

THE EDGE OF HAZARD

PICTURES BY A. WEIL

COPYRIGHT 1906 THE BOBBIS-MERRILL COMPANY

BY GEORGE HORTON

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 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 for Siberia, meeting Princess Romanovna on the train. Hardy boarded a vessel for Amur. Hardy showed the princess his expertness as a rifle shot. The steamer was stranded. The princess and her maid were attacked by Chinese. Hardy saved their lives. The princess thanked Hardy for his heroism. Manchurians fired upon the craft. Hardy slew their chief. Burning arrows were hurled upon the Pushkin's decks. An attempt was made to board the vessel.

CHAPTER XVI—Continued.

There were four of the crew, besides the captain, all armed with rifles to which bayonets had been affixed by the general's order. Add to these Smulders, the general himself, Hardy and three Bouriat, and the defending party consisted of 11 members. Brave Stenka Pugacheff of the crew had gone down the river for help, and the attack had been delivered so suddenly that there was no time to call Romanoff, who was sleeping below. Indeed, it is doubtful if, at that moment of extreme excitement, anybody thought of him.

The Chinese were receiving a murderous and unlooked-for reception, but they were not to be easily beaten off. Several of them gained the deck and began to swing their clumsy, two-handed swords, and the clash of steel on steel rang out amid savage grunts, snarls and cries of rage. The Cossack crew and the Bouriat fought like devils, leaping and darting about with the agility of wildcats and handling their more modern weapons with murderous dexterity and skill.

A man never knows what sort of man he is still a supreme trial comes to him. The American found himself cool. His faculties were all at a state of extreme tension, with the result that he could see and hear better, think faster and decide more quickly than in ordinary moments. He took his revolver from his pocket and ran lightly toward a Manchurian who was just throwing one leg over the rail. He fired at the head of the man, who fell back into the water with a loud splash, dropping his sword on the deck. Another leaped over the rail almost at his side, and, swinging his great steel blade high in the air, chopped at Hardy's head. The latter threw up his rifle and received the blow on the barrel. The impact brought him to his knees, but, as he sank, he shot his assailant beneath the chin, killing him instantly.

At this moment a blazing arrow passed over him and stuck in one of the cotton-stuffed pillows that had been used as a barricade. Hardy snatched the pillow, threw it overboard and ran to the down-stream side of the boat. The attack of the boarders had not lasted in all over four or five minutes, and yet in that time several of the wading party had approached considerably nearer. The moon gave sufficient light for him to see the sights of his rifle now and the dark form of the Chinese made conspicuous marks in the gleaming water. This was not over two or three inches deep on the sand in which the prow of the boat was imbedded, and two of the Chinese were running close in. Hardy killed them both with his rifle and then began to shot deliberately at those who were farther away, with such effect that he put the entire party to flight ere the ten remaining shots in his weapon were exhausted.

He turned to re-enter the melee just in time to see Boris Romanoff burst raging on deck, wrench a two-handed sword from the fingers of a dead Chinese and ply it with as much ease and skill as though it were lightest of rapiers. The attackers were gaining ground. Enough of them had come over the side to defend a portion of the rail, over which others were rapidly scrambling, while several of their number were keeping the defending party so busy that they could not use their guns to shoot them down; which, indeed, they would not have been likely to do, in any case, as Cossacks and Bouriat are primitive fighters who do not think of shooting when brought to close quarters. Boris Romanoff charged with such deadly skill that the boarders leaped over the side, back into the water, leaving two of their number dead. The other brigands followed their comrades, with the exception of one, who was bayoneted in the back just as he jumped; the rifle-barrel, striking the rail, made a fulcrum of it, so that the weapon was wrenched from the owners hands.

And now a thing happened that made Hardy glad that he had not taken Boris Romanoff's hand. One of the Chinese was not dead, but had been stunned by a blow on the head with a pole. He sat up and looked about



Was Bayoneted in the Back Just as He Jumped.



him, when Romanoff kicked him in the face, knocking him backward, and, snatching a gun from one of the Bouriat, pinned the man writhing to the deck. So firmly was the steel blade imbedded in the planking that the combined efforts of two men were needed to pull it out again.

