THE FIGHT OF THE CENTURY

BY EMERSON HOUGH

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SYNOPSIS.

Senator John Calhoun is invited to be some secretary of state in Tyler's cabinet. He decides that if he accepts Texas and Oregon must be added to the Union. Calhoun's secretary, Thornton, is in love with the Princess Nina, daughter of the British ambassador, Pakenham, to call at his apartments. While searching for the baroness' home, a carriage drives up and Thornton, in the dark, mistakes Calhoun for the baroness, and gets Nicholas into assist in evading pursuers. Nicholas notes that the baroness has lost a slipper. He gives him the remaining slipper. Nina is sent to Mexico to discover what he intends to know regarding England's intentions toward Mexico. As security Nicholas gives her a diamond ring which for his sweetheart, Elizabeth Churchill, Nicholas has purchased in Paris. The others Nicholas was then, also, at his business, and the latter plans to be married that night. The baroness says she will try to prevent the marriage. Nicholas is arrested for the theft of the slipper. Nicholas is assaulted by the baroness' stepmother, Elizabeth, who takes the ring from him. Nicholas is detained in Bedlam, having succeeded, when he failed, in frustrating the baroness' attentions regarding Oregon. She tells him that Nina, who is in the next apartment, is the daughter of the British ambassador, say he is a spy. Nina escapes and meets Texas within 30 days, she would lose her Texas. Nina, Nicholas and Texas leave for Oregon. Nina, Nicholas and Texas get information about Oregon. The baroness and stepmother escape, coming from Montreal simultaneously. Calhoun, Nina, Nicholas and Texas are ready to be bound for Oregon. Calhoun suffers the jealousy of Senora Vturrio and thereby secures the passage of the Texas ultimatum to a treaty of annexation. Nicholas and Texas are ready to leave for Oregon. The British party. A British secretary arrives with the baroness as a passenger. She tells Nicholas that she recovered, in the slipper which caused the breaking of the ring, the ring which he had given to Elizabeth Churchill in exchange for the slipper she has done.

CHAPTER XXVII—*Continued.*

"If I do not find her worthy of you, then she cannot have you," went on Helena von Ritz.

"But, madam, you forget one thing. She is worthy of me, or of any other man!"

"I shall be judge of that. If she is what you think she is, then—you and Oregon!"

"But as to myself, madam? The bargain?"

"I arrive, monsieur! If she falls you, then I ask only time."

"I begin to see, madam," said I, "how large these stakes may run."

"In case I lose, be sure at least I shall pay. I shall make my stone-cast," she said.

"I doubt not that, madam, with all your heart and mind and soul."

"And body!" she whispered. The old horror came again upon me, and she shuddered. I did not know why. She stood now as one in devotions for a time, and I would no more have spoken than had she been at her prayers, as, indeed, I think she was. At last she made some faint movement of her hands. I do not know whether it was the sign of the cross.

She rose now, tall, white-clad, shimmering, a vision of beauty such as that part of the world certainly could not then offer. Her hair was loosened now in its masses and glittered from wave ity over her temples, above her brow, like gray waves upon a lake and darkness and the tall blue shadows coming again beneath them. Her hands were clasped, her chin raised just a trifle, and her gaze was rapt as that of saints and martyrs. I could not guess of these things, being but a man, and, I fear, clumsy alike of body and wit.

"What are my stakes? How may I pay?"

"There is one thing, madam, which we have spoken of, and of it last. She swayed a little on her feet, as though she were weak. "I want, said she, "the Chinese—wife—!"

The old childlike look of pathos came again. It was never seen as sad a face. She was a lady, white and delicately clad, in a rude frontiers man in campfirmed leather. But I stepped to her now and took her in my arms, and held her close, and pushed back the damp waves of her hair. And because a man's tears were in my eyes, I have no doubt of absolution when I say I had been a dog and a coward had I not kissed her own tears away. I no longer made protestations of ignorance, and how I wished that I were ignorant of what it was not my right to know.

I led her to the edge of the little bed of bunks and found her kerchief. Ah, she was of breeding and courage! Presently, her voice rose steady and clear as ever. "Threlkal" she called. "Please!"

When Threlka came, she looked closely at the lady's face. I think she had read seemed, after all, to content her.

"Threlka," said my lady in French. "I want the little one."

I turned to her with query in my eyes.

"Hens!" she said. "Wait. I have a little surprise."

"You have nothing at any time save surprises, madam."

