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# C a p t u r e d   b y   B r i g a n d s \* — B y   E l l e n   M .   S t o n e —

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It was a perfect September day, the third of the month, clear, warm, and sunshiny, so that our spirits rose as we entered into the merry confusion of loading and mounting our horses. Great numbers of our friends had gathered to bid us good-bye and to give us their loving wishes for a prosperous journey. The hallway of the house and the veranda were bright with the pretty Bulgarian dresses.

As we finally rode out through the big gate into the narrow street I noticed with surprise, which, unfortunately, did not reach the point of suspicion that my *kiridjee* (driver) led the way by the upper end of the village. When I asked him why he did so, instead of going out lower down, according to our usual custom, he answered that it was better so, and we let it pass, although I continued to feel a little uneasy at the unusual liberty he had taken. A few moments later we were joined by Mr. and Mrs. Tsilka with their weeping friends. The hearts of these young parents were doubly torn by the thought that they were leaving a little grave in the Protestant cemetery in Bansko, where they had laid their baby boy only three weeks before.

#### UNAWARE OF STEALTHY WATCHERS

Our party now being complete, we clattered merrily along the stony road, laughing and talking. There were just thirteen of us—unlucky number—three young men, students in our schools; three of our young lady teachers; Mrs. Oosheva, an older Bible woman; Mr. and Mrs. Tsilka, and myself, with three muleteers.

Lofty peaks of the Perim mountains loomed up in the south, and luxuriant forests covered all the foot-hills to the plain. How could a suspicion of danger overshadow the hearts of the happy party? They were rejoicing in the love of the friends from whom they had just parted, basking in the beauty of God's world about them, and full of hopes and high resolves to accomplish nobler things in the future for the Bulgarians in Macedonia through their schools and spiritual training.

We had been provided with the usual *teskere* or travelling passport, permitting us to make this journey.

We were on the main road between Bansko and Djumia—though this road is only a rough mountain trail—and we had seven men with us, one of them armed. Never within my knowledge had so large a party been attacked. Three hours distant from Bansko we passed the guard-house, where Turkish soldiers looked out at us stolidly, and then we went on down into the beautiful valley, the trail following a mountain brook full of little cascades and cool, dark pools. After a time we dismounted, that we might better enjoy the beauties of the way, and hold converse with the young students, all of whom were walking. I suppose that hidden eyes watched our every movement.

At length we came to a lonely bit of green-sward, under the shade of forest trees, by which purled and foamed the stream along its rocky bed. Some one suggested lunch, and immediately the stores were brought out, and we sat down in great content to refresh ourselves. How delicious were the meat balls, the fried cakes resembling crullers, and the native pastry (*banitza*), with fresh water from the stream! When we were refreshed we set out again on our way, hoping to reach the khan where we intended to spend the night, before darkness should overtake us.

#### THE AMBUSH AT THE BALANCED ROCK

Mrs. Oosheva led the column, with her son Peter walking by her side—a fine chivalrous boy. We wound along the steep trail for some distance, the sure-footed mountain horses following one another in Indian file. Thus we approached a cliff known as the Balanced Rock, a bald crag of the mountain which here juts out into the valley, turning the stream to one side. At this point the pathway leads down into the water, so that travelers must ride into the swift current, pass around the rock, and strike the trail again on the farther side. Those in the lead of such a cavalcade as ours would necessarily be hidden from those in the rear while passing the rock. An admirable spot for an

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ambush. But we had passed it safely so many times before that none of us thought of danger.

Suddenly we were startled by a shout: a command in Turkish, "Halt!" I saw Mrs. Oosheva, who was then in the middle of the stream, start backward and attempt to turn her horse aside. An armed man had sprung toward her with uplifted musket-butt, as if to strike her from the saddle. She turned a horror-stricken face upon me, and then swayed as if to faint. Before any of us could say a word, armed men were swarming about us on all sides, seeming to have sprung from the hillside. They crowded upon us, and fiercely demanded that we dismount. They even made as if to pull us off our pack-saddles.

"Give us time," I said in Bulgarian, "and we will dismount. We are women, not men, and cannot get down alone."

