

A Subterranean Experience.

BY M. BOURCHIER SANFORD



COULD not see a ray of light; almost stifled, I gasped for breath, and a terrible weight oppressed me. When I raised my hand, it struck something which, in my bewildered condition, I thought was the ceiling of my room; but, in one awful moment later, I realized that, above, below, on either side, pinning me in a space little larger than my body, were wooden walls. Buried alive?

My past was a blank, but I was horribly conscious of the present. I tried to shriek aloud, but hardly made a sound. I pounded on the coffin lid and dashed frantically against the sides. Was I dreaming? delirious? or did my prison move with my motion? I raised myself against the lid with a desperate effort. The narrow box was lifted, and fell backward with a splash. The coffin was floating, and was water-tight.

Was I the victim of some plot? If so, why? How? No solution came. I remembered nothing. As I still breathed, though painfully, I knew that a little air must find its way to me. Could I, with all my strength, burst the lid or force out its fastenings? I pounded, pushed, worked at it, and at last, O joy! it moved. It had been fitted into grooves; and I shoved it backward until I had room to raise myself and sit up.

But I was surrounded by darkness as deep as that of my coffin. The air had the chill of an atmosphere never reached by sunlight. I stretched my arms in every direction, but could feel nothing except the water below.

Had I really died? Was this some grim river of the nether world? I made a cup of my hands, and tasted some of the water. No, surely I was in the flesh, for my parched throat was relieved.

I worked the lid out of its grooves, and, taking it with both

hands, tried to reach the water bed; but as I touched nothing, I knew the depth must be at least more than six feet. With the aid of my clumsy paddle, I moved the vessel slowly, until the bow struck something hard; then I stepped forward and touched the obstacle. It was a stone pillar.

I held it with one arm, and, lifting the other high above my head, tried to reach the top, but could not. I sat for a while in my boat motionless, with memory rushing back upon me, for that column had stirred an association.

My last conscious moment had not been passed in the night editor's room of the New York *Spectator*, as I had thought in faint glimmerings of recollection, but in my lodging house in Constantinople, to which place I had been dispatched by our paper. Was it possible that the secret society, of whose existence I had learned through a strange chain of circumstances, and of whose deeds I had discovered information of the gravest character, had determined to silence me forever by consigning me to one of those mysterious subterranean monuments, the cisterns beneath the city? But, though there are accounts of their great length, which has been stretched by the imagination from yards to miles, and legends of rash adventurers who have tried to explore their dark recesses and have never returned, they are visited by travelers, described in guide books, and their size is said to be accurately known. Therefore my case was not hopeless, and my cries might reach a friendly ear.

I shouted for help, and the echoes of my voice mocked me. I moved the coffin-boat far enough to enable me to touch several pillars, but no light cheered my eyes, no sound from other living being, my ear; and, at last, wearied and despondent, I fell asleep.

I was awakened by a piercing cry — the shriek of a woman in terror. I tried to answer, but my voice, as in a nightmare, refused utterance. I heard the tones of a man, brutal and angry, and again the appeal for help.

The echoes made me uncertain of the direction of the sound, and I could see nothing; but I called aloud, and tried to move my wretched craft toward the invisible pair; whereon the ruffian laughed jeeringly and rowed away.

"Father, is it you?" cried the woman in the Greek tongue.

"Not father," I answered with my imperfect Greek, "and I cannot see where you are; but I will aid you if it is in my power."

"I will come to you. Your voice is that of a stranger; but you are English, American, perhaps, and I trust you," she said, adding when she had brought her boat close to mine, "You have but lately arrived, or you would have learned to distinguish objects, though dimly, even in this darkness."

"But lately arrived! Is it possible that you, that others, live here — under the earth?"

"Alas, yes. And all of us, like you, have awakened in the darkness knowing nothing. But we must move quickly, or — he — may follow. As we go, tell me of yourself, how you came."