"Two things I have," said she, sighing. "A little dog from China, Chow by name. He sleeps now, and I must not disturb him. I know not what he does you how lovely a dog is Chow. Also here I have found a little Indian child running about the fort. I know not how it was rejected when I adopted her."

"Well, then, madam, what pear?"

"Yes, with the promise to him that I would care for that little child. Can we not something for my own. See now. Come Natoka!"

The old servant paused at the door, and crossed herself across her with the silent feet of the savage the tiny figure of a little child, perhaps four years of age, with coal-black hair and beady eyes, clad in all the bequilled lore that a trading post could furnish—a little orphan child, as I learned later, whose parents had both been lost in a canoe accident at the Dalles. She was an infant, wild, untrained, unloved, unable to speak a word of the language that she heard. She stood now hesitating, but that was only by reason of her sight of me. As I stepped aside, the little one walked steadily but with quickening steps to my satin-clad lady on her couch of boughs. She took up the child in her arms.

Now, there must be some speech between woman and child. I do not know, except that the Baroness von Ritz spoke and that the child put out a hand to her cheek. Then, as I stood awkward as a clown myself and not knowing what to do, I saw tears rain again from the eyes of Helena von Ritz, so that I turned away, even as I saw her cheek laid to that of the child while she clasped it tight.

"See, then," she said; "here is my companion across the mountains."

Again I began to expostulate, but now she tapped her foot impatiently in her old way. "You have heard me say it. Very well. Follow if you like. Listen since you like. In a day or so Dr. McLaughlin plans a party for us all far up the Columbia to the missions at Wallatos. That is in the valley of the Walla Walla, they tell me, just at the edge of the Blue mountains, where the wagon trains come down into this part of Oregon."

"They may not now be wagon trains so soon," I ventured. "They would scarcely arrive before October, and now it is but summer."

"At least these British officers would see a part of this country, do you not comprehend? We start within three days at least. I wish only to see that perhaps—"

"Ah, I will be there surely, madam!"

"If you come independently. I have heard, however, that one of the missionary women wishes to go back to the states. I have thought that perhaps it might be better did we go together. Also Natoka. Also Chow."

"Does Dr. McLaughlin know of your plans?"

"I am not under his orders, monsieur. I only thought that, since you were used to this western travel, you could, perhaps, be of aid in getting my proper guides and vehicles. I should rely upon your judgment very much, monsieur."

"You are asking me to aid you in your own folly," said I discontentedly, "but I will be there; and be sure also you can not prevent me from following—if you persist in the absolute folly. A woman—to cross the Rockies!"

I rose now, and she was gracious enough to follow me part way toward the door. We headed there, a wardly enough. But once more our hands met in some sort of fellowship.

"Forget!" I heard her whisper. And I could think of no reply better than that same word.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

When a Woman Would.

The two pleasantest days of a woman are her marriage day and the day of her funeral.—Hipponax.

My garden at the Willamette might languish if it like, and my little cabin might stand in uncut wheat. For me, there were other matters of more importance, now. I took leave of hospitable Dr. McLaughlin at Fort Vancouver, with proper expressions of my obligation due for his hospitality; but I said nothing to him, of course, of having met the mysterious baroness, nor did I mention definitely that I intended to meet them both again at no distant date. None the less, I prepared to set out at once up the Columbia river trail.

From Fort Vancouver, to the mission at Walla Walla was a distance by trail of more than 200 miles. This I covered horseback, rapidly, and arrived two or three days in advance of the English. Nothing disturbed the quiet until, before noon of one day, we heard the gun fire and the shouting which in the Indian country customarily made announcement of the arrival of a party of travelers. Being on the lookout for these, I soon discovered them to be my late friends of the Hudson bay post.

One old brown woman, unhappily satisfied a native pony, I took to the Threlka, my lady's servant, but she rode with her class, at the rear. I looked again, and I found the baroness, clad in buckskins and blue cloth, brave as any in finery of the frontier. Dr. McLaughlin saw fit to present to me, very politely, rather carelessly, it not seeming to him that two so different would meet often in the future; and of course there being no dream even in his shrewd mind that we had ever met in the past. This supposition fitted our plans, even though it kept us apart. I was but a commonplace frontiers farmer, clothed like my kind. She, being of distinction, dwelt within the Hudson bay pale in the mission buildings.

CHAPTER XXIX.

In Exchange.

Great women belong to history and to all—excepting their husbands.

