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### THE HOUSE OF ISSTENS.

By THEODORE ROBERTS.

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#### CHAPTER XIV

THE PRISONER OF THE ROSE.

Three days passed without further orders from my royal master.

But in the meantime Harry, who had ridden from Isstens on business, heard of my presence in the town, and you may well imagine the joy of our meeting.

But when I told him that duty called me into the saddle again, to spur in I knew not what direction, he was sorely disappointed. It was now the second week in December, and the joy of Yuletide, he told me, warmed the old house of Isstens from the stables to the tower. Many guests were expected to make cheer there, among these the Lady St. Arnaud and others from the court.

Tom promised, in case I could not get home for the merry season, to take my place among the ladies so far as might be.

That evening, when we were making merry together in our rooms, each with a long pipe and a glass, a message arrived with a paper for me and a large package sealed. The first was addressed "To Sir D'Artagan Isstens, Knight of the Royal Order of Wassmark," and ran:

"It is my pleasure that you ride out tonight to the inn of the Three Trees, which lies some 20 miles east of this city, starting such time that you may arrive at the inn shortly before dawn. Do not enter, but wait near by until a coach, unescorted, drawn by three grays and a black, arrives. From a discrete distance you will see them change the horses and bring refreshment out to the inmate of the coach.

"When they proceed on their journey, you will follow at a distance of some ten rods, and should any one molest or threaten the vehicle, ride up and defend it. The pace will be hard, and at Blatenburg the horses will be again changed, and you, too, will need a fresh mount. From there you will follow to a little fishing village on the coast, a distance of over 12 miles. You will wait, out of sight, until the inmate of the coach has had ample time to go on board the ship Rose, now lying ready to sail. Then you will ride down to the shore and signal, and the captain will have a boat ready to take you out also with your horse.

"Show the captain of the vessel these papers sealed with my seal. They will not be opened as they do, but say that you are ambassador to the court of England for the court of Wassmark. Concerning which, I hope, sir, you do not object to having the post thrust

upon you.

"After this make your presence known to the person who rode in the coach.

"Upon reaching England you will know best what to do and how severely to deal with your prisoner, who has more than once threatened the peace of Wassmark.

"The risks you take are not great. I close with my blessing on the adventure."

I did not share the contents of this letter with my comrades, but thrust it and the package into a concealed pocket of my coat and asked Harry to let me have his horse until the following day. "I want Hagart for my second mount," I explained, "and will leave him here."

As they did not intend to start for Isstens for a few days Harry readily gave me the desired permission.

Within an hour I climbed to the saddle, taking care not to wrench my newly mended knee. The viscount's horse was a round barreled sorrel—swift and easy.

I rode leisurely, pondering on the king's orders. Why, if I had touched sore his pride, had he made me a knight, and now ambassador to the English court? And why the secrecy of this last strange venture—this riding behind the coach, and yet not with it? For a moment the thought of treachery crossed my mind, but I put it out with a curse, knowing that the king was ever a man to love open fighting. So through all the remaining hours of the night I rode with my gloomy heart.

There were few signs of dawn in the sky when I sighted the inn of the Three Trees. Snow lay frozen on the road and a fanned wind started out of the east. Shelter of some kind I meant to have, and looking about, I espied at a little distance from the outbuildings of the hostel a half ruined stable. One corner, under the roof of thatch, was snug enough, and here the good horse stood contentedly while I kept watch at the door, slapping my arms across my chest, after the manner of woodchoppers in the forests of Isstens.

The dawn broke at last, yellow and red. It was a dreary piece of country—wide meadows divided by lines of poplars—which stretched before the door of our refuge. Away to the right the white and gray monotony was broken by a wedge shaped forest of evergreens, coming down the side of a hill.

Before the sun had got his lower rim away from the horizon a coach, drawn swiftly by four horses—three grays and a black—appeared around a turn of the road. I retired from the door, and, through a crack in the wall, watched it draw near and pass, and in a few seconds my ears told me that it had had stopped at the inn.