She gave me an oar, which I used as a paddle under her direction; and, as we went on, I told her briefly how, while sitting in my room, I had heard steps in the hall; how my door had been burst open, and I had been surrounded by masked men, one of whom had held a phial to my nostrils; at that point recollection had failed until I had come to consciousness in the coffin. I assured her that I was guilty of no crime, but did not confide to her my occupation or my name.

In turn she informed me that her father, cousin Markos, and herself lived with other prisoners on an artificial island in these subterranean waters. She believed that her father had been suspected of leading an intrigue in which he had taken no part; and his daughter and nephew had been regarded as accomplices. They had been in captivity for several months; three old women and some men had been confined so long that they had lost count of the time, and, through peering in the darkness, had nearly lost their sight.

"But is not this the Hall of Waters, or the Yeri Batan Serai, Underground Palace, one of the great cisterns, the entrance to which is known?"

"It is, indeed, a hall of waters, and a vast one; but its very existence is unknown, except to the wretched prisoners, and those who have carefully guarded the secret,—handing it down, we believe, from generation to generation. It has been suspected by

a few, and tales of torture and crime have been whispered furtively, not spoken openly. We do not know its entrance. Some, believing that they had discovered it, have attempted escape, but have been entrapped, and tortured before death. Resistance is useless, and death hangs over us all. Masked men come at irregular intervals; sometimes only a few days elapse between their visits, sometimes many weeks. They choose one of our number, we know not why, and take him away. Though he is aware that he is being led to an awful fate, he goes silently, without protest; for that would be unavailing. You have come to fill a place made vacant three weeks ago, when one who was dear to us was taken. Some are permitted to live long, perhaps because their captors know that the torture of suspense is more terrible than death; and, therefore, it is a sweeter vengeance. Korapha, from whom you delivered me, though a prisoner, is our keeper; and five Turks, likewise prisoners, assist him. They are armed, and we have no weapons."

The sound of voices came to us, light was reflected on the water, and presently I saw a number of persons standing about a wood fire on what appeared to be a flat-topped rock. The savory odor of frying fish was grateful to one who was faint from hunger.

"No food is supplied," explained my companion, "but there are many fish. Some are blind; others, that come in from without the walls, have sight."

The prisoners came to the rock's edge and questioned me. They were almost in rags, but all wore a rough garb similar to that in which I had found myself clad, excepting my companion, whom they called Eirene, and whose threadbare dress was that of a Greek maiden. As she stood in the glow of the fire, I saw that she was of rare beauty. The ghastly pallor, which gave to others a weird, unpleasant appearance, was in her a clear whiteness which accentuated the luster of her dark eyes, and the richness of her black hair, which hung in long braids. She reminded my questioners that I had been long without food and was shivering with cold. An old woman pointed to a seat by the fire; and another brought me fried fish on a stone plate, and a boiled vegetable substance white in color. I learned that it was a

water weed, which grew in abundance on shoals that had been formed, doubtless, since the building of the aqueduct by deposits brought by the slow current. There were several varieties of water plant, all edible, and all blanched through lack of sunlight; from one variety a sort of tea was made. The fish and weeds were the only food of the community. The former were smoked, dried, or eaten fresh, and were also made into cakes mixed with dried and pounded weeds, and fried with an oil obtained from certain varieties of fish.

In answer to my inquiry as to the wood, a man who had regarded me with much curiosity replied that it was taken from the piles on which two partition walls, which had openings for the passage of water, had rested. These partitions, which were built of smaller stone than the massive outer walls, had crumbled, and some of the stones had been used in the construction of this island — which measured about eight by ten yards — and of the huts in which the prisoners slept.

“You are probably aware,” said my informant, “that wood under water remains in excellent condition for centuries, unless exposed to the ravages of the *teredo navalis*; take, for example, the preservation of the wooden piles of the bridge built by Cæsar over the Rhine. Our wood, of course, requires long drying. We keep one very low fire burning, and light others only to cook the food. If the fire goes out, we can ignite the dried wood by friction. On occasion when the wood has proved too damp, we have made a fire of dried fish and the stalks of fibrous weeds.”

“But are you not in danger of exhausting your fish supply?” I asked.

