

## **Sea-Wolves of the Mediterranean** **by Currey, E. Hamilton**

### CHAPTER XV

#### DRAGUT-REIS

How he became Lieutenant to Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa - His capture by Jannetin Doria - His four years as a galley slave - His ransom by his old chief.

In character, in capability, in strategic insight, in tactical ability, not one of the predecessors or the successors of Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa can be compared to him; he was the greatest and most outstanding figure of all those corsairs of whose deeds we hear so much during the sixteenth century, the man above all others who was feared and hated by his contemporaries in Christendom. He lived, as we have said, for another eight years after the battle of Prevesa, but his great age prevented him from pursuing a very active career. There were, however, other and younger men, trained in the terrible school of hardship in which his life had been passed, who proved themselves to be his very worthy successors, even if they did not display the same genius in war and statecraft. The conditions of this period are somewhat remarkable when we come to consider them; Europe, which had been sunk in a rude and uncultured barbarism during the middle ages, was emerging under the influence of the Renaissance into a somewhat higher and nobler conception of life. It is true that the awakening was slow, that morally the plane on which the peoples stood was far from being an elevated one, that altruism was far from being the note of the lives lived by the rulers of the so-called civilised nations. For all this they had emerged from that cimmerian darkness in which they had lived so long, and the dawn of better things, of more stable government, of some elementary recognition of the rights of those governed, was beginning to show above the murky horizon.

But if the sun of European progress was slowly and painfully struggling through the clouds, the light which had shone brightly for over seven centuries of Moslem advance was certainly and surely dying. Beneath the mail-clad heel of the Christian warrior the torch of learning which had burned so brightly in Cordova and Granada had been extinguished and ground into the dust, and the descendants of the alumni of those universities were seeking their bread in the Mediterranean Sea in the guise of bloodthirsty and desperate pirates.

There were no longer among the Moors of Andalusia learned philosophers, expert mathematicians, wise astronomers, and practical agriculturists; there was among them but one

art, one science, one means of gaining a livelihood--the practice of war--and their very existence depended on the spoils which could be reft from the hereditary enemy. The corsair who grew to man's estate, brought up in Algiers, Tunis, Tenes, Jerba, or any other of the lurking places in which the sea-wolves congregated, had as a rule no chance but to follow the sea, to exist as his father had existed before him; he must fight or starve, and in a fighting age no youngster was likely to be backward in taking to the life of wild excitement led by his elders. Unless following in the train of one of the leaders, such as Barbarossa, the Moslems were apt to take to the sea in a private capacity; a certain number of them joining together to man a small craft which was known as a brigantine. As has been said in a previous chapter, this word must not be understood in the light of the terminology of the modern seaman: the brigantines of the Moslem corsairs were really large rowing boats, carrying fourteen to twenty-six oars, and made as seaworthy as the small size of such craft would allow. Should the venture of the crew of a brigantine prove successful, then the reis, or captain, might blossom out into the command of a galley, in which his oars would be manned by his slaves; but, in the first instance, he would man his brigantine with a crew of Moslem desperadoes working on the share system and dividing anything that they could pick up; in this manner most of those corsairs who became famous commenced their careers, and rose as we have seen from the thwart of a brigantine to the unstable eminence of a throne in Algiers, Tunis, or Tlemcen.

This life which they led made of them what they were, namely desperate swordsmen, efficient men at arms, incomparably skilful in the management of the craft in which they put to sea; but it did nothing else for them in the way of education; in consequence he who would rise to the top, who aspired to be a leader amongst them and not to remain a mere swash-buckling swordsman all his life, was bound to acquire that dominance necessary for control of the wild spirits of the age. Nor was this ascendancy by any means easy to obtain, as the rank and file led lives of incredible bitterness, almost inconceivable to modern ideas. What they suffered they alone knew, but it was compounded of hunger, thirst, heat, cold, sickness unrelieved by care or tending, wounds which festered for lack of medicaments, death which ever stared them in the face, and last, and worst of all, the risk of capture by some Christian foe, by whom they would be chained to the rowers' bench and taste of a bitterness absolutely unimaginable. As a set-off to this the man who aspired to lead must offer to his followers at least a record of success in small things; also he had to be something of an enthusiast, something of an orator, some one subtly persuasive. Against all the disagreeables of the strenuous life of the corsair he had to hold before the dazzled eyes of Selim, Ali, or Mahomet the promise of fat captures of the

