



54-40 OR FIGHT

BY EMERSON HOUGH
AUTHOR OF THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY MAGNUS G. KETNER
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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 the acceptor 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. Nicholas is sent to bring the baroness to Calhoun's apartments and while searching for the baroness' house a carriage dashes up and Nicholas is invited to enter.

The occupant is the baroness, who says she is being pursued. The pursuers are shaken off. Nicholas is invited into the house and delivers Calhoun's message. He notes that the baroness has lost a slipper.

Nicholas is given the remaining slipper as a pledge that she will tell Calhoun everything. He gives her as security an Indian trinket he intended for his sweetheart, Elizabeth Churchill.

Elizabeth's father consents to Nicholas' proposal for her hand.

Nicholas is ordered to leave at once for Montreal on state business and decides to be married that night.

Calhoun becomes secretary of state. Tyler warns Pakenham that interference by England in the affairs of this continent will not be tolerated. The west demands that the joint occupancy of Oregon with Great Britain cease, and has raised the cry of "Fifty-four, forty or fight."

CHAPTER IX.

A Kettle of Fish.

Few disputes exist which have not had their origin in women.—Juvénal.

I saw the heavy face of Mr. Pakenham go pale, saw the face of the Baroness von Ritz flash with a swift resolution, saw the eyes of Mr. Calhoun and Mr. Tyler meet in firmness. An instant later, Mr. Tyler rose and bowed our dismissal.

Mr. Pakenham drew apart and engaged in earnest speech with the lady who had accompanied him; so that meantime I myself found opportunity for a word with Mr. Calhoun.

"Now," said I, "the fat certainly is all in the fire!"

Mr. Calhoun took snuff.

"You don't know women, my son, and you don't know men, either." The thin white skin about his eyes wrinkled.

"Certainly, I don't know what arts may have been employed in Mr. Calhoun's office at half-past two this morning." I smiled frankly now at my chief, and he relaxed in turn.

"We had a most pleasant visit of an hour. A delightful woman, a charming woman, and one of intellect as well. I appended to her heart, her brain, her purse, and she laughed, for the most part. Yet she argued, too, and seemed to have some interest—as you see proved now. Ah, I wish I could have had the other two great motives to add to my appeal!"

"Meaning—?"

"Love—and curiosity! With those added, I could have won her over; for believe me, she is none too firmly anchored to England. I am sure of that, though it leaves me still puzzled. If you think her personal hold on yonder gentleman will be lessened, you err," he added, in a low voice. "I consider it sure that he is bent on her as much as he is on England. See, she has him back in hand already! I would she were our friend!"

"Is she not?" I asked suddenly.

"We two may answer that one day," said Calhoun emphatically.

Now I offered to Mr. Calhoun the note I had received from his page.

"This journey to-night," I began; "can I not be excused from making that? There is a very special reason."

"What can it be?" asked Calhoun, frowning.

"I am to be married to-night, sir," said I, calmly as I could.

It was Calhoun's turn now to be surprised. "Married? Sounds! boy, what do you mean? There is no time to waste."

"I do not hold it quite wasted, sir," said I with dignity. "Miss Elizabeth Churchill and I for a long time—"

"Miss Elizabeth! So the wind is there, eh? My daughter's friend. I know her very well, of course. Very well done, indeed, for you. But there can be no wedding to-night."

I looked at him in amazement. He was as absorbed as though he felt empowered to settle that matter for me. A moment later, seeing Mr. Pakenham taking his leave, he stepped to the side of the baroness.

"Mr. Trist," said Mr. Calhoun, "I beg you to hand the Baroness von Ritz to her carriage, which will wait at the avenue." We were then standing near the door at the head of the steps.

So now I took the lady's sunshade from her hand, and we two, making adieu, passed down the shaded walk toward the avenue.

"You are a good cavalier," she said to me. "I find you not so fat as Mr. Pakenham, nor so thin as Mr. Calhoun. My faith, could you have seen that gentleman this morning in a wrapper—and in a red worsted night-cap!"

