

Between Two Fires

By ANTHONY HOPE

"A wise man will make more opportunities than he finds." —Francis Bacon.

CHAPTER XVII.—(Continued.)

There was in the room, as perhaps might be expected, a washing stand. This article was of the description one often sees; above the level of the stand itself there rose a wooden screen to the height of two feet and a half, covered with pretty tiles, the presumable object being to protect the wall paper. I never saw a more innocent looking bit of furniture; it might have stood in a lady's dressing room. The Signorina went up to it and slid it gently on one side; it moved in a groove! Then she pressed a spot in the wall behind, and a small piece of it rolled aside, disclosing a keyhole.

"He's taken the key, of course," she said. "We must break it open. Who's got a hammer?"

Tools were procured, and, working under the Signorina's directions, after a good deal of trouble, we laid bare a neat little safe embedded in the wall. This safe was legibly inscribed on the outside, "Burglar's Puzzle." We, however, were not afraid of making a noise, and it only puzzled us for ten minutes.

When opened it revealed a Golconda! There lay in securities and cash no less than \$500,000!

We smiled at one another. "O sad revelation," I remarked. "Hoary old fox!" said the Colonel.

No wonder the harbor works were unremunerative in their early stages. The President must have kept them at a very early stage.

"What are you people up to?" cried Carr.

"Rank burglary, my dear boy," I replied, and we retreated with our spoil.

"Now," said I to the Colonel, "what are you going to do?"

"Why, what do you think, Mr. Martin?" interposed the Signorina. "He's going to give you your money, and divide the rest with his sincere friend, Christina Nugent."

"Well, I suppose so," said the Colonel. "But it strikes me you are making a good thing of this, Martin."

"My dear Colonel," said I, "a bargain is a bargain, and where would you have been without my money?"

The Colonel made no reply, but handed me the money, which I liked much better. I took the \$320,000 and said:

"Now I can face the world, an honest man."

The Signorina laughed. "I am glad," she said, "chiefly for poor old Jones' sake. It'll take a load off his mind."

The Colonel proceeded to divide the remainder into two little heaps, one of which he pushed over to the Signorina. She took it gaily, saying:

"Now I shall make curl papers of half my bonds, and I shall rely on the—what do you call it?—the Provisional government to pay the rest. You remember about the house?"

"I'll see about that soon," said the Colonel impatiently. "You two seem to think there's nothing to do but take the money. You forget we've got to make our positions safe."

"Exactly. The Colonel's government must be carried on," said I.

The Signorina did not catch the allusion. She yawned, and said:

"Oh, then I shall go. Rely on my loyalty, your excellency."

She made him a courtesy and went to the door. As I opened it for her she whispered, "Horrid old bear! Come and see me, Jack," and so vanished, carrying off her dollars.

I returned and sat down opposite the Colonel.

"I wonder how she knew about the washing stand?" I remarked.

"Because Whittingham was fool enough to tell her," said the Colonel testily.

Then we settled to business. This unambitious tale does not profess to be a complete history of Aureatland, and I will spare my readers the recital of our discussion. We decided at last that matters were still so critical, owing to the President's escape, that the ordinary forms of law and constitutional government must be temporarily suspended. The chamber was not in session, which made this course easier. The Colonel was to be proclaimed President and to assume supreme power under martial law for some weeks, while we looked about us. It was thought better that my name should not appear officially, but I agreed to take in hand, under his supervision, all matters relating to finance.

"We can't pay the interest on the real debt," he said.

"No," I replied; "you must issue a notice, setting forth that, owing to General Whittingham's malversations, payments must be temporarily suspended. Promise it will be all right later on."

"Very good," said he; "and now I shall go and look up those officers. I must keep them in good temper, and the men, too. I shall give 'em another ten thousand."

"Generous hero!" said I, "and I shall go and restore this cash to my employers."

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was twelve o'clock when I left the Golden House and strolled quietly down to Liberty street. The larger part of the soldiers had been drawn off, but a couple of companies still kept guard in the Piazza. The usual occupations of life were going on amid a confused stir of excitement, and I saw by the interest my appearance aroused that some part at least

of my share in the night's doings had leaked out. The Gazette had published a special edition, in which it hailed the advent of freedom, and, while lauding McGregor to the skies, bestowed a warm commendation on the "noble Englishman who, with a native love of liberty, had taken on himself the burden of Aureatland in her hour of travail." The metaphor struck me as inappropriate, but the sentiment was most healthy; and when I finally beheld two officers of police sitting on the head of a drunken man for toasting the falling regime, I could say to myself, as I turned into the bank, "Order reigns in Warsaw."

