

COLONEL QUARTZ, V. C.

By H. RIDER HAGGARD

CHAPTER XXXIII.

GEORGE'S DIPLOMATIC ERRAND.

George carried out his intention of going to London. The morning following the day when Mr. Quest had driven the auctioneer in the dog cart to Hounham, George might have been seen an hour before it was light purchasing a third-class return ticket to Liverpool Street. Arriving there in safety, he partook of a second breakfast, for it was 10 o'clock, and then taking a cab he caused himself to be driven to the end of that street in Ipswich where he had gone with the fair "Editha," and where Johnnie had made acquaintance with his ash stick.

Dismissing the cab, he made his way to the house with the red pillars, but on arriving was considerably taken aback, for the place had every appearance of being deserted. There were no blinds to the windows, and on the steps were marks for marks and a rag and straw which seemed to be the litter of a recent removal. Indeed, there on the road were the broad wheel marks of the van which had carried off the furniture. He stared at the sight with dismay. The bird had apparently flown and had left his address, and he had had his trip for nothing.

He pressed upon the electric bell; that is, he did this ultimately. George was not accustomed to electric bells, indeed he had never seen one before, and after attempting vainly to pull it with his fingers—for he knew that it must be broken because there was no wire itself written on it—he as a last resource condescended to try it with his teeth. Ultimately, however, he discovered how to use it, but without result. Either the battery had been taken away, or it was out of gear. As he was wondering what to do next, he made a discovery—the door was slightly ajar. He pushed it, and it came open—revealing a dirty hall, stripped of every scrap of furniture. Entering, he shut the door and walked up the stairs to the room whence he had fled after thrashing Johnnie. Here he paused and listened, for he thought he heard some body in the room; nor was he mistaken, for presently a well remembered voice shrilled out within:

"Who's skulking about outside there?" said the voice. "If it's one of those bailiffs he'd better look it, for there's nothing left here." George's countenance positively beamed at the sound.

"Bailiffs, marm?" he hung out through the door, "isn't no Yarmouth bailiffs, it's a friend, and just when you're wanting one so much." "Oh, come in, whoever you are," said the voice. Accordingly he opened the door and entered, and this was what he saw. The room, like the rest of the house, had been stripped of everything, with the solitary exception of a box and a mattress, beside which there were an empty bottle and a dirty glass. On the mattress at the fair Editha, alias Mrs. D' Aubigney, alias the Tiger, alias Mrs. Quest, and such a sight as she presented George had never seen before. Her fierce face bore traces of recent heavy drinking, and was moreover dirty, laggard and dreadful to look upon; her hair was a frizzy mass of some leavings of the golden dye had faded, leaving it its natural hue of doubtful gray. She had no collar on, and her linen was open at the neck; on her feet were a filthy pair of white satin slippers, on her back that same gorgeous pink satins gown which Mr. Quest had observed on the occasion of his visit, now, however, soiled and torn. Anything more squalid or more repulsive than the whole picture cannot be imagined, and though his stomach was pretty strong, and in the course of his life he had seen many a sight, he felt as if he were looking at a scene of utter degradation, George literally recoiled from it.

"What's the matter?" said she, sharply, "and who the dickens are you? Ah, I know you; you are the chap who whacked Johnnie," and she burst into a hoarse scream of laughter at the recollection. "It is a man of you, though, to look at like I leave me. He pulled me the devil, and I was fined two pounds by the beak."

"Mean of him, marm, not me; but he was a mean varmint altogether; he was to go and pack a lady too; I never heard of such a thing. But, marm, if I might say so, you seem to be in trouble here," and he took a seat upon the deal box.

their backs to the wind, and so must you, marm. So it's the work you'll be in to-morrow. Well, you'll find it a poor place, the skill is that you ought to take the skin off your throat, and not a drop of liquor, not even a cup of hot tea, and work, too, lots of it—scrubbing, marm, scrubbing."

This vivid picture of miseries to come drew something between a sob and a howl from the woman. There was nothing more horrible to the imagination of such people than the idea of being forced to work. If their notions of actual and possible punishment were to be put, they would be found, in nine cases out of ten, to resolve themselves into a vague conception of hard labor in a hot climate. It was the idea of the scrubbing that particularly affected the Tiger.

"I won't do it," she said, "I'll go to chocky for you." "Look here, marm," said George, in a persuasive voice, and pushing the brandy bottle toward her, "where's the need for you to go to the workhouse or to the chocky—your husband is bound to you by law to support you as becomes a lady? And, marm, another thing, a husband as has wickedly deserted you—which how he could do so ain't for me to say—and is living along of another young party."