I saw the boy Peter assisting his fainting mother, taking her down from the horse in his young, strong arms. At the same moment the placid, phlegmatic face of my driver appeared by my side. His was the only calm face in our party—strangely calm, as I remembered afterward—but I then ascribed it to his natural temperament. Somehow we dismounted in quick time from our saddles, with the brigands shouting, "Hurry, hurry," and waving their guns over our heads. They drove us like cattle into the stream. Peter carried his all but unconscious mother on his back. One of the young teachers, who showed rare presence of mind through the whole experience, crossed on a log, but the rest of us plunged into the water, save Mrs. Tsilka, who had not been given time in the hurry to dismount. Dripping with water, our captors urged us mercilessly from behind, driving us up the sharp mountain side beyond the stream, where we had to use both hands and feet to prevent falling. Mrs. Tsilka was dragged from her horse, her husband cutting the cords that bound her trunk and other luggage to the saddle, letting them fall where they would. Thus we all scrambled up the hill, a tangle of horses, drivers, men and women, with the brigands yelling behind. Our captors themselves, we now know, were very nervous, fearing lest some one should come upon us and give the alarm, for we were not such a great distance from the Turkish guard house. One poor traveler, indeed, who had the misfortune to happen upon us as we were being driven up the hill, was now in the hands of the brigands,

wounded and bloody, as we were to know a little later to our horror.

#### THE ROUND-UP ON THE MOUNTAIN SIDE

Though we were exhausted by the climb, they gave us no rest until we reached a small level spot among the trees, where we sank down exhausted, to regain our breath. We spread a rug and pillow for poor suffering Mrs. Oosheva, whose boy was trying to comfort her, repeating constantly in the tenderest tones:

"Don't be afraid, mother. Don't be afraid. If we must die, we shall at least die together."

The band now gathered swiftly about us, with guns pointed. One of them ordered us to sit and wait—we knew not for what. I had hitherto given hardly more than a glance at them. Now I saw them plainly. They were of various ages, some bearded, fierce of face, and wild of dress; some younger, but all athletic and heavily armed. Some wore suits of brown homespun, some Turkish uniforms with red or white fezes, while others were in strange and nondescript attire. One had his face so bound up in a red handkerchief as to be unrecognizable, others with faces horribly blackened and disguised with what looked like rags bobbing over their foreheads—the knotted corners of their handkerchiefs, as we afterwards learned.

Their rifles and accoutrements seemed fresh and new, and they also carried revolvers and daggers in their belts, with a plentiful and evident supply of cartridges. They had undoubtedly intended to fill us with terror at the sight of them—and truly horrible they looked.

#### THE FATE OF THE TURKISH TRAVELER

I was especially anxious to learn whether these were of the Black Shirts, as highway-men are commonly called in Macedonia, because of their filthy condition in general. Feeling somewhat reassured on that point, I turned again to our teachers, and thus failed to see the first act in the approaching tragedy. Suddenly I heard rapidly approaching footsteps above us, then a cruel blow. The Turk whom the brigands had captured was driven past us, his arms pinioned behind him with a scarlet girdle. As he walked, the brigand struck him violently with the butt of his gun. Blood was streaming from a wound in his temple. Once he turned and looked back piteously at his pursuer. With tense nerves and a terrible fear in our hearts

we saw him driven across the little opening where we sat, and into the thicket beyond. Here my eyes refused to follow. Alas that my ears could not also have been closed, that I might not have heard the horrible dagger thrusts and the death cry that followed.

One of the brigands now emerged from the thicket and signalled to me without saying a word. With indescribable horror tugging at my heart, but with a calm exterior, I rose and obeyed him. What was coming? Would they do with me as with the Turk? "Hope thou in God" whispered itself in my heart, and I was strengthened to await whatever might happen. But I was not compelled to enter the thicket. Following the motions of the brigand, I went to a spot higher up the hill some distance from the party, where I sat down alone, experiencing an intense revulsion of feeling as I noticed those hideously blackened faces with their rags and knots bobbing about their heads as though the brigands were gay carnivalers just before the Lenten fast. I became conscious that I was very thirsty; that my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth. I must have expressed this want aloud in some way, for the brigand who was guarding me, the same who had summoned me, said I could find some water at a spring which he indicated by a motion of his hand. It was the direction also which the Turk had taken, and from which he was never to return. Was this a grim refinement of cruelty? It was almost too much for me to go thither, but I finally started, with veiled eyes, fearing to see what must have lain there. After slaking my thirst with water from my hand, I was returning to my place, when it occurred to me—humorously enough, as it now seems—that I must not leave my umbrella, and so I went back and found it, no objection being made by my guard. Then I took my last look into the eyes of the dear young teachers, my co-workers, for whose safe return to their parents or to their places of service I had made myself responsible. Alas, that I was now cruelly prevented from fulfilling my pledge. I remember noticing, even then, the calmness which was given to Mr. Tsilka as he sat holding the halter of his bare-backed horse with one hand, while he leaned his face on the other in deep dejection. I did not then know that his wife, too, had been called by our captors, and was even then separated from him. Had I known that I should have