“We have never seen a sign of any such calamity. Whether these waters are connected with the ‘fishy’ Bosphorus, in which there are seventy edible varieties, we do not know; but they are proportionately ‘fishy.’ Sometimes the fish that have sight are attracted by the reflection from torches in the boats, and killed with stone spears of our own manufacture; but both blind and seeing varieties are usually caught in nets made from the fibrous weeds. The old people declare the aqueduct measures several miles; but we are forbidden to pass a great shoal, which, with the

dense mass of weeds on it, would dam up the water if a passage on each side were not kept clear. The prisoners, from time to time, have worked at digging away the sand and cutting the weeds; but a sign is set up at a certain spot, beyond which they dare not go unless they seek death. One of our number ventured, believing that he might find the secret of the entrance; but he paid for his rashness with his life. Just beyond the shoal, concealed by the water, but stretching from wall to wall, a trap is set; and the aged men here tell ghastly tales of some who have been caught in it. They believe that our captors, who visit us from time to time, have a passage under the superstructure, through which they come in a submarine boat, not far from the trap, the mechanism of which of course they understand. If that be true, we shall never find the passage." He paused, as if listening, then continued lightly, and in English, "But about the fish; if they furnish brain food, we should be a most intellectual community. But perhaps, as our friend Mark Twain observed, a couple of whales would be necessary to produce an effect."

Though his Greek was not that of a native, it had not occurred to me that he was English or American. He was thin to emaciation. His tattered clothing hung loosely; his long hair floated on his shoulders; his iron-gray beard, too, was of great length.

He answered my inquiring look, "It's a case of the ruling passion strong in death. I used to make jokes for — we'll say *Punch*. Perhaps they were sometimes heavy, but I can do better now since I've grown light-headed. Korapha and the powers that be regard me as dangerous, but spare my life because I amuse them. By the way, countrymen as we are, we must not often be seen in company, and I hear a boat approaching, so more anon."

Before I retired to the corner of the stone hut to which Chefik, a Turk, assigned me, I discovered that the affairs of the community had a certain routine. Time was measured by a rough mechanism of wood and sand, similar to an hour-glass, and a sort of calendar and record of such events as the "disappearance" of a prisoner was scratched on a stone. Axes, rough spears, and knives had been manufactured with great patience from stone, and vessels of stone, wood, and shells had been carved by the aid of these primitive implements.

I was watched so closely by Korapha and his Turks that two days passed before I found an opportunity for conversation with the English-speaking prisoner. I then informed him that I was Richard Harden, of the *Spectator*, and of the probable cause of my imprisonment. In turn he told me that he was the late Somerton Symes, of the Boston *Tattler*, that he had been dead three years, and that, so far as he knew, his widow and orphan son were still living in Brookline. His voice choked when he spoke of them. He drew his hand across his eyes, and was silent for some moments. When he had recovered his composure, he inquired if I was a married man.

I answered that no woman had been rash enough to accept me, and he warned me that I must carefully suppress any appearance of interest in Eirene Cynides; otherwise, I should bring trouble to her, and probably death to myself. Korapha had announced his intention of making her his wife, and though Symes did not believe that, being a prisoner, he would be permitted to marry, yet if he were induced by jealousy or annoyance to make false accusations against any one, his misrepresentations would influence the powers above. Korapha, so far as his fellow-captives were concerned, held the keys of death, but was not permitted to turn them in the lock; that amusement being reserved for the captors, who were much diverted by the terror their visits aroused, and by their game of casting lots for the next victim. If Korapha should fail in his duties, or otherwise displease, the death lot might fall on him, but at present he was too valuable, and he was granted many privileges which were withheld from his assistants. Symes believed that he was a disgraced member of the secret association, and had been a man of much power.

It was evident, in the days that followed, that Korapha felt malicious delight in making opportunities for me to see how the unhappy Eirene was compelled to endure his company. The fact that she hated, feared, and tried to escape him gave him such pleasure as a big bully finds in torturing some helpless little lad. My love for her seemed to feed and grow on its hopelessness, and between horror at the prospect of years in that grim abode, and dread that she would be torn from us and carried away, I was almost distraught. For Symes had observed the admiration of our

captors for her beauty, and believed that very soon, probably on their next visit, she would be taken from her father and friends, and forced to become the unwilling bride of one who had appeared especially interested in her.