She took some more brandy before she answered. "That's all very well, you duffer," she said; "but how am I to get at him? I tell you I'm afraid of him, and even if I weren't, I haven't a cent to travel with, and if I got there what an I to do?" "As for being afraid, marm," he answered, "I've told you, Laryer Quest is a long sight more frightened of you than you are of him. Then as for money, why, marm, I'm going down to Bosingham myself by the train that leaves Liverpool street at half past 11, and that's an hour from now, and it's proud and proud of me to take a lady as you are, and be the means of bringing them as has been in holy matrimony together again. And as to what you should do when you gets there, why, you should just walk up with your husband, and I'll be on you to come living as you did, righter, and take me back; and if he don't, why, then you swears an information, and it's a case of warrant for bigamy."

The Tiger chuckled, and then suddenly seized with suspicion, looked at her visitor sharply. "What do you want me to blow the gaff for?" she said; "you're a leery old hand, you are, for all your simple ways, and you've got some game on, I'll take my davy." "I'm a game—If answered George, an expression of the deepest pain spreading itself over his high forehead. "No, marm—and when one has wanted to help a friend, too. Well, if you think that—and no doubt, misfortune have made you suspicious—the best I can do is to bid you good day, and to wish you well out of your troubles, workhouse and all, marm, which I do according; and be sure my heart is as warm as ever, and I'm proud to be loved to the lag on the mattress, and then turning walked toward the door.

She sprung up with an oath. "I'll go," she said, "I'll take the change out of him; I'll teach him to let his wife starve on a beggarly pittance. I don't care if he does try to kill me, I'll run him, and she stamped upon the floor and screamed, "I'll run him, I'll run him," presenting such a picture of abandoned rage and wickedness that even George, whose nerves were not finely strung, inwardly shrank from her.

"Ah, marm," he said, "no wonder you're so hot. When I think of what you've had to suffer, I own I make my blood go a-bubbling through my veins. But if you are coming, perhaps it would be as well to stop cursing and put your hat on, for we have got to catch the train," and he pointed to a headgear chiefly made of somewhat dilapidated carpets, and an umber which the bailiffs had either overlooked or left through pity.

She put on her hat and cloak, and then going to the hole beneath the board, out of which she had taken the key, she produced her jewelry, she extracted the copy of the certificate of marriage which that lady had not apparently thought worth stealing, and put it in the pocket of her pink silk pelisse. Then George, having first secured the remainder of the bottle of brandy, which he put into an empty pocket, they started and, finding a hansom, drove to Liverpool street. Such a spectacle, as the Tiger looked upon the platform, George was wont, in after days, to declare he never did see. But it can easily be imagined that a fierce, dissolute, hungry looking woman, with half dyed hair, who had drunk as much as was good for her, dressed in a hat made of shabby pence feathers, dirty white shoes, an umber with some buttons off, and a gorgeous but filthy pink silk tea gown, presented a sufficiently curious appearance, especially when contrasted with her companion, the sober and melancholy looking tiger, who was arrayed in his pepper and salt Sunday suit.

Up; I'll have his blood. But look here, if he's put in chocky, where's the tin to come from?" "Why, marm," answered George, with splendid mendacity, "it's the best thing that can happen for you, for if they collar him you get the property, and that's law."

"Oh," she answered, "if I'd known that 'Oh' had been collared long ago, I can tell you."

"Come," said George, seeing that they were nearing their destination, "have one more nip just to keep your spirits up, and be produced the brandy bottle, at which she took a long pull.

"Now," he said, "go for him like a wild cat." "Never you fear," she said. They dismounted from the cab and entered the court house without attracting any particular notice. The court itself was crowded, for a case which excited public interest was coming to a conclusion. The jury had given their verdict and sentence was being pronounced by Mr. de la Molla, the chairman.

Mr. Quest was sitting at his table below the bench taking some notes. "There's your husband," he whispered, "now do you draw on."

George's part in the drama was played, and with a sigh of relief he fell back to watch its final development. He saw the fierce, tall woman slip through the crowd like a snake or a panther to the prey, and some companion touched him when he thought of the prey. He glanced at the elderly respectable looking gentleman at the table, and reflected that he, too, was stalking his prey—the old squire and the ancient house of de la Molla. Then his companion vanished, and he rejoiced to think that he would be the means of destroying a man who, to fill his pockets, did not hesitate to destroy the family with which his life and the lives of his forefathers for many generations had been intertwined.

By the time the woman had fought her way through the press, bursting the remaining buttons off her sister in so doing, and reached the bar which separated the spectators from the space reserved for the officials. On the further side of the bar was a gangway, which came the table at which Mr. Quest sat. He had been busy writing something all this time; now he rose and passed it to Mr. de la Molla, and then turned to sit down again.

Meanwhile his wife had craned her long, lithe body forward over the bar till her head was almost within the litter edge of the table. There she stood glaring at the wicked face alive with fury and malice, for the brandy she had drunk had caused her to forget her fears.

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