

The Interpreter.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OMAR PASHA.

(CONTINUED.)

'At what distance from the Danube did you leave your General's head-quarters?'

The prisoner pretends not to understand. My limited knowledge of his language obliges me to put the question in an involved form, and he seems to take time to consider his answer. There is nothing about the man to distinguish him from the common Russian soldier—a mere military serf. He is dressed in the long, shabby grey coat, the greasy boots, and has a low overhanging brow, a thoroughly Calmuck cast of features, and an intensely stupid expression of countenance; but I remark that his hands, which are nervously pressed together, are white and slender, and his feet are much too small for their huge snapeless coverings.

His eye glitters as he steals a look at the General, whilst he answers, 'Not more than an hour and a half.'

Again Omar consults his paper, and a gleam passes over his face like that of a chess player who has check-mated his adversary.

'One more question,' he observes, courteously, 'and I will trouble you no longer. What force of artillery is attached to your General's corps d'armes?'

'Eight batteries of field cannon and four troops of horse artillery,' replies the prisoner, this time without a moment's hesitation; but the sweat breaks out on his forehead, for he is watching Omar Pasha's countenance, and he reads 'death' on that impassable surface.

'It is sufficient, gentlemen,' observes the General to the officers who surround him. 'Let him be taken to the rear of the encampment and shot forthwith.'

The prisoner's lips quiver nervously, but he shows extraordinary pluck, and holds himself upright as if on parade.

'Poor devil!' says a hearty voice in English; and turning round, I see a good-looking, broad-shouldered Englishman, in the uniform of a brigadier, who is watching the prisoner with an air of pity and curiosity approaching the ludicrous. 'Excellence,' says he, in somewhat broken German, 'will you not send him to me? I will undertake that he spreads no false reports about the camp. I will answer for his safety in my hands; he must not be permitted to communicate with any one, even by signs; but it is a pity to shoot him: is it not?'

'I would do much to oblige you, Brigadier,' replied Omar, with frank courtesy; 'but you know the custom of war. I cannot in this instance depart from it—no, not even to oblige a friend;' he smiled as he spoke, and added in Turkish to an officer who stood beside him, 'March him out and see it done immediately. And now, gentlemen,' he proceeded, 'we will arrange the plan of attack. Mr. Egerton, your despatches are ready; let them reach Iskender Bey without delay. There will be work for us all to-morrow.'

At these words a buzz of satisfaction filled the tent; not an officer there but was determined to win his way to distinction *quois que coûte*. I felt I had received my dismissal, and bowed myself out. As I left the tent, I encountered the unfortunate Russian prisoner marching doggedly under escort to the place of his doom. When he caught sight of me he made a mechanical motion with his fettered hand, as though to raise his cap, and addressed me in French, of which language he had hitherto affected the most profound ignorance.

'Comrade,' said he, 'order these men to give me five minutes. We are both soldiers; you shall do me a favor.'

I spoke to the *muzlim* who commanded the guard. He pointed out an open space on which we were entering, and observed, 'The Moscow has reached his resting-place at last. Five minutes are soon gone. What am I that I should disobey the Tergyman? Be it on my head, Effendi.'

The Russian became perfectly composed. At my desire his arms were liberated, and the first use he made of his freedom was to shake me cordially by the hand.

'Comrade,' said he, in excellent French, and with the refined tone of an educated

man squeezed my hand, and drew himself up proudly to his full height, whilst his eye kindled, and the color came once more into his cheek. As I mounted my horse, he saluted me with the grave courteous air with which a man salutes an antagonist in a duel.

I could not bear to see him die. I went off at a gallop, but I had not gone two hundred paces before I heard the rattle of some half-dozen muskets. I pulled up short and turned round. Some inexplicable fascination forced me to look. The white smoke was floating away. I heard the ring of men's ramrods as they reloaded; and where the Russian had stood erect and chivalrous while he bid me his last farewell, there was nothing now but a wisp of grey cloth upon the ground.

Siek at heart, I rode on at a walk, with the bridle on my horse's neck. But a soldier's feelings must not interfere with duty. My despatches had to be delivered immediately, and soon I was once more speeding away as fast as I had come. An hour's gallop braced my nerves, and warmed the blood about my heart. As I gave Injour a moment's breathing time, I summoned fortitude to read the Russian's letter. My scholarship was more than sufficient to master its brief contents. It was addressed to the Countess D—, and consisted but of these few words: 'Console thyself, my mother; I die in the true faith.'