General assent had proclaimed a suspension of commerce on this auspicious day, and I found Jones sitting idle and ill at ease. I explained to him the state of affairs, showing how the President's dishonorable scheme had compelled me, in the interests of the bank, to take a more or less active part in the revolution. It was pathetic to hear him bewail the villainy of the man he had trusted, and when I produced the money, he blessed me fervently, and at once proposed writing to the directors a full account of the matter.

"They are bound to vote you an honorarium, sir," he said.

"I don't know, Jones," I replied. "I am afraid there is a certain prejudice against me at headquarters. But in any case I have resolved to forego the personal advantage that might accrue to me from my conduct. President McGregor has made a strong representation to me that the schemes of General Whittingham, if publicly known, would, however unjustly, prejudice the credit of Aureatland, and he appealed to me not to give particulars to the world. In matters such as these, Jones, we cannot be guided solely by selfish considerations."

"Heaven forbid, sir!" said Jones, much moved.

"I have, therefore, consented to restrict myself to a confidential communication to the directors; they must judge how far they will pass it on to the shareholders. To the world at large I shall say nothing of the second loan; and I know you will oblige me by treating this money as the product of realizations in the ordinary course of business. The recent disturbances will quite account for so large a sum being called in."

"I don't quite see how I can arrange that."

"Ah, you are overdone," said I. "Leave it all to me, Jones."

And this I persuaded him to do. In fact, he was so relieved at seeing the money back that he was easy to deal with; and if he suspected anything, he was overruled by my present exalted position. He appeared to forget what I could not, that the President, no doubt, still possessed that fatal cable!

After lunch I remembered my engagement with the Signorina, and, putting on my hat, was bidding farewell to business, when Jones said:

"There's a note just come for you sir. A little boy brought it while you were out at lunch."

He gave it to me—a little dirty envelope, with an illiterate scrawl. I opened it carelessly, but as my eye fell on the President's hand, I started in amazement. The note was dated "Saturday—From on board The Songstress, and ran as follows:

"Dear Mr. Martin—I must confess to having underrated your courage and abilities. If you care to put them at my disposal now, I will accept them. In the other event, I must refer you to my public announcement. In any case it may be useful to you to know that McGregor designs to marry Signorina Nugent. I fear that on my return it will be hardly consistent with my public duties to spare your life (unless you accept my present offer), but I shall always look back to your acquaintance with pleasure. I have, if you will allow me to say so, seldom met a young man with such natural gifts for finance and politics. I shall anchor five miles out from Whittingham to-night (for I know you have no ships), and if you join me, well and good. If not, I shall consider your decision irrevocable. Believe me, dear Mr. Martin, faithfully yours,

"MARCUS W. WHITTINGHAM,
"President of the Republic of Aureatland."

The President's praise was grateful to me. But I did not see my way to fall in with his views. He said nothing about the money, but I knew well that its return would be a condition of any alliance between us. Again, I was sure that he also "designed to marry the Signorina," and if I must have a rival on the spot I preferred McGregor in that capacity. Lastly, I thought that after all there is a decency in things, and I had better stick to my party. I did not, however, tell McGregor about the letter, merely sending him a line to say I had heard that he had better look out.

This done, I resumed my interrupted progress to the Signorina's. When I was shown in, she greeted me kindly.

"I have had a letter from the President," I said.

"Yes," said she, "he told me he had written to you."

"Why, have you heard from him?"

"Yes, just a little note. He is rather cross with me. Are you going over to him—going to forsake me?"

"How can you ask me? Won't you show me your letter, Christina?"

"No, John," she answered, mimicking

my impassioned tones. "I may steal the President's savings, but I respect his confidence."

"You know what he says to me about McGregor?"

"Yes," said the Signorina. "But, curious to relate, the Colonel has just been here himself and told me the same thing. The Colonel has not a nice way of making love, Jack—not so nice as yours nearly."

Thus encouraged I went and sat down by her. I believe I took her hand.

"You don't love him?"

"Not at all," she replied. "I like you very much, Jack," she said, "and it's very sweet of you to have made a revolution for me. It was for me, Jack?"

"Of course it was, my darling," I promptly replied.

"But you know, Jack, I don't see how we're much better off. Indeed, in a way it's worse. The President wouldn't let anybody else marry me, but he wasn't so peremptory as the Colonel. The Colonel declares he will marry me this day week!"

"We'll see about that," said I, savagely.

"Another revolution, Jack?" asked the Signorina.

"You needn't laugh at me," I said sulkily.

"Poor boy! What are we idyllic lovers to do?"

"I don't believe you're a bit in earnest."

