54-40 OR FIGHT

BY EMERSON HOUGH

AUTHOR OF THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE

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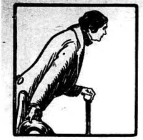


SYNOPSIS.

The story is told by Nicholas Trist. His chief, Senator John Calhoun, offered the portfolio of secretary of state in Tyler's cabinet, is told by Dr. Ward that his time is short. Calhoun declares that he is not ready to die, and if he accepts Tyler's offer it means that Texas and Oregon must be added to the Union. He plans to learn the intentions of England with regard to Mexico through Baroness Von Ritz, secret spy and reputed mistress of the English ambassador, Pakenham.

CHAPTER II.

By Special Dispatch.

In all eras and all climes a woman of great genius or beauty has done what she chose.—Ouida.

"Nicholas," said Calhoun, turning to me suddenly, but with his invariable kindliness of tone, "oblige me tonight. I have written a message here. You will see the address—"

"I have unavoidably heard this lady's name," I hesitated.

"You will find the lady's name above the seal. Take her this message from me. Yes, your errand is to bring the least known and most talked of woman in Washington, alone, unattended save by yourself, to a gentleman's apartments, to his house, at a time past the hour of midnight! That gentleman is myself! You must not take any answer in the negative."

As I sat dumbly, holding this sealed document in my hand, he turned to Dr. Ward, with a nod toward myself.

"I choose my young aide, Mr. Trist here, for good reasons. He is just back from six months in the wilderness, and may be shy; but once he had a way with women, so they tell me—and you know, in approaching the question ad feminam we operate per hominem."

Dr. Ward took snuff with violence as he regarded me critically.

"I do not doubt the young man's sincerity and faithfulness," said he. "I was only questioning one thing."

"Yes?"

"His age."

Calhoun rubbed his chin. "Nicholas," he said, "you heard me. I have no wish to encumber you with useless instructions. Your errand is before you. Very much depends upon it, as you have heard. All I can say is, keep your head, keep your feet, and keep your heart!"

The two older men both turned now, and smiled at me in a manner not wholly to my liking. Neither was this errand to my liking.

It was true, I was hardly arrived home after many months in the west, but I had certain plans of my own for that very night, and although as yet I had made no definite engagement with my fiancee, Miss Elizabeth Churchill of Elmhurst farm, for meeting her at the great ball this night, such certainly was my desire and my intention. Why, I had scarce seen Elizabeth twice in the last year.

"He might be older," said Calhoun at length, speaking of me as though I were not present. "And 'tis a hard game to play, if once my lady Helen takes it into her merry head to make it so for him. But if I sent one shorter of stature and uglier of visage and with less art in approaching a crinoline—why, perhaps he would get no farther than her door. No, he will serve—he must serve!"

He arose now, and bowed to us both, even as I rose and turned for my cloak to shield me from the raw drizzle which then was falling in the streets.

So this, then, was my errand. My mind still tingled at its unwelcome quality. Dr. Ward guessed something of my mental dissatisfaction.

"Never mind, Nicholas," said he, as we parted at the street corner, where he climbed into the rickety carriage which his colored driver held awaiting him. "Never mind. I don't myself quite know what Calhoun wants; but he would not ask of you anything personally improper. Do his errand, then. It is part of your work. In any case—" and I thought I saw him grin in the dim light— "you may have a night which you will remember."

There proved to be truth in what he said.

CHAPTER III.

In Argument.

The egotism of women is always for two.—Mme. De Stael.

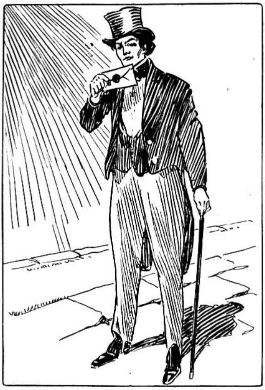
The thought of missing my meeting with Elizabeth still rankled in my soul. Had it been another man who asked me to carry this message, I must have refused. But this man was my master, my chief, in whose service I had engaged.

For myself, his agent, I had, as I say, left the old Trist homestead at the foot of South mountain in Maryland, to seek my fortune in our capital city. I had had some three or four years' semi-diplomatic training when I first met Calhoun and entered his service as assistant. It was under him that I finished my studies in law. Meantime, I was his messenger in very many quests, his source of information in many matters, where he had no time to go into details.

Strange enough had been some of the circumstances in which I found myself thrust through this relation with a man so intimately connected for a generation with our public life. For six months I had been in Mississippi and Texas studying matters and men, and now, just back from Natchitoches, I felt that I had earned some little rest.