He was a gallant man and a good. 'If this is the stuff our enemies are made of,' thought I, as I urged Injour once more to his speed, 'there is, indeed—as Omar Pasha told us to-day—there is, indeed, work cut out for us all.'

CHAPTER XIX.

'ISKENDER BEY.'

The old Lion is sober enough now. What a headache he ought to have after all that brandy yesterday; but the prospect of fighting always puts Iskender Bey to rights, and to-day he will have a bellyful, or we are much mistaken. At the head, in the rear, on the flanks of his small force, the fiery Pole seems to have eyes and ears for every trooper under his command. The morning is dark and cloudy; a small drizzling rain is falling, and effectually assists our manoeuvres. We have crossed the Danube in a few flat boats before daybreak, fortunately with no further casualty than the drowning of one horse, whose burial-service has been celebrated in the strongest oaths of the Turkish language. We have landed without opposition; and should we not be surprised by any outpost of the enemy, we are in a highly favorable position for taking our share in the combined attack.

Victor de Rohan has been attached for the occasion to our commander's staff. He is accompanied by a swarthy, powerful man, mounted on a game-looking bay mare, the only charger of that sex present on the field. This worthy goes by the name of Ali Mesrour, and is by birth a Beloochee; fighting has been his trade for all over the East, till he found himself a sort of henchman to Omar Pasha on the banks of the Danube. He has accompanied De Rohan here from head-quarters, and sits on his mare by the Hungarian's side, grim and unmoved as becomes a veteran warrior. There is chivalry in all trades. It is the affectation of the young soldier to be excited, keen, volatile, and jocular, while the older hand thinks it right to assume an air of knowing calmness, just dashed with a touch of sardonic humor. We are situated in a hollow, where we are completely hidden from the surrounding district: the river guards our rear and one of our flanks; a strong picket is under arms in our front; and beyond it a few videttes, themselves unseen, are peeping over the eminence before them. Our main body are dismounted, but the men are prepared to stand to their horses' at a moment's notice, and all noise is strictly forbidden in the ranks. If we are surprised by a sufficiently strong force we shall be cut to pieces, for we have no retreat; if we can remain undiscovered for another hour or so, the game will be in our own hands.

Iskender Bey is in Paradise. This is what he lives for; and to-day, he thinks, will see him a pasha or a corpse. 'Tergyman,' he whispers to me, whilst his sides shake, and his eyes kindle with mirth, 'how little they think who is their neighbor. And the landing, Tergyman; the landing; Victor, 'The hussar's horse drinks wine.' But the rain is coming on heavier,' he adds, looking up at the clouds; 'we shall have water enough to satisfy even a true Mussulman like Ali, presently. How slow the time passes. May I not go forward and reconnoitre?'

The permission is willingly granted; and as my office is to-day a sinecure, I creep forward with Victor beyond our advanced posts, to a small knoll, from which, without being seen, we can obtain a commanding view of the surrounding country.

There is a flat extent in front of us, admirably adapted for the operations of cavalry; and a slight eminence covered with brushwood, which will conceal our movements for nearly half a mile farther.

'The fools!' whispers Victor; 'if they had lined that copse with riflemen, they might have bothered us sadly as we advanced.'

'How do you know they have not?' I whisper in reply; not a man could we see from here; and their grey coats are exactly the color of the soil of this unhappy country. Victor points to a flock of bustards feeding in security on the plain. 'Not one of those birds would remain a second,' says he, 'if there were a single man in the copse. Do you not see that they have got the wind of all that brushwood? and the bustard, either by scent or hearing, can detect the presence of a human being as unerringly as a deer. But see; the mist is clearing from the Danube. It cannot but begin soon.'

Sure enough the mist was rolling heavily away from the broad, yellow surface of the river; already we could descry the towers and walls of Ronschouk, looming large, like some enchanted keep, above the waters. The rain, too, was clearing off, and a bit of blue sky was visible above our heads. In a few minutes the sun shone forth cheerfully, and a lark rose into the sky from our very feet, with his glad some heavenward song, as the boom of a cannon smote heavily on our ears; and we knew that, for to-day, the work of death had at last begun.