The fight was over. There was no further danger of the Chinese returning to the attack that night, if at all. They had been taught a terrible lesson, though with considerable cost, it must be confessed, to the defenders. One of the Bouriat was dead, cleft deeply at the base of the neck from a blow with a two-handed sword. Smulders was wounded in the head by a gash that caused the blood to flow over his cheek. His clothing was copiously stained. Romanoff, it was found, too, had received a thrust in the leg, of which he made light, but which was bleeding profusely. The general ordered him below.

While the men were washing down the decks, Hardy went into the passage leading to the cabins. He wished to reload his rifle, and possibly get a little sleep. He wondered how the princess had fared during these terrible moments of uproar and carnage.

Her cabin door was open and he saw her within, comforting her maid and Smulders' Julia, both of whom were in hysterics. The two girls, clasped in each other's arms, were lying on a berth, with a blanket drawn over their heads, sobbing and praying.

"We have driven them off, madame," announced Hardy. "I think there is no further cause of apprehension at present." The princess, leaning over the girls, pulled the blanket from their heads, and made them understand that the enemy had fled.

"I had no fears of the result," she said, simply, "with such heroes on board." Her face was pale, but it flushed and her eyes flashed as she cried: "Oh, why am I not a man, that I might have helped you?"

"You have helped us a thousand times more by giving us such a cause to fight for," replied Hardy, earnestly. "You are good at making pretty speeches to women," said a sneering voice behind him. "I must tell her highness of the effect which they produced in Japan."

Hardy turned and beheld Boris Romanoff towering in the passage behind him. "But he is wounded, my brave Boris!" cried the princess, as Romanoff entered the room, limping painfully. As the princess sprang anxiously to her cousin's side and assisted him to a couch, Hardy turned away and went to his cabin.

She had not been able to understand her cousin's remark, reflected Hardy, as he had made it in English.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Figure on the Cross.

When Hardy awoke in the morning, the sun was shining against his open cabin window. He looked out and saw

a stretch of yellow water, gleaming like gold in the bright rays of the early light, and, farther away, the dark green of the interminable Siberian forests. It was a peaceful scene, with nothing in it suggestive of the dreadful conflict of the night. The corpses of the slain were even now miles below, floating on and on by Cossack villages and stretches of Manchurian woodland, proclaiming with mute tongue that another conflict had taken place between the Slav and the Mongol, and with the usual result. Hardy went on deck and there beheld a solemn and affecting scene. The dead Bouriat lay on a bier improvised of two benches, with a cross on his breast. The general, the princess with her maid, and his comrades, with uncovered heads, stood by, while the captain read the burial service. All were weeping.

The simple service finished, the dead soldier, just as he was, in his high boots and faded, blood-stained uniform, and with the rude wooden cross tied to his breast, was lifted and consigned tenderly to the water, to float on and on in tireless but vain pursuit of those other corpses, some of which he himself had sent on their long, sad journey to the sea. Hardy saluted the princess gravely, and would have passed her by, but she detained him.

"Have you noticed," she asked, "that the forests are on fire?" He looked. It was true. A dense cloud of smoke was rolling up from behind a long ridge that ran parallel with the river, but no flame could be seen as yet. Half an hour later the wind shifted and blew directly from the fire, bringing the acrid smell of smoke to the nostrils of the people quarantined on the Pushkin. The fire columns were evidently advancing up the hill, for soon trees began to burst into flame here and there along its crest.

And now the Manchurians appeared again, on their own side of the river, as before. They could be plainly seen, as the distance was in reality not great, and their dark forms stood out distinctly against the strip of white sand that stretched between the woods and the river. They were making preparations of some kind. The general brought his field-glass and studied them carefully. There was no doubt that they were digging a hole, but for what purpose, it was impossible to tell.

The Chinese did not leave their intentions long in doubt, for they brought a huge cross out from the shadows of the forest, and a struggling prisoner, whom they cast down on the earth and proceeded to nail to the cross. The general turned to Hardy with white, drawn face.

