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 for Siberia, meeting Princess Romanovna on the train. Hardy boarded a vessel for Amur. Hardy showed the princess his expertness as a rifle shot.

CHAPTER XI.

Up the Amur.

The blackened ruins of Aigun and its grisly story of men and women slain in that swoop of the Cossacks, that awful picture of fire, slaughter and rapine, and the thousands trampled by horses, cut down by the sword, or driven to death in the turbid Amur, illustrated in Hardy's mind, one phase of the advance of Russian civilization; another and more pleasing phase was symbolized by the large white gymnasium of Blagovestchensk, the first building of that progressive modern city that could be seen from the decks of the Alexsay.

The imperial mail-steamer, on which they embarked about dark, was a much smaller boat than the Alexsay, and of lighter draft. There were only six first-class cabins, all forward, and the poor princess was obliged to squeeze into three of these, the general taking the other three. Hardy managed to obtain an upper berth in a second-class cabin aft, but was soon driven out of this, as the Russian beneath him smoked some filthy brand of cigarettes all night, lighting them every five minutes with acid-fashioned sulphur matches, the acid fumes of which, mingled with the smoke, arose in stifling clouds to his nostrils and filled the entire cabin. The Russians, much to Hardy's surprise, kept the door and window tightly closed, and though he arose several times to open one or the other, his fellow passengers immediately shut it again.

He arose at last, dressed and went out on deck, taking his blankets with him. The air was balmy and he soon fell asleep, lulled by the breathing of the engine and the whispering of the waters. But he was not allowed to enjoy his repose long, for about midnight the passengers and the baggage were changed over to another steamer that drew a trifle less water and was, unfortunately for the comfort of the passengers, all save the princess and the general, of smaller holding capacity. This new steamer brought down the disquieting rumor that the Amur and the Shilka, which latter river formed the waterway higher up, were rapidly falling.

Here, too, they took on a detachment of Bouriat cavalry in faded,

dirty and dusty uniforms, returning from some murderous and unrecorded raid into Manchuria. They seemed half Chinese and half North-American Indian, and they swarmed on every available portion of the deck.

The ship was off again at dawn, feeling its way cautiously to avoid the shallow places. There were six first-class cabins on this boat, also, Hardy learned, which were given over, as a matter of course, to the princess and the general.

As she continued her course for several days, it was necessary for Hardy and Smulders to pre-empt places on the deck for lying down, for the time comes at last when a man must sleep, and not being provided, like a horse, with four legs, "one on each corner," he finds it necessary to measure his length on something.

It was necessary now to test the depths of the water constantly. Two men, one on either side of the prow, sounding by means of stakes attached to ropes, swaying rhythmically as they cast their wooden spears, chanting the depths: "Chetyre, chetyre-polovena, pyat!" (Four, four and a half, five!) As often as a down-coming steamer passed, the little captain made a trumpet of his hands and shouted across to its commander: "How much water is there in the Shilka?"

The disquieting rumor that the water was rapidly falling was gaining confirmation by each report. Once the men with the poles cried: "Tres-polovena" (three and a half), and the steamer scraped on the bottom. At Pokrovka, a dreary Cossack village near the junction of the Amur and the Shilka rivers, they found a smaller mail boat awaiting them that drew but three feet of water. They changed over again with a multi-lingual hullabaloo and a grand scramble for places, all save the general and the princess, who moved leisurely into the first-class cabins, like the superior beings they were.

The next day they stuck fast on a sand-bank, and a boat's crew carried the anchor far up the river and dropped it, attached to a stout hawser. Then, by means of the windless, they deliberately warped the steamer loose. At dark of the same day they grounded for good in 2½ feet of water, a few yards below a great tramp steamer firmly imbedded athwart the channel. There was no hope of going either up or down for many days to come. The peasants took the matter philosophically; they would simply live where they were, rent free, buying their bread and milk of the Cossacks. When God saw fit to send water they would go on.

CHAPTER XII.

To the Rescue.