The mist rose like a curtain; and the whole attack was now visible from our post. A few flats were putting off from the Bulgarian side of the river, crowded with infantry, whose muskets and accoutrements glittered in the fitful sunlight, loaded to the water's edge. It was frightful to think of the effect a round-shot might have on one of those crazy shallops, with its living freight. The Russian batteries, well and promptly served, were playing furiously on the river; but their range was too high, and the iron shower whizzed harmlessly over the heads of the attacking Moelem. A Turkish steamer, coolly and skilfully handled, was plying to and fro in support of her comrades, and throwing her shells beautifully into the Russian redoubts, where those unwelcome visitors created much annoyance and confusion. Victor's eyes lightened as he puffed at his cigar with an assumed *sang froid* which it was easy to see he did not feel.

'The old Lion won't stay here long,' he whispered to me; 'look back at him now, Vere. I told you so: there they go—'boots and saddles.' We, too, shall be at it ten minutes, *Vive la guerre!*'

As he spoke, the trumpet rang out the order to 'mount.' Concealment was no longer necessary, and we rushed back to our horses, and placed ourselves on either side of our commander, ready to execute whatever orders he might choose to give.

Iskender Bey was now cool as if on parade; nay, considerably cooler: for the rehearsal was more apt to excite his feelings than the play itself. He moved us forward at a trot. Once more he halted amongst the brushwood, from which the scared bustards were by this time flying in all directions; and whilst every charger's frame quivered with excitement, and even the proud Turkish hearts throbbed quicker under the Sultan's uniform, he alone appeared wholly unmoved by the stake he had to play in the great game. It was but the calm before the hurricane.

From our new position we could see the boats of our comrades rapidly nearing the shore. Iskender, his bridle hanging over his mutilated arm, and his glass pressed to his eye, watched them with eager gaze. It was indeed a glorious sight. With a thrilling cheer, the Turkish infantry sprang ashore, and fixing bayonets as they rushed on, stormed the Russian redoubts at a run, undismayed and totally uncheckered by the well-sustained fire of musketry, and the grape and canister liberally showered on them by the enemy. An English officer in the uni-

them. The column will advance at a trot—'March.'

Rapidly we clear the space that intervenes between our former position and the retreating columns of the enemy—now to sweep down with our handful of cavalry on their flank, and complete the victory that has so gallantly begun. For the first time the enemy appears aware of our proximity. A large body of cavalry moves up at a gallop to intercept us. We can see their commander waving his sword and giving his orders to his men; their number is far greater than our own, and Iskender is now indeed in his glory.

'Form line,' he shouts in a voice of thunder, as he draws his glittering sabre and shakes it above his head. 'Advance at a gallop!—charge!'

Victor de Rohan is on one side of him, the Beloochee and myself on the other; the wildest blood and the best horses in Turkey at our backs: and down we go like the whirlwind, with the shout of 'Allah, Allah!' surging in our ears, lances couched and pennons fluttering, the maddened chargers thundering at their speed, and the life-blood mounting to the brain in the fierce ecstasy of that delirious moment.

I am a man of peace, God knows. What have I to do with the folly of ambition—the tinsel and the glare and the false enthusiasm of war? And yet, with steel in his hand and a good horse between his knees, a man may well be excused for deeming such a moment as this worth many a year of peaceful life and homely duties. Alas, alas! it is all vanity? is *cui bono* the sum and the end of everything? Who knows? And yet it was glorious while it lasted.

Long ere we reach them, the Russian cavalry wavers and hesitates. Their commander rides nobly to the front. I can see him now, with his high chivalrous features, and long, fair moustache waving in the breeze. He gesticulates wildly to his men, and a squadron or two seem inclined to follow the example of their gallant leader. In vain: we are upon them even now in their confusion, and we roll them over, man and horse, with the very impetus of our charge. Lance-thrust and sabre-cut, stab blow and ringing pistol-shot, make short work of the enemy. 'Allah, Allah!' shout our maddened troopers, and they give and take no quarter. The fair-haired Colonel still fights gallantly on. Hopeless as it is, he strives to rally his men—a gentleman and a soldier to the last. My comrade, the Beloochee, has his eye on him. They meet in the *melee*. The Colonel deals a furious blow at his enemy with his long sabre, but the supple Asiatic crouches on his mare's neck, and whisks the well-trained animal at the same instant with his heel. His curved blade glitter for a moment in the sun. It seems to pass without resistance through the air; then the fair moustache is dabbled all in blood, and the Colonel's horse gallops masterless from the field.

Victor de Rohan fights like a very Paladin, and even I feel the accursed spirit rising in my heart. The Russian cavalry are scattered like chaff before the wind. Their disorganized masses ride in upon their own infantry, who are vainly endeavoring to form with some regularity. The retreat becomes a general rout, and our Turkish troopers fly like hell-hounds to the pursuit.