"Stenka!" he groaned. "Yes, there was no doubt of it. The unfortunate Pugacheff had been captured and was now being crucified in plain sight of his comrades. The effect upon the latter, as soon as they comprehended, was indescribable. They seized their rifles, they shook impotent fists at the shore and

screamed imprecations at those fiends, engaged there in their horrid work.

One of the crew, mounting a coil of rope, addressed a few impassioned remarks to his brethren, crying:

"Come on, brothers, let us save poor Stenka or die with him!"

Every member of the little band shouted:

"We will save him or die with him!"—and in a moment more all would have been over the rail, had not the old general drawn his revolver and leaped before them, crying in a voice of thunder:

"Stop! The first man who attempts to leave the boat I will shoot through the head!"—and so great was their habitual respect for authority, that they paused and regarded him in dumb amazement.

"What, my children," he said, "would ye fall into a Chinese trap? Those fiends there are crucifying poor

white as a ghost, wringing her hands and staring at the awful object.

"Oh, why does not the Virgin help me? Why is not a miracle performed?" she whispered, hoarsely. "Listen, my friend," she cried, grasping Hardy by the arm convulsively, "could you not shoot so far? Could you not put him out of his misery?"

"This is no place for you," said Hardy, "come away. Come inside."

"I will go and pray for him," she murmured, letting the American lead her toward the cabin door. "I have a sacred icon with me. I will promise the Virgin half my fortune if she will save him!"

And now an idea occurred to Hardy, the application of a desperate remedy for a desperate case. He had understood nothing of the words that had passed between the captain and the crew, though there was no possibility of mistaking their import. Why should

ran on, across the wide and shallow river, his eyes fixed on that spectacle of agony. At last he stopped, for the time had come for him to do the thing he must do. He could get no nearer without the absolute certainty of being shot down. There was no other way. It would not have been possible for Stenka's friends to reach that cross without all being picked off from the woods. He cast one glance at the shore, measuring the distance with the keen, accurate eye of the marksman. Then he removed his glasses and wiped the moisture, tears, perhaps, from his eyes. Replacing them, he aimed at Stenka, and prayed:

"Receive his soul, O God!" He fired. The head stopped that dreadful moving from side to side, and Hardy could feel, even at that distance, that the eyes were fixed on his own, in comprehension. He will believe, to his dying day, that there was gratitude in them. He had missed, however, and now the Chinese, grasping his purpose, began shooting at him in earnest, and several of the horsemen urged their steeds into the water. With the bullets scattering all about him, Hardy set his teeth and fired again.

Poor Stenka's sufferings were over. His chin fell forward on his breast and the body collapsed limply on the wooden peg thrust between his thighs.

"Thank God!" cried Hardy, and, turning, he ran back toward the boat, ran madly, desperately, as he had run but once before, and that was the time when he heard the princess scream and saved her from the brigands.

On he ran over the hard sand covered with a sheet of rippling water, carrying his rifle low and bending at the hips. He realized that every step was taking him farther from those savages on the shore, was putting a greater distance between himself and their rifles. He scarcely believed that he could get away without being wounded. If they would only kill him outright, or would hit him in some spot that would not prevent his running! He listened, as a hare before the pursuing hunter, for the sound of the guns, and still he ran on.

But the Chinese did not shoot again, and now from the Pushkin came half a dozen men to the rescue, deployed in open formation, like a troop of trained soldiers, with their eyes fixed on something behind him. They were shouting to him, but Hardy could not understand.

He turned, looked, and knew why the enemy had ceased shooting. They feared killing their own horsemen, who were between him and the shore, and bearing down on him rapidly. There were at least a dozen of them, and in a minute more three, better mounted than the others, would have been upon him. These were bending close to their horses' necks, and were armed with long swords to cut him down. The American aimed at the horses and fired rapidly, three times. One of the animals, mortally wounded, sank to his knees, while the others, stung and maddened by the bullets, became unmanageable and ran snorting back toward the Manchurian shore.

The Cossacks now came up, and, turning in a volley on the mounted brigands, emptied one saddle and compelled the entire party to retire, which they did slowly, shaking their swords at the Russians and yelling imprecations. They were destined, however, to lose one more of their number. The man whose horse Hardy had killed was making frantic but unsuccessful efforts to get away, his leg being pinned down beneath the dead animal. To him one of the Bouriat ran up and, wrenching the man's own sword from his hand, cleft his skull with it and left him there with his dead steed.