been even more impressed with the marvelous power of his faith in restraining himself. But had he fired one shot to save her, terrible consequences must have followed. Peter was still trying to comfort his mother, who now lay more quietly on my rug. The students were sitting, pale-faced and silent. But I could not tarry; so saying to them, "Pray for me as you never prayed before!" and hearing Mareeka's soft promise, "Yes'm," I went back, feeling that it would probably be to my death.

What was my surprise to find that I was no longer alone. There sat Mrs. Tsilka, with her back to the guard and her face turned towards our fellow-travelers. Is it strange that even in those dreadful moments a feeling of relief came over me that my fate, whatever it was to be, would be shared by another? Both of us were calm, at least outwardly. Our captors observed our quiet demeanor, and weeks later they told us that we had been very brave when taken. They little knew the reason of that quiet. We were leaning hard upon God's promise: "Fear not, I am with thee. Fear not, I will help thee," and God was telling us, "Be not afraid."

While waiting to see what would be done with us next, we had time to observe that the brigands were hurriedly examining our baggage. To our surprise, they seemed to be taking only food, of which we had a good supply, being provisioned for three days. Some of them ate ravenously, as they emptied the baskets and bags. Later they said they had eaten no bread for two days. I also observed one brigand talking to the driver who had led us from Bansko; I thought now I knew what they were talking about. The brigands were still rummaging among our belongings, though little seemed to be taken. One of them found a Bible, held it out to a companion to see, and, to my great comfort, brought it with him. It was neither of my Bibles—the English version, which had been the stay and comfort of my beloved missionary sister in Japan, nor yet my copy in Bulgarian; it was the property of one of our young teachers. Only He who searcheth all hearts can know what comfort and strength our souls derived from this Bible; it was our only book.

#### THE FLIGHT 'CROSS COUNTRY

At length the brigands ended their search, and after a hurried consultation two of them approached and motioned us roughly to rise

and go with them. They indicated not the direction toward the thicket, which still held my thoughts fascinated, but up and back from the spot where we had been sitting. The rise was sharp, and presently across plowed land, where I stumbled and found great difficulty in walking on account of my wet skirts. One of the brigands seized me by my arm with a grip that left black and blue marks for weeks afterwards. Another took Mrs. Tsilka.

I stole but one glance into the stern, bearded face of my keeper. He had thick curly hair of a light hue, surmounted by a black turban. Perspiration dripped from his face; he was evidently greatly excited.

After a time, when we were well nigh exhausted, we came upon two of our own horses which had been taken by the brigands. Our captors compelled us to mount hurriedly, and we started at once through the now gathering twilight. The brigands fell into line before, behind, and on both sides of us.

Poor Mrs. Tsilka glanced backward at our party below, where her husband still sat. Those we left were guarded all that night by some of the brigands, so that no alarm should be given until the band had escaped with their captives, as we learned afterwards. Shall I confess that my first sensation as we moved off was one of relief that we were not then and there to be searched for plunder, or put to a violent death? Both of us were dazed

and numbed by what had befallen us. Strangely enough, it did not come clearly to my mind for some time that we were taken for ransom. To Mrs. Tsilka's question, when she realized that we were being carried away into the mountains by those strange, fierce men: "Why have you taken us?" the brigands vouchsafed only the answer:

"You will know all bye-and-bye."

"What will you do with us?" she asked in agony.

"Nishto! Nishto! Ne boisia" (Nothing, nothing; don't be afraid).

As the quiet of the night calmed our fevered nerves we observed the brigands marching noiselessly around us. Their moccasined feet made little sound. If they had occasion for conference no word was spoken aloud, nor could even their whisperings be heard. As if by magic, men were deployed upon one side or the other as scouts, the path often changing direction without apparent command. There was a weird fascination about the scene.

The men, nearly a score in number, bore each his gun upon his back and their cloaks hung behind them, sometimes trailing on the ground, as they marched in file.

