

Between Two Fires

By ANTHONY HOPE

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

CHAPTER XX.—(Continued.)

We had no time to waste in abusing the Colonel; the question was how to outwit him. I unfolded my plan to the Signorina, not at all disguising from her the difficulties, and even dangers, attendant upon it. Whatever may have been her mind before and after, she was at this moment either so overcome with her fear of the Colonel, or so carried away by her feeling for me, that she made nothing of difficulties and laughed at dangers, pointing out that though failure would be ignominious, it could not substantially aggravate our present position.

"Are you going to take any of the money away with you?" she asked.

"No," said I, "I don't think so. It would considerably increase the risk if I were seen hanging about the bank; you know he's got spies all over the place. Besides, what good would it do? I couldn't stick to it, and I'm not inclined to run any more risks merely to save the bank's pocket. The bank hasn't treated me so well as all that. I propose to rely on your bounty till I've time to turn round. Now, shall I come for you?" I asked her when we had arranged the other details.

"I think not," she said. "I believe the Colonel has one of my servants in his pay. I can slip out by myself, but I couldn't manage so well if you were with me. The sight of you would excite curiosity. I will meet you at the bottom of Liberty street."

"At two o'clock in the morning exactly, please. Don't come through the Piazza and Liberty street. Come round by the drive." (This was a sort of boulevard encircling the town, where the aristocracy was wont to ride and drive.) "Things ought to be pretty busy about the bank by then, and no one will notice you. You have a revolver?"

"Yes."

"All right. Don't hurt anyone if you can help it; but if you do, don't leave him to linger in agony. Now I'm off," I continued. "I suppose I'd better not come and see you again?"

"I'm afraid you mustn't, Jack. You've been here two hours already."

"I shall be in my rooms in the afternoon. If anything goes wrong, send your carriage down the street and have it stopped at the grocer's. I shall take that for a sign."

The Signorina agreed, and we parted tenderly. My last words were:

"You'll send that message to Whittingham at once?"

"This moment," she said, as she waved me a kiss from the door of the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

I was evidently in for another day as unpleasantly exciting as the one I had spent before the revolution, and I reflected sadly that if a man once goes in for things of that kind, it's none so easy to pull up. Luckily, however, I had several things to occupy me, and was not left to fret the day away in idleness. First I turned my steps to the harbor. As I went I examined my pockets and found a sum total of nine hundred and fifty dollars. This was my all, for of late I had deemed it wise to carry my fortune on my person. Well, this was enough for the present; the future must take care of itself. So I thought to myself as I went along with a light heart, my triumph in love easily outweighing all the troubles and dangers that beset me. Only land me safe out of Aurenaland with the Signorina by my side, and I asked nothing more of fortune! Let the dead bury their dead, and the bank look after its dollars!

Thus musing, I came to the boat house where my launch lay. She was a tidy little boat, and had the advantage of being workable by one man without any difficulty. All I had to arrange was how to embark on her unperceived. I summoned the boatman in charge and questioned him closely about the probable state of the weather. He confidently assured me it would be fine but dark.

"Very well," said I, "I shall go fishing; start overnight and have a shy at them at sunrise."

The man was rather astonished at my unwonted energy, but of course made no objection.

"What time do you start, sir?" he asked.

"I want her ready by two," said I. "Leave her at the end of your jetty, ready for me. She'll be all safe there, won't she?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Nobody'll be about, except the sentries, and they won't touch her."

I privately hoped that not even the sentries would be about, but I didn't say so. "Of course, sir, I shall lock the gate. You've got your key?"

"Yes, all right, and here you are—and much obliged for your trouble."

Highly astonished and grateful at receiving a large tip for no obvious reason (rather a mistake on my part), the man was profuse in promising to make every arrangement for my comfort. Even when I asked for a few cushions, he dissembled his scorn and agreed to put them in. "And mind you don't sit up," I said as I left him.

"I'm not likely to sit up if I'm not obliged," he answered. "Hope you'll have good sport, sir."

From the harbor I made my way straight to the Golden House. The Colonel was rather surprised to see me again so soon, but when I told him I came on business, he put his occupations on one side and listened to me.

I began with some anxiety, for if he suspected my good faith all would be lost. However, I was always a good hand at a lie, and the Colonel was not the President.

"I've come about that money question," I said.

"Well, have you come to your senses?" he asked, with his habitual rudeness.

"I can't give you the money," I went on.

"You sit there and tell me that? Do you know that if the soldiers don't have money in a few hours, they'll upset me? They're ready to do it any minute. I don't know now when I give an order whether I shall be obeyed or get a bullet through my head."

"Pray be calm," said I. "You didn't let me finish!"

"Let you finish!" he cried. "You seem to think jabber does everything. The end of it all is, that either you give me the money, or I take it—and if you interfere, look out!"