merchant vessels of the foe; when they had but to slit a few throats and to return with their brigantines laden to the gunwale with desirable plunder. Again he had to hearten them for possible encounters with Spaniards, with the terrible Doria, or worst of all with the dreaded Knights of St. John themselves; to point out that to die in conflict with the infidel was a sure passport to heaven and its hours, and to invoke great names, such as that of Barbarossa to show to what dizzy heights the fighting Moslem could climb. In such an age and among such men as these it was no mean feat to become a leader by whom men swore and to whom they yielded a ready obedience.

Fashioned by the hammer of misfortune on the anvil of racial expropriation, such leaders arose among the Moslems, men of iron, before whom all who worshipped at the altars of Islam bowed the knee. These men, whose fame extended throughout all the length and breadth of the Mediterranean, taught to European rulers something of the value of that great force which is known to us under the modern name of "Sea Power."

Next in importance to Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa himself and in many ways his very worthy successor, was Dragut Reis. We have it on the authority of Messire Pierre de Bourdeille, the Seigneur de Brantome, that Dragut was born at a small village in Asia Minor called Charabulac, opposite to the island of Rhodes, and that his parents were Mahommedans. Being born within sight and sound of the sea, the youthful Dragut naturally graduated in the school of the brigantine and completed his education on board of a galley. His training was that which makes the best of fighting seamen, as from contemporary records he appears to have passed all his life actively engaged on board ship. At a very early age he entered the service of a master gunner who served on board the galleys of the Grand Turk. Under his auspices the youngster became an expert pilot in his own home waters, and likewise a most excellent gunner. Dragut was evidently a youth of ability and determination, as almost before he reached man's estate he had succeeded in buying a share in a cruising brigantine where his venture prospered so exceedingly that he was soon able to become sole proprietor of a galeasse. Here again fortune favoured the enterprising young man; his name began to be known as a formidable corsair in the Levant, where he was remarkable for his knowledge of that portion of the Mediterranean.

To better his condition he offered his services to Barbarossa at Algiers, who accepted this new subordinate with joy, delighted to have so valiant and capable a man under his orders.

"During some years," says J. Morgan in his *Compleat History of Algiers*, 1728, "he was by that basha intrusted in the direction of sundry momentous expeditions; in which he acquitted

himself much to the satisfaction of his principal: as having never once been unsuccessful." When we remember the treatment meted out by Barbarossa to some of his unsuccessful lieutenants, Dragut must be esteemed a very fortunate man. His master, we are told, advanced him to all the military offices of the State--it would be interesting to know what these were in a purely piratical confederation ruled by a pirate! In the end Dragut was appointed to be kayia, or lieutenant, and given entire command of twelve galleys.

"From thenceforward this redoubtable corsair passed not one summer without ravaging the coasts of Naples and Sicily; nor durst any Christian vessel attempt to pass between Spain and Italy; for if they offered it he infallibly snapped them up, and when he missed his prey at sea, he made himself amends by making descents along the coasts plundering villages and towns and dragging away multitudes of inhabitants into captivity."