But what would the general do, the military governor of Irkutsk? For, as everybody knew, he must be at his post on a certain date, and the White Czar would not be apt to take the will of God into account. Within two days the general's intentions were made

manifest, for his orderly arrived with several long dugouts, each having a mast at the prow. A rope, fastened at the stern, was passed through a pulley at the top of the mast and the other end attached to a shaggy horse. The general's baggage was piled into one of these dugouts and he seated himself comfortably in the midst. A muzhik with a paddle occupied the stern, another mounted the horse and they rode off, the animal scrambling over the stones by the shore or splashing through the shallow water, while the man with the paddle kept the boat clear of the bank. This is the ancient mode of ascending Russian rivers, the method of "Ioshat and lotka," and two military stations, or about 30 miles, can thus be made in a day under favorable circumstances, by getting under way at four o'clock in the morning.

To Hardy's consternation the princess and her maid followed in a second dugout. But there were two more waiting on the bank, their owners hoping that others of the passengers would wish to avail themselves of their use.

"Come on," cried Hardy to Smulders. "Let's follow them. It will be a lark."

"A lark? What's that?"

"A lark? Why, fun, sport."

But Smulders sighed and shook his head, thinking of the fair Viennese. "Ah, no," he said, "I do not care if it be an eagle. I cannot leave Chulia. I loaf her too heavy."

Hardy lost no time. By signs he conveyed to one of the sailors that he wished his luggage carried ashore and piled into the dugout. Soon he, too, was seated in the bottom, reclining gracefully against his impedimenta, his horse scrambling along in the wake of the princess' lotka.

They made but one military station the first day—a large square building, where a samovar is kept always ready for travelers and the sledges that carry the mails over the ice in winter. To Hardy's delight, the old general and the princess were extremely courteous to him and made him understand by signs that he was welcome. The general's orderly foraged and produced some black bread, some milk and a quantity of delicious fresh caviar of the kind the Russians do not export.

The princess presided charmingly at the samovar, after which she spread her blankets on the floor and was soon fast asleep. But he seemed no sooner to have closed his eyes than he was awakened again by the voice of the general shouting at him in Russian.

It was only three o'clock, but the place was all a-bustle with preparations for departure. Ere the mists had risen from the river they were again under way, dim as ghosts. Hardy reclined against his luggage and slept deliciously until the sun arose, when he was awakened by the stinging of a cloud of gnats. Sitting upright, he noticed that the lotka of the princess was deserted by its fair passenger. Casting his eyes about, he observed maid and mistress strolling along the government road that follows the course of the Shilka and that serves as a channel for the stream of Cossacks that pours into Manchuria. The bank was high at this point and the women were above him, plainly visible in the bright sun. The Romanovna, twirling her Japanese parasol on her shoulder, walked rapidly and with a joyous freedom of motion that testified to her love of the open air.

"I wonder if she plays golf," mused Hardy, and at that very moment he perceived that he, too, was cramped, sitting there in the boat. He got out, accordingly, and struck vigorously across a wide stretch of sand deposited during high water. He was some 15 minutes climbing the steep bank, and when he at last reached the road, the princess was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, the road at this point turned sharply away from the river and disappeared around the foot of a hill. Hardy knew, however, that it must wind back to the river, and he therefore followed the wide dusty trail confidently, although it seemed to plunge into the heart of the wilderness. Once or twice he asked himself why he was walking so rapidly, and each time made answer: "Why, to keep up with my lotka, of course." He was too thorough a gentleman to admit to himself that he was pursuing the princess; he would not have done such a thing on Beacon street; why should he do it on a government road in Siberia? At any rate, it would be an indiscreet thing to do, as she would be sure to crush him for his presumption. But he certainly had just as good a right to get out and walk as she. As he was soliloquizing thus and had about come to the conclusion that he was in a fair way at last of making an ass of himself, he thought he heard a shrill scream in the distance. Listening, with his heart in his mouth, he was sure, for the first cry was followed by others—wild, despairing shrieks, as of a woman in the most excruciating fear.