Though my knee was still somewhat stiff, I managed to crawl up to the edge of a broken manger, and, through a hole in the thatch, watched a man change the horses, and a maid-servant handed in a covered dish at the coach window.

The ride back to Blatenburg was painfully uneventful. I saw my charge drawn up at an obscure house on the edge of the city and then made all haste to our lodgings, handed Harry's horse over to a servant and flung the saddle across Hagart's stout back.

Harry and Tom came to the door while I drank off a cup of mulled wine.

When I came again in sight of the tavern at the edge of the town, the coach was just rolling out of the stable yard. Upon passing the city gates and striking the level road that runs toward the coast, the driver put his horses to a sharp trot, and Hagart swung easily after.

For several miles our way led through a low farming country. Red and white cattle clustered around the barns and in the fields; the sheep pushed away the snow with their feet and noses and cropped the grass beneath. Passing these pictures of good yeoman life, we came to a place of short hills and woods full of underbrush. Hares leaped away across the snow at our approach, and winter birds chirped in all the trees.

At times I would lose sight of my charge as it rolled down in a valley ahead. After we had covered more than half of our journey, upon topping a hill I saw the coach at a standstill, and, barring the road, a horseman. The driver was gesticulating vehemently and ever and anon jerking his thumb

back in my direction.

The horseman threatened him with pistols. A slight pressure of my sword sent Hagart thundering down the hill toward them. I held the bridle in my teeth and in my left hand a dag, in my right my rapier. The horseman looked at me, fired hurriedly in my direction, and, wheeling, fled.

Hagart passed the coach like a black wind, and over the next hill we went not far in front, traveling a level road and lying forward in his saddle, sped the highwayman. My blood sang hot, and the coach was forgotten. Once when I had drawn well up on my quarry I turned and saw the four horses bringing along the coach at their best pace—so swiftly indeed that it lurched like a boat.

We dashed, Hagart still running fresh. Of a sudden the man ahead jerked his horse back, leaped from his saddle with great skill and fired his other pistol. The ball whispered in my ear. Upon seeing me come on unhurt he tossed the weapon into the air and disappeared into the woods. It was madness for a man with a weak leg to think of following him. So I rode on, intending to await the coach at the span of the gradual hill ahead. When I reached this spot, I saw in front of me, not half a mile away, the little village, the blue winter sea beyond and a ship lying at anchor. Across the sand dunes trotted the riderless horse, its head high in the air and turning this way and that, as if in search of something. Its shrill whinnying was blown back to me on the salt breeze, and I felt a true sorrow for the faithful brute. Thus, I thought, would my brave Hagart look and call for me, and I patted his gleaming neck.

The coach passed me while I stood, with my back turned to the road, gazing out at the sea. A boat was beached, and a number of seamen waited on the sand. The coach was driven to the edge of the waves, and in a few minutes the driver turned his horses' heads inland, and the boat put out for the ship. The Rose lay some distance from shore.

When the coach passed on its return, the fellow on the box saluted me with much respect. He was a lusty, gray haired man, with the look of a trusty servant. "Are you armed?" I cried. And for answer he brought to view a belt mouth gun.

The highwayman's horse disappeared after him, with stirrups flying wide.

Seeing now that the boat had reached the ship's side, I rode down over the dunes and through the single street of the village to the lip of the sea.

And now came a large boat, and, upon its nearing, I saw that an officer sat at the tiller. It was soon, nose up, on the sand, and the officer stepped out and saluted me.

"I am Captain Anderson, sir," he said.

I bowed, gave him my name and drew my papers from my coat. He but glanced at the seal and said all was right.

Hagart, after some encouragement, allowed me to lead him into the boat, and, upon reaching the Rose, he was hoisted aboard without much difficulty.

"Now," said I to the captain, "I will see the prisoner."