That "no vessel durst pass from Spain to Italy" is no doubt a picturesque form of exaggeration on the part of the historian; at the same time, when Dragut was at the height of his activities there is no doubt that any one passing through those seas ran a great risk of capture; so much so in fact that at this period, from 1538, the date of the battle of Prevesa, until Lepanto in 1571, all maritime commerce in the Mediterranean was greatly circumscribed. At the beginning of this epoch, which saw the rise of the Moslem corsairs, these robbers perforce confined themselves more to the North African coast than was the case later on. The pioneers of the piratical movement, after the fatal date 1492, which saw the wholesale expulsion of the Moors from Spain, were comparatively speaking inexpert practitioners in the art and mystery of piracy; they had not the habit of the sea, and in consequence confined their depredations to the neighbourhood of their own selected ports in Africa, which dominated that sea lane running east and west through the Mediterranean, which then, as now, was one of the greatest highways of commerce of the world. Gradually, as we have seen, under the able guidance of the two Barbarossas, but particularly that of the second and greater of the two, piracy became a commonplace in the north, as well as in the south, of the tideless sea; the corsairs, as time went on, even devoting more time and attention to the coast of Italy and the islands of the archipelago than they did to the recognised trade routes. These latter had become by 1540 similar to an estate which has been shot over too frequently; birds had become both wild and scarce, it was hardly worth while to go over the ground, except now and again on the chance of picking up a straggler. Towns and islands, on the other hand, even if they did not yield much in the way of actual plunder, were always good cover to beat for slaves, which had a certain value in the markets of Algiers and Tunis. Another circumstance which had led to the now frequent raids on

the littoral of the European countries was the countenance and support accorded to the corsairs by the Grand Turk: so admirably did they fit into the scheme of his ambitions, that by the time Dragut arrived at a commanding position they were, so to speak, officially recognised as a fighting asset of the Sublime Porte; and, as we have seen, the Sultan did not hesitate to lend his picked troops, the Janissaries, to the corsairs when engaged in their ordinary piratical business. To the Grand Turk the corsairs were Moslems who were prepared to fight on his side, and who, taking it all in all, really cost him hardly anything; in fact, at this date, owing to the magnificent gifts made to the Sultan by Kheyr-ed-Din, the Padishah must have made something out of his association with the sea-wolves.

By the year 1540 Dragut had distinctly "arrived"; that is to say, he had succeeded in making himself so dreaded that Charles V. ordered Andrea Doria to seek him out and destroy him at any cost. The Christian admiral was "to endeavour by all possible means to purge the sea of so insufferable a nuisance."

Andrea got ready a fleet, which he entrusted, together with the care and management of this affair, to his nephew Jannetin Doria. This was the nephew who, in the disastrous attack by Charles on Hassan Aga at Algiers in the following year, was so nearly lost in the storm which destroyed the fleet of the emperor; and of whom Andrea Doria is reported to have said, "It was decreed that Jannetin should be reduced to such an extremity purposely to convince the world that it was not impossible for Andrea Doria to shed a tear." Certainly from what we know of the celebrated Genoese admiral it is hard to imagine him in a tearful mood. Jannetin Doria put to sea, and, after a long hunt, found the object of his quest at Andior on the coast of Corsica; Dragut was at anchor in the road of Goialatta, under a castle situated between Cabri and Liazzo. The corsair knew nothing of his enemies being at sea, and was in consequence keeping no particular look-out. Although we are not told the composition of the fleet of Jannetin Doria, it must have been a large one, as Dragut had under his orders thirteen galleys, and was unable to withstand the attack to which he was subject. He was also assailed from the shore, as well as the sea, as the castle under which he was at anchor opened fire upon him as soon as it was discovered by its garrison that the new arrivals were Christians. The fire was too hot for the corsair to withstand, and, to add to his embarrassments, the beach soon became lined by hundreds of the fierce Corsi, awaiting the inevitable end when they should be able to fall upon the defeated Moslems and wipe them from off the face of the earth; it was a warfare in which there was no mercy, and if the pirates were to fall into the hands of the islanders they knew well that they would be exterminated.

In all his venturesome life things had never gone so badly with Dragut as upon this occasion. On the one side, should he and his men land they would be massacred; on the other hand, his road to the open sea was barred by an immensely superior force. Recognising the logic of circumstances, and seeing no way of escape, the white flag was hung out by the Moslem leader. The only terms, however, which he could obtain were immediate surrender or instant death. It must have been a moment of anguish to the man who hitherto had always ridden on the crest of the wave of success and achievement to be thus trapped like a rat; and to have the added bitterness of the thought that had he exercised seamanlike care and precaution in keeping a good look-out he might have escaped. As it was, he was allowed no time for reflection, but had to decide on the instant: he did the only thing possible in the circumstances, which was to haul down his flag and to become the thrall of his lifelong foes.