"Coming! coming!" shouted Hardy, and, feeling in his pocket for the general's American pistol, which, thank

God! was there, he ran as he never ran before. Rounding a little turn in the road and a clump of trees, he came suddenly on a sight that thrilled him with rage and sickened him with fear, not for himself, but for the princess. There she was, struggling in the arms of a big Chinese, one of that half-savage tribe that inhabits the wild regions of Manchuria. The beast had lifted her in his arms and was running toward the woods with her, while another carried the maid. Two other Mongolians, with long war bows in their hands, completed the strange picture. Hardy shouted again, and the four Chinese wheeled about and regarded him with startled malignancy that turned on the instant to amusement.

Those four great brutes beheld one rather small, dark man, of dapper appearance, despite his week's river-travel—a slender, dark man in a blue serge suit and negligee shirt, who mechanically adjusted his gold pince-nez as he advanced now at a slower gait. The two Chinese with war bows fitted long arrows to the strings and, with a sudden lift of the left foot and a widening of the arms, they let drive. One arrow whizzed by Hardy's head and the other pierced his clothing, making a nasty scratch on his left side. Then the pistol cracked twice and the two Chinese fell sprawling, with bullets through their bodies. The other two promptly dropped the fainting women and started to run. Hardy aimed deliberately at the one who had seized the princess and fired. It was a long shot, but the bullet took effect, as a scream of pain testified.

Neither the princess nor the maid evinced any signs of reviving, but lay there huddled on the ground as though dead. Hardy ran to the edge of the bluff and there, as good fortune would have it, was the general's lotka, and the general himself strolling along leisurely on the sand. The American shouted so loudly and flung his arms about so wildly that the orderly, the two muzhiks and even the governor himself were soon scrambling up the steep bank toward him. The Romanovna had revived by the time they all reached her, and sat in the tall grass putting up her abundant hair, woman fashion, and looking about with awakening eyes. She was as pale as a ghost and held out her hands appealingly. Hardy and the general helped her to her feet, and it was the American who supported her until her trembling limbs regained their strength. The general surveyed the dead Chinese, and then, standing squarely in front of Hardy, removed his cap and made a low bow.

At the next station they found a small government boat, the Pushkin, awaiting them, that drew only one foot of water. It had been sent down by the authorities to pick up the general, and Courtland Hardy, ex-cotton leader, was taken on board and one of the four cabins was given to him, although one of the greatest heiresses in all Russia was thereby compelled to occupy a room with her maid.

CHAPTER XIII.

Woman's Gratitude.

The princess was sitting on one of the benches of the upper deck, attired in the costume of Little Russia, with the Japanese parasol turned toward the sun, over her shoulder. Hardy had rather avoided her since the incident of the brigands, as he felt that any attempt at friendship on his part would be taking advantage of the service he had been able to render her—he would have performed just as eagerly for the humblest peasant woman on the boat. The Romanovna, in fact, had been nearly prostrated since that dreadful happening, remaining in her cabin until now, under the care of her maid.

"Monsieur," she said to Hardy, who was promenading the little deck. He threw away his cigar, removed his hat and bowed very low. He noticed that she was still pale and that her eyes looked unnaturally large. "Parlez-vous Francais, monsieur?" she asked, sweetly, with a perfect Parisian accent.

"Un peu, madame," he replied, "but unfortunately, very badly." "Ah, but you do speak it!" she cried with animation, "you speak it well, or at least well enough to enable me to express to you my undying gratitude. I owe you my life, monsieur! Pray, sit down here beside me. I owe you my escape from a horrible, a hideous fate."

Hardy sat beside her on the bench. "You owe me nothing, madame," he said; "there was no great danger for me, really. The obligation is all on my side. There is not a muzhik or Bouriat on the boat who would not have done the same thing. They are all envious of my great good fortune."

"I owe you, nevertheless, my life," she insisted, "and you have my undying gratitude, as I said. I do not know how I shall ever be able to repay you!"

Hardy frowned. "I did not do it with any thought of repayment of any kind, madame," he said. "You will best recompense



Struggling in the Arms of a Big Chinese.

me if you will dismiss all thought of obligation. It would pain me to think that I had imposed any such imaginary burden on you. I am more than repaid in my own satisfaction. I trust you are quite recovered from the shock."

"But, you were wounded! The general tells me that you were wounded. Do not deny it!" she commanded, smiling. "The entire boat knows of it. It is fortunate the arrow was not poisoned."