"That is just what I was going to propose, if you hadn't interrupted me," I said quietly, but with inward exultation, for I saw he was just in the state of mind to walk eagerly into the trap I was preparing for him.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I explained to him that it was impossible for me to give up the money. My reputation was at stake; it was my duty to die in defense of that money—a duty which, I hastened to add, I entertained no intention of performing.

"But," I went on, "although I am bound not to surrender the money, I am not bound to anticipate a forcible seizure of it. In times of disturbance parties of ruffians often turn to plunder. Not even the most rigorous precautions can guard against it. Now it would be very possible that even to-night a band of such marauders might make an attack on the bank, and carry off all the money in the safe."

"Oh!" said the Colonel, "that's the game, is it?"

"That," I replied, "is the game; and a very neat game, too, if you play it properly."

"And what will they say in Europe, when they hear the Provisional government is looting private property?"

"My dear Colonel, you force me to much explanation. You will, of course, not appear in the matter."

"I should like to be there," he remarked.

"If I weren't, the men mightn't catch the exact drift of the thing."

"You will be there, of course, but inognito. Look here, Colonel, it's as plain as two peas. Give out that you're going to reconnoiter the coast and keep an eye on The Songstress. Draw off your companies from the Piazza on that pretense. Then take fifteen or twenty men you can trust—not more, for it's no use asking more than you can help, and resistance is out of the question. About two, when everything is quiet, surround the bank. Jones will open when you knock. Don't hurt him, but take him outside and keep him quiet. Go in and take the money. Here's the key to the safe. Then, if you like, set fire to the place."

"Bravo, my boy!" said the Colonel.

"There's stuff in you after all! And what are you going to get out of it? I suppose that's coming next?"

As the reader knows, I wasn't going to get anything out of it, except myself and the Signorina. But it wouldn't do to tell the Colonel that; he would not believe in disinterested conduct. So I bargained with him for thirty thousand dollars, which he promised so readily that I strongly doubted whether he ever meant to pay it.

"Do you think there's any danger of Whittingham making an attack while we're engaged on the job?"

The Colonel was, in common parlance, getting rather warmer than I liked. It was necessary to mislead him.

"I don't think so," I replied. "He can't possibly have organized much of a party here yet. There's some discontent, no doubt, but not enough for him to rely on."

"There's plenty of discontent," said the Colonel.

"There won't be in a couple of hours."

"Why not?"

"Why, because you're going down to the barracks to announce a fresh installment of pay to the troops to-morrow morning—a handsome installment."

"Yes," said he thoughtfully, "that ought to keep them quiet for one night. Fact is, they don't care twopence either for me or Whittingham; and if they think they'll get more out of me they'll stick to me."

"Of course," I assented. Indeed, it was true enough as long as the President was not on the spot; but I thought privately, that the Colonel did not allow enough for his rival's personal influence and prestige, if he once got face to face with the troops.

"Yes," the Colonel went on, "I'll do that, and what's more, I'll put the people in good-humor by sending down orders for a free social in the Piazza to-night."

"Delightfully old-fashioned and baronial," I remarked. "I think it's a good idea. Have a bonfire and make it complete. I don't suppose Whittingham dreams of any attempt, but it will make the riot even more plausible."

"At any rate, they'll be too jolly to make trouble," said he.

"Well, that's about all, isn't it?" said I. "I shall be off. I've got to write to

my directors and ask instructions for the investment of the money."

"You'll live to be hanged, Martin," said the Colonel, with evident admiration. "Not by you, eh, Colonel? Whatever might have happened if I'd been obstinate! Hope I shall survive to dance at your wedding anyhow. Less than a week now!"

"Yes," said he, "next Saturday's the day!"

He really looked quite the happy bridegroom as he said this, and I left him to contemplate his bliss.

"I would bet ten to one that day never comes," I thought, as I walked away. "Even if I don't will 'll back the President to be back before that."

The Colonel's greed had triumphed over his wits, and he had fallen into my snare with greater readiness than I could have hoped. The question remained, What would the President do when he got the Signorina's letter? It may conduce to a better understanding of the position if I tell what that letter was. She gave it me to read over, after we had compiled it together, and I still have my copy. It ran as follows:

"I can hardly hope you will trust me again, but if I betrayed you, you drove me to it. I have given them your money; it is in the bank now. M. refuses to give it up, and the C. means to take it to-night. He will have only a few men, the rest not near. He will be at the bank at two, with about twenty men. Take your own measures. All here favor you. He threatens me with violence unless I marry him at once. He watches The Songstress, but if you can leave her at anchor and land in a boat there will be no suspicion. Do not punish me more by disbelieving me." CHRISTINA.

"P. S.—M. and the C. are on bad terms, and M. will not be active against you."