The principal captives were made to pass before young Doria. When Dragut beheld him he cried out in a fury: "What! Am I a slave to that effeminate Caramite?" for Doria was but a beardless youth. These opprobrious epithets being interpreted to the young nobleman, "highly incensed he flew at Dragut, tore out his beard and moustaches, and buffeted him most outrageously: nay his passion was so great it is said that had he not been prevented, he certainly would have sheathed his sword in the bowels of that assuming prisoner."

For four long years Dragut rowed in Doria's galley. No distinctions were made in those days, and knight or noble, companion or grand master, basha or boy, was, if caught, condemned to the rowers' bench to slave at the oar beneath the boatswain's lash, perchance alongside some degraded criminal, filthy and swarming with vermin. While Dragut was employed as a galley slave there came on board the craft in which he rowed Monsieur Parisot, Grand Master of the Knights of Malta. This high officer, recognising his old enemy, called out to him in Spanish:

"Hola, Senor Dragut, usanza de guerra" ("The usage of war, Senor Dragut").

To which the undaunted corsair merely replied with a laugh:

"Y mudanza de fortuna" ("And a change of luck").

The Grand Master, who had known the chain and lash himself, smiled and passed on--there was no pity in those days.

But Dragut was not destined to end his life as a galley slave, for, when indeed hope must have died within him, after more than four years of this veritable hell upon earth, there sailed one day into the harbour of Genoa the great Kheyr-ed-Din himself. The Admiralissimo of the

Grand Turk, full of years, honours, and booty, was on his last cruise, and one of the last acts of his active life was the rescue of Dragut, the man who had served him so well, and for whom he had so high a regard as a resourceful mariner, from the degrading servitude into which he had fallen. The Spanish historian, Marmol, recounts that the sum of three thousand ducats was paid by Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa for the redemption of Dragut. As this history was published in 1573, we must conclude that the author who wrote of these events so soon after they had happened is correct; at the same time, Barbarossa was in command of one hundred galleys of the Grand Turk, and it was never his custom to pay for anything which he could take by force. However this may have been, and the point is not one of very great importance, the Genoese Senate was terrified lest their territory should be ravaged; they wrote accordingly to their Grand Admiral, requesting that Dragut might be released and sent on board of the galley of the admiral basha. This was immediately done, and the man who for four years had tugged at the Christian oar was once again in a position to make war on those who had been for that period his masters.

Not only had he tugged at the Christian oar, but also he had tasted of the Christian whip-- and of very little else, as the food of the rower was as scanty as it was disgusting; in consequence, if he had been an implacable foe to Christendom before this event, he was not likely to have become less so while toiling in the Genoese galley.

The practical retirement of Barbarossa from that sphere of activity in which his life had been passed now left Dragut-Reis the most feared and the most formidable of all the Moslem corsairs in the Mediterranean. From the time of his release by Barbarossa until the day of his death at the siege of Malta in 1565, he followed the example shown him by that prince among pirates with so much assiduity as to render him only second to Kheyr-ed-Din in the detestation in which he was held. Says Morgan: "The ill-treatment he had met with during his four years' captivity was no small addition to the Innate Rapaciousness of his Disposition."

In the year 1546, Kheyr-ed-Din Barbarossa died, and to replace him the Sultan Soliman ordered all the mariners in his dominions to acknowledge Dragut-Reis as their admiral, and to obey him in the same manner as they had obeyed his predecessor. From this date he was the foremost corsair in the Mediterranean, and the feats which were performed by him showed that the Padishah had not erred in his selection.

