

The Queen's ✿ Advocate ✿

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THE QUEEN'S ADVOCATE



"OVER AND OVER WE ROLLED IN THE DUSTY ROAD."

The Queen's Advocate

CHAPTER I. THE RESCUE.

Crack!

It was a rifle shot, sure enough, somewhere in the hills, and Chris raised his huge head with a low growl and thrust his nose against me in warning.

I was lying on the flat of my back, my hands clasped under my head, thinking lazily, as I watched the glorious sunset amid the Gravenje hills—where the play of sunset colour is at times almost as fine as in Colorado—and speculated when the storm which was brewing would break.

I had just been chuckling at the idea of what the men in Wall Street or the dandies of Fifth Avenue would have thought of Chase F. Bergwyn, millionaire, mine-owner, and financier, could they have seen me then vagabondising in the Bosnian hills. My dress was a kind of nondescript native costume, half peasant's, half miner's, very dirty and worn with my rough prospecting work; and I carried a ten days' growth of scrubby beard on my sun-tanned face. The report of the rifle stopped the chuckle on my lips.

One of my men must have been after some hill game, I guessed, and in the eagerness of the chase had disobeyed my strict orders against shooting. I was anxious not to draw any unnecessary attention to my doings. I was after another pile, in fact. When in Vienna, just before, I had been offered what

appeared to be a good thing in the shape of a concession to work a rich mining district in these Bosnian hills, and, as I still had a touch of the vagabond in me, I was roughing it in order that I might look into the thing for myself.

I knew that part of Eastern Europe pretty well. I had lived there as a lad with a relative stationed in Prague, and as I had the knack of picking up the Balkan languages, he had found me of such use that he had taken me with him on many an expedition among the hills in Bosnia, Servia, and Herzgovina.

I had delighted in the hills, and had carried my love for them across the Atlantic when things changed and I went to the States in search of fortune. After a time of pretty hard rough-and-tumble hurly-burly buffeting I had "struck it rich," and turned up in New York wealthy enough to play a strong hand in the big gambles of Wall Street.

Then the wandering fever laid hold of me again, and, remembering my days in the Balkans, I was seized with the idea of utilising the old experiences for business purposes. There was money to be made, I believed; and I opened up communications with folks in Belgrade and Sofia, and was in Vienna, on my way to the Servian capital, when this Bosnian mining affair turned up.

The pile was there right enough, just waiting for someone to come along and harvest it. But whether the difficulties of harvesting it could be overcome, I should have to settle elsewhere; and until they were settled I didn't wish to draw the inquisitive eyes of any blockheads of Austrian officials upon me.

There were other dangers, too. Lalwor, a hill village, was not far off, and the reports about the villagers were not pleasing. They were not likely to jump one's claim, or do anything of that sort, but were said to be quite ready to knock me on the head if they had an inkling that I was a rich foreigner. That at least was the opinion of the man who had acted as my guide; and probably he knew.

So that, altogether, that shot annoyed me; and I sat up, thinking no more about either New York or the sunset, but just how to find out who had fired it, and bent upon punishing him for disobedience. Not so easy this last as it would have been, had I disliked all the four men composing my party less and trusted them more.

Crack!

Another shot. This time nearer.

Chris showed greater uneasiness than before, and getting up ran forward sniffing the air. Almost immediately afterwards I heard a faint throbbing sound on the earth, uncommonly like a horse's gallop. But who could be galloping our way? No one who was at all likely to be welcome; that was certain. I scented trouble, and calling the dog back crouched with him behind a bush-covered hillock and gazed, not without some anxiety, up and down the steep, rough mountain road.

The camp—which consisted of a cottage or hut for my use, a shed for the horses, and a tent for the men—lay two or three hundred yards along a gully, which branched off at right angles from this road. I was lying at the mouth of the gully, and from

my position commanded a view from the top to the bottom of the hill, about a mile in length.

Crack! crack!

Two more shots in quick succession; the throbbing sound of the hoofs came nearer and nearer; and a horse and rider showed at the top of the hill. I caught my breath in surprise as I saw the rider was a woman, who was urging her horse, a wiry little white animal, to its utmost efforts as it dashed at break-neck speed down the steep, winding, boulder-strewn, dangerous road.

Next, two horsemen came into sight and, with a loud shout, one of them reined up, and taking deliberate aim fired at the fugitive woman. My eye was on her as the shot rang out, and I saw the little white beast start, and swerve as if hit. The next instant the blood began to run freely over the flank, and the horse's gait told me it was badly wounded.

The men behind saw it, too; and the brute who had fired the shot shouted to his companion, and then continued the pursuit.

The chase was all but over. The white horse struggled on gamely, but as it neared the gully where I lay the pace slackened ominously. Its rider looked back at her pursuers, and then across the ravine; and then, to my further amazement, I saw that she was no more than a girl in years—and a very pretty one, too; her face flushed with the excitement of the mad gallop, her eyes wide with alarm, and her features set with the courage of desperate resolve.