Upon the whole I thought this would bring him. I doubted whether he would believe very much in it, but it looked probable. Again, he was so fond of a bold stroke, and so devoid of fear, that it was very likely he would come and see if it were true. If, as we suspected, he already had a considerable body of adherents on shore, he could land and reconnoiter without very great danger of falling into the Colonel's hands. Finally, even if he didn't come, we hoped the letter would be enough to divert his attention from any thought of fugitive boats and runaway lovers.

To my mind it is nearly as difficult to be consistently selfish as to be absolutely unselfish. I had, at this crisis, every inducement to concentrate all my efforts on myself, but I could not get Jones out of my head. It was certainly improbable that Jones would try to resist the marauding party; but neither the Colonel nor his chosen band was likely to be scrupulous, and it was impossible not to see that Jones might get a bullet through his head; indeed, I fancied such a step would rather commend itself to the Colonel, as giving a bona fide look to the affair. Jones had often been the cause of great inconvenience to me, but I didn't wish to have his death on my conscience, so I was very glad when I happened to meet him on my way back from the Golden House, and seized the opportunity of giving him a friendly hint.

I took him and sat him down beside me on a bench in the Piazza. I was in no way disturbed by the curious glances of the three soldiers who were evidently charged to keep an eye on the bank and my dealings with it.

I began by pledging Jones to absolute secrecy, and then I intimated to him, in a roundabout way, that the Colonel and I were both very apprehensive of an attack on the bank.

"The town," said I, "is in a most unsettled condition, and many dangerous characters are about. Under these circumstances I have felt compelled to leave the defense of our property in the hands of the government. I have formally intimated to the authorities that we shall hold them responsible for any loss occasioned to us by public disorder. The Colonel, in the name of the government, has accepted that responsibility. I therefore desire to tell you, Mr. Jones, that in the lamentable event of any attack on the bank it will not be expected of you to expose your life by resistance. Such a sacrifice would be both uncalculated for and useless; and I must instruct you that the government insists that their measures shall not be put in danger of frustration by any rash conduct on our part. I am unable to be at the bank this evening; but in the event of any trouble you will oblige me by not attempting to meet force by force. You will yield, and we shall rely on our remedy against the government in case of loss."

These instructions so fully agreed with the natural bent of Jones' mind that he readily acquiesced in them and expressed high appreciation of my foresight.

"Take care of yourself and Mrs. Jones, my dear fellow," I concluded; "that is all you have to do, and I shall be satisfied."

I parted from him affectionately, wondering if my path in life would ever cross the honest, stupid old fellow's again, and heartily hoping that his fortune would soon take him out of the rogue's nest in which he had been dwelling.

(To be continued.)

Asked and Answered.

"Oh, what do you call those things you hang clothes on?" said Dumley, who was trying to think of "clothes-tree."

"What things?" asked Jiggins.

"Why, they have arms that stick out like this and—"

"Oh, dudes!"—Philadelphia Ledger.

A Man of Doubts.

"Do you think that municipal ownership would eliminate graft?"

"I am not quite sure," answered Senator Sorghum, "whether it would eliminate it or simply originate a new kind."—Washington Star.

She Knew.

Sunday School Teacher—Can any of you children tell me what was King David's nationality?

Willie—Hebrew.

S. S. T.—That's right. Now, can any one tell me his wife's nationality?

Annie (after pause)—I know, teacher.

S. S. T.—Well, Annie, you may tell us.

Annie—Shebrew.—Toledo Blade.

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Differentiating.

"William," said the boss, "sort those eggs into two piles. They are to be sold at different prices."

"Yes, sir," said the boy. "The fresh and the near fresh?"

"No, you lunkhead; the big and the little."—Chicago Tribune.

Information.

The train had stopped for water at a little station in the country.

The passenger with the skull cap, seeing a lone native standing on the station platform, addressed him.

"Farmers around here seem to have been cutting a good deal of hay this morning," he said.

"Yes, sir," answered the native.

"They're taking risks. Don't you think it looks like rain?"

"Sort o'."

"What do you suppose they will do if it does rain?"

"I reckon they'll have sense enough to go in out of it, mister."—Chicago Tribune.

In the Nick of Time.

Coleridge was enumerating the stenches of Cologne.

He had counted up to seventy-one, and stopped in despair.

"That seems to be all!" he muttered.

"And I've just got to have another one!"

At this moment an automobile whizzed by.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "There it is!"

Sniffing the strange odor with satisfaction in spite of its disagreeable quality, he proceeded to write his immortal poem.

Mean Man.

"So the burglar that paid your home a visit the other night wasn't a 'gentleman burglar'?" said Mrs. A.

"I—I should say not," pouted Mrs. Z.

"He took all of your money?"

"Y-yes."

"And all of your jewels?"

"Y-yes. B-but I could have stood all of that, but for one thing."

"And what was that, dear?"

"He—he said the baby was home-ly."

The other day in Paris a dog was seen in a motor car with a well-fitted pair of blue spectacles to protect his eyes.

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