"She is in the cabin, sir," he answered, "and I believe she expects you."

"Now, the devil have it!" I fumed.

"Is there a woman thrust on my hands?" And I went straightway down the nearest hatch and into a large and well appointed cabin. But the appointments I did not notice till later, for there, standing with her face toward the door, was the Princess Barbara.

In a flash all came over me, and I would have blessed the king for his good heart, had any wits been left me. But I stood like a fool, holding fast to the knob of the door which I had closed behind me.

"Ah, D'Artagan," she cried softly, her eyes brimming with tears, her face light with happiness. "Did you never suspect it in all your long ride?"

And of the ten minutes following a greater and more skilled writer than I would do but poor justice.

When we ascended to the deck together—she in her red cloak trimmed with fur—we found Captain Anderson at the rail, gazing back at the receding shores. He turned on our approach and in an instant must have read all in the joy of our faces.

Bowing, he said, "The strangest meetings, my lady, are sometimes the happiest," and then he winked at me in the English manner.

The voyage was short, and I believe the winds favorable, though of the winds and the sea I took little notice, for as a true soldier I must needs keep a careful eye on my prisoner.

Our ship entered London harbor on a morning of the thickest fog. The captain and his two officers put to shore

forest of leaden poplars. The priest, for all his crooked shoulders, was a courteous gentleman of breeding, and also a judge of wines. The captain, a good man and merry, ate and drank and cracked his jokes, and his officers, who were but boys, sat and looked dolefully at my princess, for verily both were in love with her.

From these good gentlemen my eyes would ever come back to the one beside me, and she, for fear of what our company and the waiters might think, did but smile down the table at the person.

We took up our abode in a tall house near the court at Whitehall and many were our friends, from his majesty Charles I to the poorest gentleman adventurer in his train.

Of Barbara I would write at some length, but she reads over my shoulder and accuses me of flattery.

A month after our arrival in London, word came from the house of Isstens, and when I read Harry's letter aloud to my wife, her curiosity was more excited. For this is the viscount's letter—unadorned:

Dearest Dart—There are so many things to say I know not where to begin. When the Cavalier Beverly and I reached home, the first of the surprising things took place. Marion, with the rest of the family, hastened down to the great hall to greet us, and no sooner did your friend Tom clasp eyes on her than he uttered a cry between astonishment and joy. Marion were all white as my powdered wig, and the captain cried, "Great God, sir, we have thought you dead!" and embraced him父子. You may imagine from this how sore my heart felt for you, dear brother, for then I did not know of the change—that is, I knew not Dart of the other lady. (At this part of the letter Barbara's rare mouth took on a wondrous amused expression.)

Upon Marion's recovery there took place a most tender scene between the two, and Castletree told me that in Devon they had been betrothed at an early age, and of Beverly's disappearance, which smacked to me of underhand work on the part of some one.

This turned us all topsy turvy, and then came our Christmas guess, the Lady St. Arnaud among them. You know the Lady St. Arnaud. In a few days news reached us that you had run away with Princess Barbara of Cloburg and that her father had a price of gold upon your head. By all the seven blue devils, D'Artagan, you are a modest cait. I crave your pardon; I forgot about your knighthood. For a time we would not believe this, and so I rode into Blatenburg, and the king informed me under great pain of secrecy that he had his finger in that pie. Now, all this seemed to us beyond belief, that the princess should give up a crown to follow your sword, charming though you are, brother mine. And of your love for Mistress Castletree—why, that was but a love, I suppose!

Now that I have written thus, let me cry out my true heart. You are a credit to the house, a nine days' wonder, and, by heaven! one of the most fortunate men alive. By your bravery and the help of God you have won the second lady of Europe.

And in this vein to the end of the letter.

So—did he mean that the girl with the green eyes was the first lady of Europe?

"Barbara, I have written the last word." And she gave me a kiss for having done with so foolish a story.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]



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