The quiet moon looked down upon the scene.

"She sits up there like a spy," the brigands afterwards frequently said to us. "She says, 'Eto ghee! Tay sull!'" (Here they are. These are they),



*Faithfully yours,  
Ellen M. Stone.*

Through the long hours of that night we traveled. Sometimes the barking of dogs would indicate the proximity of some shepherd with his flock, some threshing floor, or a lonely farmhouse on a hillside; but our line of march was kept by secluded ways, often under trees whose branches were so low as almost to sweep us from our saddles, notwithstanding the efforts of a man of gigantic strength, who went before, breaking down branches and pulling up young trees from our path. Once my horse stumbled and fell, carrying me with him. As I felt myself falling, a sweet content filled me as I thought that it might be the end of all my troubles; but it was not to be so. Instantly men flocked around, raised me on my horse, inquired if I were hurt, and setting me again in the saddle, we moved on as if nothing had happened. Not knowing, then, the rule of brigands to allow no conversation, I remember talking with my guards, telling them of my aged mother, of my brothers, devoted to their only sister, and at one time I spoke of God's love and care for His children. One of the men, to my great surprise and relief, answered; "Yes, we are all God's children."

#### THE HALT AT DAWN

The dawn was almost breaking when at last we stopped again. We were in a most desolate narrow valley between bare and towering crags. Half dead with exhaustion, we sat down upon a rock, only to be forced onward again. We could scarcely compel our feet to move, so the brigands helped us to climb up into a small ravine, gruesome and wild, but clothed with vegetation—a spot well-fitted for such awful deeds as I thought might await us. Finally they seemed satisfied with a location, spread down a woolen rug which I then learned they had taken from one of our teachers, and told us to sit down.

One or two broke off great leafy branches from trees and arched them over us, making a booth to shelter us alike from the sun and from any intrusive eye. Most of the men disappeared, but only to take positions in our rear and above us, from which, unseen by us, they could command our movements. Of course we were faint with hunger and weariness, as we had eaten nothing save a few pears which were given us during the night, "instead of water," as the brigands said, since our happy lunch by the brookside. Once in the night, when we came to

a stream, one of the brigands offered us water out of my own blue and white granite-ware cup, which I had left suspended from my pack-saddle.

Now the men were concerned to bring us food, some milk in a kettle, with a couple of wooden spoons, and in one of her own towels they brought Mrs. Tsilka the crumbled remains of some pastry which her mother had given her for the journey. That brought the tears. Dear mother, did she yet know that her daughter had been carried off, and perhaps killed? Would she ever know that we had actually eaten of her good things? They also brought a woolen homespun bag containing a stabrets of pork (cured in a pig's stomach), and a large piece of another one. This is a specialty in the Raglug district and the Tsilkas and several of the teachers had provided themselves with a supply for the winter. They gave us pears, cornel-berries, red, tart, and astringent, and pressed them upon us in far greater quantities than we could eat. One brought a pretty tin box, empty, which Mrs. Tsilka knew was filled with honey for the journey; but some of the brigands, not being able to resist the temptation of such a tit-bit, had eaten it. We were thankful, however, for the box. What most surprised us was a gift from one of the brigands of a bunch of wild cyclamen, which touched us beyond anything else, and made hope spring up in our hearts, that men who could thus care to supply us not only with the necessities of life, but even with flowers, could not be bent upon murdering us. This brigand had observed that some of the flowers which covered me like a breastplate the day before, when we rode out of Bansko, were still clinging to my dress (though our hearts were crushed and discouraged), and he had sent these blossoms of the woods "Because I saw you loved flowers." Here, then, was one heart, not wholly calloused, but susceptible to a noble impulse! One brigand had had his morning nap in my mackintosh before delivering it, but that did not matter compared with the comfort of gaining possession of it. We were already learning not to be too particular! At the last some one handed us the best of all, the Bible which they had taken from Mareeka's bundle. Mrs. Tsilka and I opened its blessed leaves with chastened hearts to find what message our Father in Heaven had for us, and were strengthened to feel that He was with us even in captivity.

Late in the afternoon some one brought us a chicken, only about half boiled, and explained that we were to have had one earlier, but that the shepherd who was to cook it had boiled it with ten hot red peppers and an *oke* (two and three-quarter pounds) of flour, making a dish which none of the brigands themselves could eat. Hence they had delayed until a second chicken could be boiled. Of course we thanked them, and when they commanded us to be ready to start on our journey, and brought us a pair of goat's-hairsaddle-bags, we wrapped it up and put it with our other food, our Bible, tin box, and shawl strap into the bags.