"Not wounded," replied Hardy; "merely scratched."

The princess fixed her eyes on him for several moments.

"I have always insisted," she murmured, "that the American gentlemen compare favorably with those of any country in the world, and now I know it. Pray do me the honor to sit here and talk with me a while. We will change the subject, if you desire. How do you like our Russia?"

Hardy talked with her for an hour or so. She spoke slowly and distinctly for him, and he found, under such delightful auspices, his French was a much more practical and useful acquirement than he had thought. They talked of the increasing activity of the Chinese marauders, of the possibility of war with Japan, of the wild flowers of Siberia, of Russian and American society. He found her intensely patriotic, and firm in the belief that Russia could crush Japan in a month, should hostilities actually break out.

As they were thus engaged in conversation the general approached, and, bowing before the princess, proposed zakouska to Hardy.

"Ah, monsieur," she laughed, "do you know the great Russian institution of zakouska?"

"Yes," he replied, "it was about the first Russian word I learned, and I have heard it more frequently than any other since."

"Then," she said, rising and taking the general's arm, "we will have zakouska in my cabin. Will you do us the honor of joining us?"

"Certainly," replied Hardy, with alacrity. "I find it a most delightful custom!"

And all day long they steamed up the winding and yellow Amur through virgin solitudes of rolling prairie, through interminable stretches of primeval forest, with medieval Russia on the right and ancient, prehistoric China on the left.

The grinding and jarring of the little steamer on the sand was now a matter of hourly occurrence. Occasionally a large river boat would be passed, high-founded and dry, either deserted or occupied by a few passengers, patiently waiting for the water to rise. Many rowboats drifted by, laden with more fortunate people, going with the swift current rather than against it. To these the captain shouted continually:

"How is the water in the Shilka?" And ever came the same reply:

"Falling, slowly falling."

At midnight they ran upon a sand-bank and had such difficulty getting

off that Hardy thought they were stuck for good. It was necessary to wake up the passengers, with the exception of her highness, the princess, and drive them all over to one side of the boat to list her. After an hour of most exciting work, during which the captain dashed forward and back on the bridge, gesticulating with his entire body and shouting like a madman, they got off and were under way again, only to make another hour's stop for wood. This time, as before, a bewhiskered muzhik was sitting on the bank by a flaring fire. He could be seen very distinctly from a great distance, and as the steamer approached the officer in command shouted at him again and again. The soundness with which he was sleeping, with head upon breast and arms folded upon knees, gave rise to considerable amusement among such of the passengers as were awake. The plank was laid and several of the crew ran up to him. One of them pushed him and he sprawled over.

"He's dead!" announced the sailor. "Dead?" "Yes, sir; transfixed by an arrow."

He put his foot upon the man's breast and, seizing something, pulled. A moment later he held up in the light of the bonfire a Chinese war arrow; then, throwing it to the earth, he stooped and wiped his hand upon the grass.

Toward morning they stuck on the sand again, in a wide part of the river, with dense forests on either bank. The steamer drifted about and blocked up a narrow channel through which they were attempting to pass. The sand came level with the surface of the water on either hand. The captain tried in vain all the expedients known on the Amur; he attempted to lift the boat around by means of a mast planted at her side in the river; he sent the anchor up stream and essayed to drag her through bodily by means of the windlass; he added to this power the pulling force of a wooden windlass, set up on one bank of the river, whose long cross bar was manned by half the boat's crew, but without success.

"What is the matter?" the princess, coming out on the deck about nine o'clock in the morning, asked Hardy.

"We are stuck for good," explained the American. "I hope you slept well?"

"Excellently, thank you! But I hope we are not stranded, as I have invited some friends to a house party at my country place near Moscow."

A rowboat drifted into the mouth of the channel and lodged against the side of the steamer. It contained four dead, one of whom was a priest in long robes. He was lying flat on his back, with his head lolling horribly over the side, his venerable beard floating in the water. All were pierced with arrows. The general offered the princess his arm and conducted her below.

"Zakouska?" he said, patting her hand

(TO BE CONTINUED.)