Vaguely in my conscience I felt that, after all, my errand was justified, even though at some cost to my own wishes and my own pride. The farther I walked in the dark along Pennsylvania avenue, into which finally I swung after I had crossed Rock bridge, the more I realized that perhaps this big game was worth playing in detail and without quibble as the master mind should dictate.

I was, indeed, young—Nicholas Trist, of Maryland; six feet tall, thin, lean, always hungry, perhaps a trifle freckled, a little sandy of hair, blue I suppose of eye, although I am not sure; good rider and good marcher, I know; something of an expert with the weapons of my time and people; fond of a horse and a dog and a rifle—yes, and a glass and a girl, if truth be told. I was not yet 30, in spite of my western travels. At that age the rustle of silk or dimity, the suspicion of adventure, tempts the worst or the best of us, I fear. Woman!—the very sound of the word made my blood leap then. I went forward rather blithely, as I now blush to confess. "If there are maps to be made tonight," said I, "the Baroness Helena shall do her share in writing on my chief's old mahogany desk, and not on her own dressing case."



Knock at the Third Door in the Second Block Beyond M Street.

That was an idle boast, though made but to myself. I had not yet met the woman.

CHAPTER IV.

The Baroness Helena.

Woman is seldom merciful to the man who is timid.—Edward Bulwer Lytton.

There was one of our dim street lights at a central corner on old Pennsylvania avenue, and under it, after a long walk, I paused for a glance at the inscription on my sealed document. I had not looked at it before in the confusion of my somewhat hurried mental processes. In addition to the name and street number, in Calhoun's writing, I read this memorandum: "Knock at the third door in the second block beyond M street."

I recalled the nearest cross street, but I must confess the direction still seemed somewhat cryptic. Puzzled, I stood under the lamp, shielding the face of the note under my cloak to keep off the rain, as I studied it.

The sound of wheels behind me on the muddy pavement called my attention, and I looked about. A carriage came swinging up to the curb where I stood. It was driven rapidly, and as it approached the door swung open. I heard a quick word, and the driver pulled up his horses. I saw the light shine through the door on a glimpse of white satin. I looked again. Yes, it was a beckoning hand! The negro driver looked at me inquiringly.

Ah, well, I suppose diplomacy under the stars runs much the same in all ages. I have said that I loved Elizabeth, but also said I was not yet 30. Moreover, I was a gentleman, and here might be a lady in need of help. I need not say that in a moment I was at the side of the carriage. Its occupant made no exclamation of surprise; in fact, she moved back upon the other side of the seat in the darkness, as though to make room for me!

A dark framed face, whose outlines I could only dimly see in the faint light of the street lamp, leaned toward me. The same small hand nervously reached out, as though in request.

I now very naturally stepped closer. A pair of wide and very dark eyes was looking into mine. I could now see her face. There was no smile upon her lips. I had never seen her before, that was sure—nor did I ever think to see her like again; I could say that even then, even in the half light. Just a trifle foreign, the face; somewhat dark, but not too dark; the lips full, the eyes luminous, the forehead beautifully arched, chin and cheek beautifully rounded, nose clean-cut and straight, thin but not pinched. There was nothing niggard about her. She was magnificent—a magnificent woman. I saw that she had splendid jewels at her throat, in her ears—a necklace of diamonds, long hoops of diamonds and emeralds used as earrings! a sparkling clasp which caught at her white throat the wrap which she had thrown about her ball gown—for now I saw she was in full evening dress. I guessed she had been an attendant at the great ball, that ball which I had missed with so keen a regret myself—the ball where I had hoped to dance with Elizabeth. Without doubt she had lost her way and was asking the first stranger for instructions to her driver.

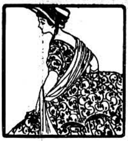
My lady, whoever she was, seemed pleased with her rapid temporary scrutiny. With a faint murmur, whether of invitation or not I scarce could tell, she drew back again to the farther side of the seat. Before I knew how or why, I was at her side. The driver pushed shut the door, and whipped up his team.

Personally I am gifted with but small imagination. In a very matter of fact way I had got into this carriage with a strange lady. Now in a sober and matter of fact way it appeared to me my duty to find out the reason for this singular situation.

"Madam," I remarked to my companion, "in what manner can I be of service to you this evening?"

"I am fortunate that you are a gentleman," she said, in a low and soft voice, quite distinct, quite musical in quality, and marked with just the faintest trace of some foreign accent, although her English was perfect.