On the first day they gave us no opportunity for more than a chance word with them. We climbed steadily, but were soon puffing and perspiring because of the steepness of the way. Now I noticed more clearly than I could the night before that we never traveled by roads, but always by mountain trails or sheep or goat paths, or with no path at all.

If we saw a road anywhere, and hoped for an easier journey on it, we were here to be disappointed, for the advance guard always crossed over and continued the journey

through the underbrush, where the captives were often in imminent danger of Absalom's fate from the overhanging branches. The way that night was long also. We were permitted to dismount to rest once or twice, and once we were refreshed from a jar of buttermilk. Whence it came or how it was brought was a mystery to us, but we drank

and were refreshed. Finally, we were dismounted and told to wait. After a time spent in silence and deep darkness the men came and commanded us each to put on one of their heavy goat-hair coats, the deep hoods of which they pulled over our heads, so that we could see only the ground immediately before us. Thus they led us to a doorway and through some dark outer space, into a small inner room with one small barred window.

#### IN THE HUT—THE PLOT REVEALED

A light was brought. After the brigands had spread down some cloaks for us we were left to ourselves. The horror of a great fear fell upon us. What could they not do to us in that dark, hidden

spot? Why had they brought us thither? If we should be killed now no one in the wide world would know our fate. The darkness settled into our very souls. We lay down in our corner, which was far harder than the hillside had been the day before, but no sleep



MME. TSILKA AND MISS STONE IN TRAVELING COSTUME

came to refresh us. After daylight we looked from the tiny barred window, but could see only trees on a grassy slope. Though we occasionally heard voices during the day besides those of the brigands, we could never see any one. We were cut off from all mankind save those who had so mercilessly captured us.

After a time a guard brought us bread, and perhaps a bit of cheese, and inquired about food for dinner. We gave him the under-cooked chicken, to be prepared in some way so that we could eat it, and later in the day it was returned to us, fried and fairly palatable.

During the day three men came filing into the room. As they seated themselves upon the ground they filled all the space outside of our corner. They were heavily armed. Cartridges were upon their breasts and in belts around their waists. Daggers and revolvers hung at their sides. They had left their rifles behind; but, as though their present armament were not sufficient to protect them against us, one soon went out and brought in the three guns, which he stacked in a corner. They were at no pains to remove their fezes from their heads. Ah! We were only poor captives!

With trembling hearts under an exterior which we prayed God to keep calm, we waited until they should tell us the purpose of their visit. Finally, one whom I took to be the *voivoda* (leader) spoke rapidly and roughly, telling us that they were highwaymen, that among them were many nationalities (my glance involuntarily wandered from his face to those of his companions; one, with dark, shaggy hair and beard, I thought might be of Spanish extraction, while he of the thick, light-hued curls might be a Jew, and the *voivoda* himself a Macedonian Parnak). He told us that they had taken us for money,

and should hold us until the ransom was forthcoming.

"If it is not paid," he said menacingly, "there will be a bullet for you and a bullet for her"—indicating Mrs. Tsilka. We named him in our hearts "The Bad Man." and so called him for many weeks; but not to the end.

When I inquired the amount of the ransom, the spokesman took an envelope and wrote upon it, then passed it to the next man, who also wrote upon it and gave it to the third, who, after writing upon it, returned it to their spokesman.

"We have decided," he said, "to ask twenty-five thousand pounds for your ransom, and we are prepared to hold you until it is paid, or, in case of failure to pay it, there is, as I said before, a bullet for each of you, to let people know that we are not men to be trifled with."

We were utterly crushed with the helplessness of the position in which they had put us. To my inquiry as to when I should write the letter telling my friends of their demands, they answered:

"After a few days we will tell you, but not now."

Then they filed out of the tiny black room, leaving it filled with smoke from their tobacco, and the stench from clothes long unchanged, and also with something worse, for a cloud of despair settled into our very souls. Twenty-five thousand pounds! One hundred and ten thousand dollars! It could never be raised. Why should they not kill us at once? So we talked with each other until our faith in God overcame the fearful forebodings and comforted us. "Our God reigns, and we are still in His hands. He can deliver us from even these toils. We will trust Him still."