The keeper's abode was a stone house, about a quarter of a mile from the prisoners' island. It rose straight out of the water, and was large enough to contain several rooms. The oldest captives believed that it had been built soon after the completion of the aqueduct. Two of the Turkish assistants slept on an anchored raft outside it, and the other three on our island. It was said that none of them had ever been admitted to the interior of the house. Korapha doubtless had abundant stores of provisions there; he and his men were well nourished, and in far better fighting condition than their fellow-prisoners.

One day I remarked to Symes, "Kalitri thinks that there is not only a submarine boat passage beyond the shoal, but a tunnel from under the house to a place outside the wall: Yet, even if he is right, what chance have we of entering the building, locked, barred, and guarded as it always is?"

"A poor chance, indeed," replied Symes. "I believe I can trust your discretion," he continued, after a pause in which he appeared to be in deep thought. "I have mentioned my opinion to Basileios Cynides only, and I will ask you not to give a hint to any one of what I tell you. I am convinced that there is a tunnel, but that it does not lead beyond the wall. If there had not been another way, the house might have been built against the wall, with a very short tunnel under, or a passage through; but it is placed about the center of the aqueduct. The tunnel is a short one, and leads only to the pillar on the right hand."

"The pillar! But how —"

"That pillar is hollow. I have tested it frequently, and am sure of it. You have observed, no doubt, that ten pillars which support the roof in that part of the aqueduct are hexagonal, and of unusually large size, fully six feet in diameter. Nine are solid; the walls of the tenth are not, I believe, more than twelve inches thick. If I am correct, there must be ample room inside for the ascent of one person at a time. I have not dared to carry a light to examine it; but from such observations as I have been able to

make when I have been alone in the neighborhood, I believe that one pillar was built of brick, flushed with mortar, and dressed to resemble stone."

The sound of an approaching boat, which might be Korapha's, put a sudden stop to our conference; but on other occasions I learned further particulars.

I had been a prisoner for many weeks, when one day, as I was making a pretense of fishing, at some distance from the island, Eirene joined me, and told me, with much agitation, that Korapha had gone away to be absent until the next day; and she had promised, under threat of torture and death to her father, to marry him directly after his return. Alas! I feared not Korapha, but those whose visit had long been dreaded, and who would come back with him. I believed that he had extorted her promise only because it pleased him to torture her, and he knew his time for that had almost ended. I tried to think of some way of escape, to give her some hope; and then, overcome by my sympathy, agonized by fears, I told her of my love, called her endearing names, and strove to comfort her.

A low chuckle startled us. Silently and stealthily Korapha had come, for he was close beside us. I saw the glint of steel, and believed that he meant to bury the knife in my body. With the courage of desperation I sprang at his throat, and throttled him so that, dizzy and breathless, he could not strike true, though I felt the point of his blade. The knife dropped from his limp hand, and Eirene seized it. His condition was poor, and I choked him into temporary unconsciousness. I told my companion that she must act promptly under my direction, for failure would mean death to her, to me, and to all whom she loved; and, though she trembled with horror, she obeyed. While she searched the boat, I gagged Korapha; then, after removing his cloak, with Eirene's assistance, I bound him hand and foot with part of a long coil of rope she had found. On his person I discovered a revolver, another knife, and a phial of some liquid. Then I removed his oars to my boat, towed his to a small shoal and stuck it fast in the sand. He had begun to move, but had not recovered his senses when we rowed rapidly away toward the place where I had left Symes. I hastily told him of the encounter.

He cautiously tested the liquid, and said that it was a powerful narcotic, which might be of great service. The time for action, for fighting a desperate game, had arrived, and no one must shirk it. He said he would go alone to the island, to avoid exciting suspicion; I must follow in a few minutes, and Eirene must row slowly in the direction of Korapha's house, and await us in the neighborhood of a mark at the old partition wall, not far beyond our island.