I looked again at her. Yes, her hair was dark; that was sure. It swept up in a great roll about her oval brow. Her eyes, too, must be dark, I confirmed. Yes—as a passed lamp gave me aid—there were strong dark brows above them. Her nose, too, was patrician; her chin curving just strongly enough, but not too full, and faintly cleft, a sign of power, they say.



A third gracious lamp gave me a glimpse of her figure, huddled back among her draperies, and I guessed her to be about of medium height. A fourth lamp showed me her hands, small, firm, white; also I could catch a glimpse of her arm, as it lay outstretched, her fingers clasping a fan. So I knew her arms were round and taper, hence all her limbs and figure finely molded, because nature does not do such things by halves, and makes no bungles in her symmetry of contour when she plans a noble specimen of humanity. Here was a noble specimen of what woman may be.

I was not in such a hurry to ask again how I might be of service. In fact, being somewhat surprised and somewhat pleased, I remained silent now for a time, and let matters adjust themselves; which is not a bad course for any one similarly engaged.

She turned toward me at last deliberately, her fan against her lips, studying me. And I did as much, taking advantage as I could of the passing street lamps. Then, all at once, without warning or apology, she smiled, showing very even and white teeth.

She smiled. There came to me from the purple-colored shadows some sort of deep perfume, strange to me. I frown at the description of such things and such emotions, but I swear that as I sat there, a stranger, I felt swim up around me some sort of amber shadow, edged with purple—the shadow, as I figured it then, being this perfume, curious and alluring!

It was wet, there in the street. Why should I rebel at this stealing charm of color or fragrance—let those name it better who can. At least I sat, smiling to myself in my purple-amber shadow, now in no very special hurry.

At last I could not, in politeness, keep this up further.

"How may I serve the baroness?" said I.

She started back on the seat as far as she could go.

"How did you know?" she asked. "And who are you?"

I laughed. "I did not know, and did not guess until almost as I began to speak, but if it comes to that, I might say I am simply an humble gentleman of Washington here. I might be privileged to peep in at ambassadors' balls—through the windows, at least."

"But you were not there—you did not see me? I never saw you in my life until this very moment—how, then do you know me? Speak! At once!" Her satins rustled. I knew she was tapping a foot on the carriage floor.

"Madam," I answered, laughing at her, "by this amber purple shadow, with flecks of scarlet and pink; by this perfume which weaves webs for me here in this carriage, I know you. The light is poor, but it is good enough to show one who can be no one else but the Baroness von Ritz."

I was in the mood to spice an adventure which had gone thus far. Of course she thought me crazed, and drew back again in the shadow, but when I turned and smiled, she smiled in answer—herself somewhat puzzled.

"The Baroness von Ritz cannot be disguised," I said, "not even if she wore her domino."

She looked down at the little mask which hung from the silken cord, and flung it from her.

"Oh, then, very well!" she said. "If you know who I am, who are you, and why do you talk in this absurd way with me, a stranger?"

"And, why, madam, do you take me up, a stranger, in this absurd way, at midnight on the streets of Washington? I, who am engaged on business for my chief?"

She tapped again with her foot on the carriage floor. "Tell me who you are!" she said.

"Once a young planter from Maryland yonder, sometime would be lawyer here in Washington. It is my misfortune not to be so distinguished in fame or beauty that my name is known by all, so I need not tell you my name perhaps, only assuring you that I am at your service if I may be useful."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Begging for Toothpicks.

"Hold-up men of all kinds have stopped me on the highways and byways of the city, but the limit was reached the other night," says C. H. Peckham.

"I had just left the theater when a man touched my arm.

"'My friend,' he said, 'will you please stake me to a wooden toothpick?'

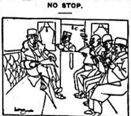
"So dazed was I that I was taken off my guard.

"'Wait here,' I said, 'and I'll go in the Gillsy and get you a handful.'

"I did, and he accepted them with profuse thanks.

"'It's getting so now,' he said 'that a gentleman can't even pick up a match in a hotel unless he is paying $5 a day for a fifty-cent room.'"

NO STOP.



Ticket Collector—We don't stop here, sir.

Montague Swank (who has just given up a ticket)—Stop where?

Ticket Collector—At the pawnbroker's.

A Cautious Answer.

"Now, Johnny," said the geography teacher, "what is the capital of Portugal?"

"I dun'no', Miss Flanders," said Johnny, "but from what I hearn tell of the extravagance of the late king they ain't much left."—Harper's Weekly.

The Lady and the Hobble.

"Do you think the hobble gown will remain long in vogue?"

"If it doesn't you can cast it aside."

"Yes; but I hate to waste time learning to hobble."—Suburban Life.

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Mrs. Doyle—Why didn't you marry an American?

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