"Yes, I am, Jack—now." Then she went on, with a sort of playful pity, "Look at my savage, jealous Jack. It's pleasant while it lasts; try not to be broken-hearted if it doesn't last."

"If you love me, why don't you come with me out of this sink of iniquity?"

"Run away with you?" she asked with open amazement. "Do you think that we're the sort of people for a romantic elopement? I am very earthy. And so are you, Jack dear, nice earth, but earth, Jack."

There was a good deal of truth in this remark. We were not an ideal pair for love in a cottage.

"Yes," I said. "I've got no money."

"I've got a little money, but not much. I've been paying my debts," she added proudly.

"I haven't been even doing that. And I'm not quite equal to pilfering that \$300,000."

"We must wait, Jack. But this I will promise: I'll never marry the Colonel. If it comes to that or running away, we'll run away."

"And Whittingham?"

The Signorina for once looked grave. "You know him," she said. "Think what he made you do! and you're not a weak man, or I shouldn't be fond of you, Jack, you must keep him away."

She was quite agitated; and it was one more tribute to the President's powers that he should exert so strange an influence over such a nature. I was burning to ask her more about herself and the President, but I could not while she was distressed. And when I had comforted her, she resolutely declined to return to the subject.

"No, go away now," she said. "Think how we are to checkmate our two Presidents. And Jack, whatever happens, I got you back the money. I've done you some good. So be kind to me. I'm not very much afraid of your heart breaking. You have plenty of useful things to occupy your time."

At last I accepted my dismissal, and walked off, my happiness considerably damped by the awkward predicament in which we stood. Clearly McGregor meant business; and at this moment McGregor was all powerful. If he kept the reins, I should lose my love. If the President came back, a worse fate still threatened. Supposing it were possible to carry off the Signorina, which I doubted very much, where were we to go? And would she come? On the whole, I did not think she would come.

(To be continued.)

Knew His Business.

Criticus—I have only one fault to find with this rural scene.

DeAuber—What is that?

Criticus—Why in the name of common sense did you paint those cows blue?

DeAuber—Oh, that's all right. The models I used were from the blue-grass section of Kentucky.

One Woman's Way.

Husband—Why do you encourage that Mrs. Tattles to keep calling so often? Is it because you enjoy hearing the neighbors talked about?

Wife—Oh, no, but when she is here I know she isn't somewhere else talking about me.

More of Him.

Miss Mugley—The idea of his calling me homely. I may not be very pretty, but I'm certainly not as homely as he is.

Miss Pert—No, dear, but that's simply because he's bigger than you.—Philadelphia Public Ledger.

Another Viewpoint.

Chapleigh—I—aw—nevah associate with those—aw—howid baseball playahs, doncher know.

Miss Caustique—I suppose not. There are some things that even baseball players won't stand for.

Why It Is.

"Why is it," asked the Frenchman, "that you have no duels like we have in France?"

"We are all such good shots," answered the American, "that we would be sure to hit each other. That's why."

As a Supplanter.

The Maid—Do you think the automobile will ever supplant the horse?

The Man—No; but it may supplant the mule in the course of time. One is fully as unreliable as the other.

The Inquisitive Barber.

No doubt many readers have heard of the austere disposition of America's greatest living actor, Richard Mansfield. Perhaps the following conversation, which took place in one of Boston's leading hotels, better illustrates the satirical nature of the player. Entering the barber's shop one morning, he was immediately recognized as Richard Mansfield by the barber.

"Good morning," said the barber affably.

A grunt was the only reply.

"Well, how was things over at the house last night?"

"What house?" answered the actor ironically.

"The Hollis," said the barber.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Why, are you not Richard Mansfield?" the barber asked.

"Oh, no, indeed," replied Mr. Mansfield. "I just got out of jail this morning."

"What! You're not Richard Mansfield; and you just got out of jail this morning! What for, pray?"

"For assaulting inquisitive barbers," was the response.

Bold Invaders.

There were some phases of country life with which the little city girl had as yet only one day's acquaintance, but the rights of property-owners and property-renters were firmly fixed in her mind.

"Mother!" she called, in evident excitement, the morning after the family had settled for the summer in Sunset View Cottage, "mother! Just come here and look! There are somebody's hens wiping their feet on our nice clean grass!"

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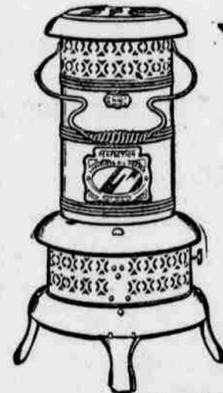
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