On my arrival, Kalitri informed me that Symes, with Markos and Georgios, had surprised two of the Turkish guards in their hut. Symes had stupefied them with the liquid I had given him; his companions had gagged and bound them, and they were now searching the hut; while others, obeying Symes's hurried directions, were keeping guard, and putting in the boats such rough weapons as they had manufactured.

I met Symes at the hut door. He had found in a hole, concealed by a part of the flooring, some rope, knives, and two files. "I was sure," he said, "that Chefik's hand had been hurt by a file. I dressed it for him yesterday, and kept my opinion to myself. I am in hopes that he has done us a very good turn."

When the young men came out with their spoils we rolled a great stone against the door, and left the guards helpless behind it.

Symes told the old priest, Melapoulos, what we meant to try, and that, were it possible, we would take him with us. He answered, with pious resignation, that he knew it could not be, that he was prepared for any fate, and would gladly remain, in the hope that he might soothe and sustain those who, by reason of their infirmities, could not attempt the escape.

Spite of the denials of Chefik and Seyfullah, who had been threatened with torture unless they would reveal the secret of the exit, it was possible that the remaining guards had an access to the house, and means of giving the alarm. The old people, who were hardly able to distinguish their imagining from reality, had warned us how, on two occasions when prisoners had risen against their keepers, the outcry had caused sudden flashings of piercing lights from a hundred openings in the roof, and the speedy arrival of avengers. We could not be sure that there was no foundation for these stories, and therefore agreed to advance in couples, in a

leisurely way, keeping the torches in our boats carefully covered; for even I could now distinguish objects through the darkness at a short distance. Symes, who was familiar with the drug, and had saturated cloths with a quantity sufficient to stupefy, went before us with Kalitri, while Basileios and I found Eirene. When we came up with the leading pair, the guard, Hamed, whom they had overtaken, was lying unconscious in his boat, and we remained to complete the work with him, while Symes and his companion went on to the house. When we arrived there, we found that the struggle with the couple who had been half asleep on the raft had been short; but they had suspected danger, and shouted for help before they lost consciousness. We were uneasy lest their cries had been heard, but would not draw back now.

The windows were high, but the bars of all were quickly examined by three men hoisted on the shoulders of their companions. Symes's surmise was correct. The guards had filed the bars of a rear window, the one nearest the water, so that they soon yielded to force. With hearts almost stilled with dread, we watched Symes fasten a rope to a strong side bar, preparatory to letting himself down. Would he be seized by some trap, or pierced by the spear of some hidden watcher? No; presently he called softly, "Come on, I'm all right"; and, one by one, we followed, hauling up the eighth, who had no companion's shoulders on which to mount, by a rope.

We held this last man up by the window, while he replaced the bars and fastened an inside iron shutter, which we had found open. We soon had reason to be thankful that we had done so, for the muffled sounds that reached our sensitive ears told of an advancing force.

"Quick!" cried Basileios. "Unless we can hide, we are lost!"

Swiftly we cast our eyes about, and, in a corner, half concealed by old rugs, I saw a trap door. It covered a hole, barely large enough to hold us all. But, believing it was our only chance, we dropped down one by one into the darkness. Georgios, the last to enter, contrived to draw the rugs over the trap before he closed the door. Almost stifled, and tortured by fears as we were, the time that passed before the searchers tramped over our heads and

went out of the house, fastening the door behind them, seemed interminable. We had towed the raft of the outer guards far away, and had sunk our own boats; so our hope was that the newcomers, not suspecting danger near the house, would go directly to the island; for it was probable that they had access to hidden boats of whose existence we had not been aware or that they had brought with them, packed in small compass, some kind of portable floating contrivance.