The ambition of Dragut increased with his power, and he determined, following the example of the Barbarossas, to seize and hold some strong place of arms possessed of a commodious

port in which he might be the supreme ruler. Accordingly, in the depth of winter in the year 1548, at a time which was, as we have pointed out, a close season for piratical enterprises, and during which attack from the sea was not expected, he collected all the corsairs whom he could gather, and fell upon the Spaniards on the coast of Tunis, at Susa, at Sfax, and at Monastir. These places had been taken from the corsairs in the previous summer by Andrea Doria; they formed a sort of regular battle-ground when the combatants were in want of something to do, and were held alternately by the King of Tunis, the Spaniards, and the corsairs.

Dragut was well aware that as soon as the spring arrived he would be attacked; he also knew that the attack would come in sufficient force to drive him out, as none of these towns was really strong or easily defended; in consequence he concentrated his attention on the town of "Africa," otherwise known as Mehedia, and in the Roman histories as Adrumetum.

This great city lay some leagues to the east of Tunis on a tongue of land projecting into the sea; its fortifications were regular, its walls of great thickness, height, and solidity, and were strengthened by many towers and bulwarks; the guns were large, numerous, and in good condition. At the back of the town, on an eminence, stood a large fortress, the citadel of the place; the harbour was large and secure, with an inner basin forming a port for galleys; the entrance to this was closed by a strong chain. The sea washed the walls of the city; indeed, it was entirely surrounded, except where by a narrow neck of land it joined the shore.

The inhabitants, natives of the place, had shaken off the yoke of the King of Tunis, and had formed themselves into a kind of independent republic. They admitted neither Turk nor Christian within their walls, trusting neither party, and fearing from them the fate which befell Susa, Sfax, and Monastir.

"Africa" was the goal of the desires of Dragut-Reis: once in possession of this, by far the strongest city on the littoral of Northern Africa, he thought that he might abide secure against the attacks of Charles and of Andrea Doria. He had seen the enormous expedition of 1541 against Algiers come to naught on account of the wholesale wrecking of the fleet in which it had sailed by a tempest of unexampled violence. But he was too level-headed a man to think that a miracle like this would be likely to come to pass a second time for his own special behoof, and preferred to act the part of the strong man armed who keepeth his goods in peace. He had, however, first to gain over the inhabitants of "Africa" to his views, and they proved anything but anxious to listen to his blandishments. The more he tried to ingratiate himself the less inclined did these people seem to listen.

"My ambition," said the silver-tongued corsair, "is to become a citizen of your great and beautiful city. If you will admit me to its privileges it shall be my business to render you the richest people in the whole Mediterranean, and your city the most dreaded place in the world."

The "Africans," however, were obdurate; they knew a pirate when they saw him quite as well as any one else, and they were quite aware that, should they open their gates to Dragut, sooner or later they would have to stand a siege from the Christian forces, which was a thing they by no means desired.

But Dragut was not yet at the end of his resources; he was rich, and he spent money freely in order to gain over to his side those men of importance by whom such a question as this was bound to be decided. By rich presents and other blandishments he succeeded in securing the friendship of one Ibrahim Amburac, who was not only a leader among the inhabitants, but also governor of one of the towers by which the city was surrounded. Through him he approached the Council by which the town was ruled, only to receive a very decided negative: the Council observed the outward forms of politeness to this formidable person who was speaking them so fair: in reality, they hated and feared the corsairs only one degree less than they did Andrea Doria and his Christians. To admit the one was to bring upon themselves the vengeance of the other; therefore if they could keep them both out they intended so to do. The ill-omened courtesy of the corsair filled their hearts with apprehension, and they viewed his immediate departure, after the refusal of the council had been conveyed to him, with undisguised relief. Had they but known their man a little better, their uneasiness would have been far greater than their joy at his temporary absence. Those things desired by Dragut which he could not obtain by fair means he usually seized by the strong hand; and when he left so hurriedly, and at the same time so unostentatiously, he had already entered into a plot with Ibrahim Amburac. This leader, furious at the rebuff which he had received at the hands of his fellow councillors on the subject of the admittance of Dragut to the citizenship of "Africa," was now ready to deliver that city into the hands of the corsairs by treachery.

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