When Hardy again reached the deck of the Pushkin, the general and the captain each shook his hand in silence, and the princess, her beautiful eyes red with weeping, said to him:

"It was an act of mercy, my friend, for which we all thank you. The soul of brave Stenka, now in heaven, will be grateful to you."

"It was a hard thing to do," replied Hardy, faint almost to falling, "but I could not endure the sight of the agony—I could not bear to have you look at it. It is what I should have wanted some one to do for me," he added, as though further extenuation were necessary.

"Then," said the princess with a sad, solemn smile, "it was a Christ-like act, a deed of sublime courage, and so I shall ever regard it. But you are faint, my friend. Go and lie down and be sure that the Virgin and all the saints approve what you have just done."

"Thanks, a thousand thanks," murmured Hardy. "If you approve, I am sure that it was right."

And still there were no signs of help, no sounds of galloping hoofs, on the military road yonder, that wound in and out of the dark forest, or stretched like a long white ribbon by the side of the yellow river.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)



"Stop! The First Man Who Attempts to Leave the Boat I Will Shoot!"

Stenka that we should lose our wits and plunge into the water, when they will kill us one by one. We must be brave! It is harder to stand here and watch a comrade in torture than to die with him. Do you suppose that if there were the least chance of saving him I would hold you back? Is there here any man who will accuse me of cowardice? No! If you go, it is I who should lead you. But I tell you we could do nothing for poor Stenka, and that we should all be killed. Let us rather pray for divine help and that the Virgin will relieve his sufferings. The time will surely come, in God's good providence, for your revenge, and I promise that you shall feed it fat."

Even as he spoke, the cross was heaved on high, and Stenka loomed upon it, very large and plain, in the light of the sun, shining on the white stretch of sand. The general was standing with his back against the rail, the pistol in his hand. His voice had been tender, but his eye was stern and there was that in his manner which suggested accustomed command and the prestige of a dozen famous battles.

It was a critical moment, during which the fate of all on board was at stake.

For 10, 20 seconds, for half a minute, the men stood, grasping their weapons, their muscles rigid, in various attitudes of men about to rush into the fight; and then the general conquered. Several dropped their rifles clattering to the deck, and covered their faces with their hands, sobbing. Some fell on their knees and prayed, while others, with pale faces and set teeth, resumed the tasks on which they had been engaged.

The Chinese, having finished what they had to do, retired into the cover of the woods, leaving that awful thing there in the light.

Hardy turned away, his teeth chattering, sick, giddy with horror. His eyes fell on the Princess Romanovna,

he not again take advantage of his ignorance of Russian and act on his own initiative? While the general's back was turned, Hardy walked to the prow and dropped over the side upon a bit of hard sand. Then, rifle in hand, he ran straight toward the Manchurian shore, plashing through the shallow water that flew about him in a spray. Men shouted after him from the Pushkin. He paid no attention, but ran on, his eyes fixed on the cross and the burden that it bore. Once he stepped into a channel where the water was up to his armpits and running so swiftly that it nearly swept him from his feet, but he struggled through and dashed on again.

A dozen or more Chinese came out of the forest and regarded him in wonder. Then, raising rifles, they took deliberate aim and commenced to shoot, the bullets striking about him in the water. One, that hit several rods ahead of him, "skipped" like a child's pebble and passed close to him. And still Hardy ran on, his eyes fixed on the man on the cross. He could see the features now, but could not recognize them, they were so distorted with agony. The head was moving slowly from side to side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A Hard Shot.

The number of Chinese who emerged from the forest was surprising. There must have been 100 of them, at least 20 of whom were mounted. There could be no further doubt as to their purpose in thus torturing Stenka, openly and in full sight of the Pushkin. They hoped that his comrades, maddened by the sight, would rush to his aid immediately, or would fall into the trap later, believing that the Chinese had gone away and left him there to suffer. So great was their astonishment now, when they realized that only one person was coming to Stenka's rescue, that they ceased shooting and stood staring in wonder. And still Hardy