Her pursuers realised her plight; and being now sure of capturing her, slung their guns and rode down the ugly path very cautiously.

I made ready to take my share in the business. I had my revolver in my hip pocket, and drew it out, but did not show myself. My intention was to let her pass and then get between her and the men. But her horse was done. The bullet had evidently found the artery, for the blood was spurting out fast; and just before she reached the spot where I crouched the poor beast lurched badly and half sank on its quarters. The rider had only time to jump cleverly and quickly from the saddle when the end came, and the gallant little horse rolled over.

She must have given up all for lost then; but she showed no sign of faltering courage. One swift, desperate glance round she gave, as if in search of some chance of escape, and I saw her face was pale and set, but full of determination. Then, drawing a dainty little stiletto from her dress, she stood at bay behind the body of the dying horse with a calmness all eloquent of pluck and nerve.

Meanwhile, with Chris at my heel, and keeping as much as possible under cover, I crept forward until I was opposite to her. The men dismounted when they were still some fifty yards or so above her, and they were rushing forward to close upon her when I showed myself, with Chris growling ominously at my side.

The surprise caused by my unexpected appearance gave me a moment's advantage.

“Have no fear. The dog will guard you,” I called to her as I passed. “Guard, Chris, guard, good dog,” I told him; and instantly understanding me, he ran to her side.

“Thank God,” I heard her murmur as I sprang toward the men, with my revolver levelled at them.

“You may give it up,” I cried; but that was not their view. One of them swung his gun round on the instant, and was in the act of levelling it at me when I fired, aiming low, and shot him in the leg, bringing him to the ground.

His companion hesitated at this, then clubbed his gun and appeared to be about to attack me, when he suddenly changed his mind and made a dart for the horses. I dashed after him, and as he vaulted into the saddle I fired at his horse and wounded it. Uttering a cry of rage, he leapt with extraordinary agility to the unwounded horse, and might then have got off had not the reins of both animals become entangled. Before he could disengage them I had closed up to him.

I called to him to surrender, but he had plenty of fight in him, and, taking me no doubt for the peasant I looked, he first struck at me furiously with his gun, and then tried to ride me down.

I checked that effort with a bullet in his horse’s head, however, and threatened to put one into the man himself if he did not submit. But still he would not.

Leaping free of the falling horse he surprised me by running back down the hill helter-skelter towards the girl, who stood watching us with breathless interest. I thought he meant to attack her, and, wild with sudden anger, I rushed after him. He

had apparently remembered, however, that his comrade's gun was loaded and his object was to secure it.

But Chris stopped this. The weapon lay near the girl and Chris sprang forward and snarled so savagely looking so formidable and dangerous, that the man hesitated, and before his hesitation was over I caught up and closed with him. Over and over we rolled in the dusty road in a fierce, hand-to-hand tussle, writhing, kicking, and sprawling as we gripped each other in that desperate wrestle. But I had the advantage of method. I was Cumberland bred, and in my boyhood had learnt some tricks and falls which had stood me in good stead before now in many a "scrap" in my rough-and-tumble mining days in Colorado and Montana.

I got my grip of him presently, and bit by bit moved my hands up till my fingers were playing on his windpipe, and he was seeing stars as I dashed his thick head again and again on the hard road, until all the fight and all his senses too were knocked out of him.

Then I rose, and taking the reins from the girl's horse, I tied him up securely with them.

All this time I had not spoken to her, except that first sentence; but I had caught her great grey eyes fixed upon me questioningly as she followed every action. Before going to her I had a look at the man I had shot, and found his leg was broken between the knee and the ankle. I had some rough knowledge of surgery—one picks up such things knocking about the world as I had—so I probed about with my knife and found the bullet, which was in the muscular calf, cleansed the wound as best I

could, and set the bone. Then I placed him in as comfortable a position as I could, and told him not to move until I could do more.

This done, I rose and went to the girl. She was now leaning against a boulder by the wayside, deathly pale, and to my infinite concern I saw that her dress was all blood-stained. One of the coward's bullets must have hit her, I thought.

"Are you hit?" I asked. I spoke in Serb, as I was more familiar with that than any other of the Balkan languages.

"No. It is the blood from this poor beast."

"Thank God for that. You're very pale, but you won't have any more trouble from the men. I'll see to that."

Instead of replying she appeared in some way to resent my tone of reassurance, and looked at me steadily with this curious expression of resentment mingled with gratitude and some fear. But she had made friends with Chris, and the great fellow was pushing his head against her as she stroked him.

"You were very brave," I said after a pause, during which I could not keep my eyes off her. She was indeed a beautiful girl, with a figure of queenly grace, and I daresay some of the intense admiration I felt may have shown in my glance. I had never seen so lovely a face.