For sufficient reasons of my own, which have been explained, I did not care to mingle over much, lest we meet any with the party of the Hudson bay folk who made their headquarters at the mission buildings. I kept close to my own camp when not busy with my inquiries in the neighborhood, where I now began to see what could be done in the preparation of a proper outfit for the baroness. Myself I did not see for the next two days; but one evening I met her on the narrow log gallery of one of the mission houses. Without much preface we sat and looked over the pleasant prospect of the wide flats, the fringe of willow trees, the loom of the mountains off toward the east.

"Continually you surprise me, madam," I began at last. "Can we not something, selling at so ridiculous a plan of your going east?"

"I can see no reason for abandoning it," said she. "There are many thousands of your people, men, women and children, who have crossed that trail. Why should not I?"

"But they come in large parties; they are well prepared. Such helps his neighbor."

"The distance is the same, and the method is the same."

I ceased to argue, seeing that she would not yield. "There are two, madam," said I, "I have done what little I could in securing you a party. You are to have eight mules, two carts, six horses, and two men, besides old Joe Meek, who has guided now to Oregon. He would not go to save his life. He goes to save you."

"You are good special pleader," said she. "I do not see that mules, in my purpose, and I hold to my purpose. It does not rest with you and me, but with another. As I said you—as we have both agreed—"

"There let us not speak more," said I.

Again her eyes looked into mine, straight, kind, and dark. Again the spell of her beauty rose all around me, enveloping me. I had felt it do before. "You cannot have Oregon, except through me," she said at last. "Is it worth—this—to you—or except through me?"

"The truth," I answered. "In God's name, then, play the game fair."

CHAPTER XXX.

Counter Currents.

Woman is like the reed that bends to every breeze, but breaks not in the tempest.—Bishop Richard Whately.

The Oregon immigration for 1845 numbered, according to some accounts, not less than 3,000 souls. Our people still were coming in in mighty wave. The history of that great movement is well known. The story of a yet more decisive journey of that same year never has been adequately told. Perhaps Mr. Ritz, from Oregon to the east, The price of that journey was a complete cost—ah, let me not yet speak of that.

Although Meek and I agreed that he should push east at the best possible speed, it was not without some misgiving that I should give him no more than a day or so start. I did not purpose to have my lady's journey made this to be undertaken by any woman in so small a party, and I have no doubt that I would overtake them at least at Fort Hall, perhaps five miles east of the missions, or at farthest at Fort Bridger, some 700 miles from the starting point in Oregon.

The young wife of one of the missionaries was glad enough to take passage thus for the east; and there was the silent Threlka. Those two made our company even of not the little Indian maid, adopted by the baroness, who between her whole equipment and supplies were as good as any purchasable. What could be better, we now said, done?

Yet, after all, Helena von Ritz had my leave. I did not see her again after we parted that evening at the mission. I was gone from there in two days with a hunting party, and on my return discovered that she was gone, with no more than a word to me (as those left behind! Meek was anxious to be hurried to be off, and I had left word for me to follow on at once.

It may be supposed that I myself now hurried. I did not. I had time to make up a small party of four men, about half the number I had given to him; and I threw together such equipment as I could from remaining, not wholly to my liking, but good enough, I fancied, to overtake a party headed by a woman. But one thing after another cost us time, and we did not arrange to start, at least, a full half desperate, as I reflected on what that might mean. As early fall was approaching, I was anxious to view of my own lost time, to encounter the annual wagon train by 200 miles farther westward than the object of my pursuit naturally would have set out. As a matter of fact, my party met the wagons at a point well to the west of Fort Hall.

It was early in the morning we met them coming, a long, straggling, dust-covered, creeping caravan, a mile long, slow serpent, crawling westward across the desert. It was time up to the head of the tremendous wagon train of 1845, and I, for myself, my self threw up our hands in the salutation of the wagon train.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

An Adherent.

By mistake a farmer had got aboard a car reserved for a party of college graduates who were returning to their alma mater after some special event. There was a large quantity of refreshments on board, and the farmer was allowed to join the others. A Finish man asked him, "Are you an alumnus?" "No," said the farmer earnestly; "but I believe in it."—Lippincott's.

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In Gold.

"Is your ball-room here?" "Is it in a hole?"

"Yes."

"A deep hole?"

"Yes, with slightly overhanging banks, so you can possibly get at it."

"Yes."

"Then it's my ball, all right."

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