They might return fatally soon; yet we chose rather to face instant death at their hands than remain longer in that foul, stifling cavern. When we had left it, we secured the strong bolts and bars on the inside of the door; then two searched for the tunnel, and the others threw off outer garments, cast them in the hole, and put on clothing taken from the guards or found in the house. Eirene tucked her hair beneath a cap, and hid her dress by a long cloak. When Basileios and Symes summoned us, we followed them without delay through a trap door, down a steep flight of steps, and along a narrow passage; then, one behind another, we ascended a rusty iron ladder that ran up one side of the hollow pillar; and, though death might await us at the end, not one thought of hesitating.

I was the third in line; and when I followed my leaders over a curving stairway on the arch, I became aware by the sound, and the light that shown from above, that a door had been opened without resistance. Basileios, the foremost, turned and said softly, "Give the word to those behind, follow quickly, silently, there is no one here!"

Presently we found ourselves in a small room, that had lights turned low; but through high, narrow windows, mere slits in the wall, a strange glare came in. Judging from the hour marked by our timepiece when we left the island, it was now after ten o'clock, and we had hoped to be aided by the darkness, should we succeed in escaping from the prison. It seemed evident, however, that there was some brilliant illumination that would make detection easy; yet we were nervously impatient to go on.

When we found the heavy door unfastened, and stepped into an empty corridor, we were fearful that our arrival had been anticipated, and a trap set for us. But we closed the door, as we had

closed that at the end of the ladder. Symes, Kalitri, and Gulbenkian walked abreast; Eirene, guarded by her father and me, followed, and directly behind were Markos and Georgios. Even Eirene was armed with a dagger, taken from one of the guards, and four of us had revolvers as well as knives. The command of Basileios was that we must not take life unless it should be unavoidable in self-defense.

The dimly lighted halls were bright enough to our eyes, so long accustomed to profound darkness. As we went on, we expected every moment that some foe in ambush would spring upon us, and our nervous tension was increased by the dread that, after so many dangers passed, so many difficulties surmounted, when sweet freedom was so near, all chance of escape might in one instant be cut off. What wonder that we trembled and turned cold when we heard advancing footsteps, and four men came around a corner?

"Keep close together. March in order steadily," commanded Basileios. And with firm tread, despite our tremors, we approached the enemy. But, to our astonishment, without lifting a hand against us, the four turned and fled.

In obedience to order, we followed quickly, without breaking rank. Presently we heard the tramp of many feet, and knew that a force was advancing against us.

I have but a confused recollection of the succeeding events; of our wild rush past trembling men, whose hands seemed powerless to attack; of others who met us more boldly; of flashing steel and whizzing shot; of a stinging pain in my shoulder, and a struggle to free myself from a strong grasp; and of finding ourselves wounded, almost spent and breathless, but with the courage of desperation, in a large garden with many trees.

There we discovered the cause of the glare through the windows, and why guards had forsaken their posts, or had been called elsewhere, for we saw the sky reddened by fire and heard cries of the assassination of Selmet Pasha, and the work of incendiaries. The dead man had been a leader in the association that had condemned us. But louder than the shouts beyond the walls were the calls within them for our capture, and yet we were outside the gates at last, mingling with the crowds that hurried toward the conflagration.

After a time, in response to a sign passed from one to another, we slipped down a narrow, deserted street, and followed Kalitri. At his request, we concealed ourselves near a large building, while he knocked at a barred door. The watchman who answered almost fled in terror, but our companion held him, made some rapid explanations, and the faithful servant's dread and incredulity gave place to delight, for this was the warehouse of the merchant Olantes, a cousin of Kalitri, who had been mourned as one dead.

When we were under shelter and in comparative security, we learned that our three leaders in the prison halls, perceiving that the superstitious fellows who met us regarded us as unearthly visitants, had made hideous grimaces and gesticulations to heighten the effect. Many in the crowd, too, had drawn away, shuddering at our ghastly faces and wild appearance.

Olantes, who came to us in the morning, kept us in hiding all day, and through a part of the following night. But before dawn we were conveyed, secreted under bales, to the hold of a merchantman, from which, miles from the city of our imprisonment, we were transferred to an American vessel.

Then, on sparkling Mediterranean waters, under sunny skies, safe, free, and full of hope, I renewed the wooing I had begun beneath the earth, in darkness, and almost in despair.