"If that man is much hurt you had better see to him," she said, with a distinct note of command in her voice.

"His leg's broken. I'm going to improvise a splint, and then get help."

“Help?” Quick suspicion prompted the question. “Do you live about here?”

I shut down a smile. She took me for a peasant; and well she might, I thought, as I glanced down at my clothes, dust-stained, torn, and dishevelled.

“There is a cottage close here and a tent,” I answered, evading her question and her glance. There was clearly a mystery about her to be solved. It was as evident as that she herself was well-born, and accustomed to give orders for which she expected prompt obedience. But leaving all explanations over for the time, I set about making the splint.

Returning to the men’s horses I took off the bridle and saddle of the dead one, cut away the saddle flaps, and carried them and the reins to the injured man. The flaps made good splints, and I bound them tightly with the reins round his leg. He had borne all my crude surgery work with such stoicism that I guessed he was a Turk, and spoke to him in the little Turkish I knew, telling him I would get help and have him removed directly. He grunted something about being all right, and soon was smoking as placidly as though nothing had happened, and a broken leg was one of the usual events of daily life.

I returned then to the girl, who was sitting on the ground with her hands clasped over her face. I guessed she was as desperately puzzled as I was what to do next.

She sprang up quickly as I approached, and again stared at me with much the same expression of anxiety and doubt.

“You seem very clever and resourceful,” she said. “Can yet get me a horse?”

“What for? To lose yourself in the darkness among the hills?”

“I can pay you—later, I mean. I have no money on me. Tell me how to send it to you, and I will give you any price you name. And I will add to it a generous reward for what you have done already.”

“Do you think you are strong enough to travel yet? You are still very white, and trembling like a leaf. You are scarcely used to this sort of thing, you see.”

“I can judge that for myself,” she answered, almost haughtily, making a great effort to rally her shaken nerves.

“I don’t think you are. You don’t realise yet how much this thing has shaken you.”

“I am not accustomed to be contradicted in this way.”

“You are very near contradicting yourself by fainting,” I answered. I could see it plainly. “How long have you been without food?”

“I do not wish you to question me. Can you get me a horse, or must I try to walk? I must have a horse.”

“There’s another reason. If you know anything of these hills you’ll know what a storm means among them; and there’s one brewing now. Listen.” As I spoke we heard the rumbling of distant thunder among the hills.

“I cannot stay here, in any case,” she shot back quickly. Then, after a pause, “Who are you? Your name, I mean?” This in her sharp imperious manner.

“My name is Bergwyn.” I slurred the pronunciation intentionally. I had strong reasons for not wishing anyone to know I had been on the hills on my mission.

But the effect of the name upon her was remarkable; and her agitation was too great to be concealed even by the effort she made. She appeared completely unnerved; and while her eyes opened wide in unmistakable fear, she shrank from me as though I were a pestilence incarnate.

“Bourgwan—the—the brigand? I have heard of you.” The words were just a whisper, uttered with a catch of the breath all eloquent of terror.

“No, I’m not——” I began with a smile intended to reassure her; but before I could finish the sentence her own unfortunate guess had completed her undoing, and with a little gasping sob down she went in a heap to the ground unconscious, to my utter consternation.

Disconcerting as her collapse was, it nevertheless had the result of deciding me what to do. Another clap of thunder came at the moment; and, without waiting to think any longer, I picked her up and set off as quickly as I could along the ravine to the camp.

She had not recovered consciousness when I reached the cottage; and as there was but one room in it, I laid her on the

bed, bundled my few things together, tossed them out of sight, and leaving the dog with her, I went over to the tent.

I found my four men asleep there, and waking them with an impartial kick or two, sent them down to bring up the prisoner and his wounded companion.

Then I began to realise what a really awkward matter it was likely to be to have a girl, and such a girl, quartered upon us. I was not by any means sure of my own men, even. They had been chosen by the guide; but even he had deemed them so worthless and unreliable that he had gone off that morning in search of others. Without him my position was very grave. He was already a couple of hours overdue; and with this storm coming up it was long odds that he would not arrive until the next morning at the earliest.

Still the thing had to be faced. I must take my chance in the tent with the men that night, and trust to my own authority and vigilance and wits.

I went back to the cottage, and was alarmed to find the girl still unconscious; so I got some brandy, and supporting her head managed to get a few drops between her lips. This soon had an effect, and after a repetition of the remedy she opened her eyes with a deep, long-drawn sigh, and gave a great start as she found me bending over her and herself on the bed in the hut.

“It’s all right,” I said, soothingly. “You fainted, probably from exhaustion and the fright you had, and I brought you here. It was the only thing I could do. You are perfectly safe, and the best thing you can do is to be quiet until you can eat something.

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