How might a reserve have turned the tables then? What a bitter lesson might have been taught us by a few squadrons of veteran cavalry, kept in hand by a cool and resolute officer. In vain Iskender rides and curses and gesticulates. He is himself more than half inclined to follow the example of his men. In vain the Beloochee entreates and argues, and even strikes the refractory with the flat of his sabre; our men have tasted blood, and are no longer under control. One regiment of Russian infantry, supported by a few Hussars and a field-piece, are still endeavoring to cover the retreat.

'De Rohan,' exclaims Iskender, while the foam gathers on his lip and his features work with excitement, 'I must have that gun! Forward, and follow me.'

We placed ourselves at the head of two squadrons of the flower of our cavalry; veterans are they, well seasoned in all the artifices of war, and 'own children'—so he delights to call them—to their chief. The Beloochee has also succeeded in rallying a few stragglers; and once more we rush to the attack.

The Russian regiment, however, is well commanded, and does its duty admirably. The light field-piece opens on us as we advance, and a well-directed volley de-

forcements. The Russian hussars, firing on my right tells me that the pursuit still rolling away far into Wallachia. All this is dim and indistinct. Again the feeling comes on that it is not Vere Egerton but some one else, who is lying there! A cold sweat covers my face; a deadly nausea oppresses me; the ground rises heaves around me, and I grasp the rust-trodden grass in my hands. The sound of church bells is in my ears. Surely it is old bell at Alton; but it strikes painfully my brain. A vision, too, floats before of Constance, with her dark, soft eyes—white dress makes me giddy—a flash of fire seems to blind me, and I know and no more.

I was brought to my senses by the sin process of a Cossack dropping his lance, the fleshy part of my arm—no pleasant torative, but in my case a most effectual. The first sight that greeted my eyes was little horse's girthe and belly, and his rough, savage countenance, looking gr down upon me as he raised his arm to re the thrust. I muttered the few words Russian I knew, to beg for mercy, and looked at his comrades, as though to con them on the propriety of acceding to so heard-of a request as that of a wounded for his life. A few paces off I saw the Beloochee, evidently taken prisoner, disarmed, his head running with blood, but whole bearing as dignified and unmoved usual.

In this awkward predicament I had bethought me of the Russian prisoner's tale.

'Quarter, comrade, quarter!' I shed as loudly as my failing voice would allow. 'I have a letter from your officer. It is.'

'Osmanli?' inquired the Cossack, more raising his arm to strike. I should think how quickly that steel lance might be buried in my body.

'No, Inglis,' I replied, and the man eyed his weapon once more and assisted to rise.

Fortunately at this juncture an officer up, and to him I appealed for mercy, proper treatment as a prisoner of war, misdoubted considerably the humanity my first acquaintance, whose eyes I see wandering over my person, as though was selecting such accoutrements and articles of clothing as he thought would suit his taste. The officer, who seemed of high rank and was accompanied by an escort, finally spoke German; and I appealed gently to him in that language. He stopped at the superscription of the deserter's letter, and demanded of me sternly how I obtained it. In a few words I told him the history of the unfortunate spy, and he passed his gloved hand over his face as though to cool his emotion.

'You are English?' he observed, raising and looking uneasily over his shoulder at the same time. 'We do not kill our English prisoners, barbarians as you choose to us; but to the Turk we give no quarter. him on a horse,' he added, to my own captor, who kept unpleasantly near; 'ill-treat him, but bring him safely along you. If he tries to escape, blow his head out. As for that rascal,' pointing to the Beloochee, 'put a lance through him with.'

A happy thought struck me. I determined to make an effort for Ali's excellence, I pleaded, 'spare him, he is my servant.'

The Russian officer paused. 'Is he a Turk?' he asked, sternly.

'No, I swear he is not,' I replied. 'I am my servant, and an Englishman.'

'If ever a lie was justifiable, it was on present: I trust this white one may be laid to my charge.'

'Bring them both on,' said the Russian still glancing anxiously to the rear. 'tenant Dolwitz, look to the party. Your men together, and move rapidly. is the devil's own business, and our people are in full retreat.' All this, though spoken in Russian, I was able to understand; did the hurried manner in which the man galloped off shake my impression; he still dreaded a vision of Iskender Bey and his band of heroes thundering on track.

I was placed on a little active Cossack pony. The Beloochee's wrist was tied to mine, and he was forced to walk or run by my side; whenever he flagged a