"But what did you determine?" I asked her suddenly. "What has my chief said to cause you to fall poor Mr. Pakenham as you did? I pitied the poor man, in such a grueling, and wholly without warning!"



"I am to be Married at Six."

sively. "As though I had changed! I will say this much: I think Sir Richard will care more for Mexico and less for Mexicans after this! But you do not tell me when you are coming to see me, to bring back my little shoe. Its mate has arrived by special messenger, but the pair remains still broken. Do you come tonight—this afternoon?"

"It would be my delight, madam, but there are two reasons—"

"One, then?"

"I am going to Montreal to-night, for one."

She gave me a swift glance, which I could not understand.

"So?" she said. "Why so soon?"

"Orders," said I briefly. "But perhaps I may not obey orders for once. There is another reason."

"And that one?"

"I am to be married at six."

I turned to enjoy her consternation. Indeed, there was an alternate white and red passed across her face! But at once she was in hand.

"And you allowed me to become your devoted slave," she said, "even to the extent of calling upon a man in a red nightcap; and then, even upon a morning like this, when the birds sing so sweetly and the little flowers show pink and white—now you cast down my most sacred feelings!"

The mockery in her tone was perfect. I scarce had paused to note it, I was absorbed in one thought—of Elizabeth.

"I might have told you," said I at last, "but I did not myself know it until this morning."

"My faith, this country!" she exclaimed with genuine surprise. "What extraordinary things it does! I have just seen history made between the lightings of a cigarette, as it were. Now comes this man and announces that since midnight he has met and won the lady who is to rule his heart, and that he is to marry her at six!"

"Then congratulate me!" I demanded.

"Ah," she said, suddenly absorbed; "it was that tall girl. Yes, yes, I see, I see! I understand! So then! Yes!"

"But still you have not congratulated me."

"Ah, monsieur," she answered lightly, "one woman never congratulates a man when he has won another! What of my own heart? Pie! Pie! Yet she had curious color in her face."

"I do not credit myself with such fatal charms," said I. "Rather say what of my little clasp there. I promised that to the tall girl, as you know."

"And might I not wear it for an hour?"

"Every word of it," I answered. "Has she fortune?"

"I do not know."

"Have you fortune?"

"God knows, no!"

"You have but love—and this country?"

"That is all."

"It is enough," said she, sighing. "Dear God, it is enough! But then—she turned to me suddenly—"I don't think you will be married so soon, after all. Wait."

"Ah, then you forbid our banquets?"

"If you challenge me," she retorted, "I shall do my worst."

"Then do your worst!" I said. "All of you do your joint worst. You cannot shake the faith of Elizabeth Churchill in me, nor mine in her. Oh, yes, by all means do your worst!"

"Very well," she said, with a catch of her breath. "At least we both said—on guard!"

"I wish I could ask you to attend at our wedding," I concluded, as her carriage approached the curb; "but it is safe to say that not even friends of the family will be present, and of those not all the family will be friends."

She did not seem to see her carriage as it paused, although she prepared to enter when I opened the door.

What sat on her face was perplexity, wonder, amazement, and something else, I know not what. Something of her perfect poise and confidence, her quality as a woman of the world, seemed to drop away. A strange and childlike quality came into her face, a pathos unlike anything I had seen there before. She took my hand mechanically.

"Of course," said she, as though she spoke to herself, "it cannot be. But, dear God! would it not be enough?"

I did not understand her speech. I stood and watched her carriage as it whirled away. Thinking of my great need for haste, mechanically I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock. Then I reflected that it was at 11 of the night previous that I had first met the Baroness von Ritz. Our acquaintance had therefore lasted some 14 hours.

CHAPTER X.

Mixed Duties.

Most women forgive a liberty, rather than a slight.—Colton.

When I crossed the White House grounds and found my way to the spot where I had left my horse, I discovered my dandy boy lying on his back, fast asleep under a tree, the bride reins hooked over his upturned foot.

I wakened him, took the reins and was about to mount, when at the moment I heard my name called.

Turning, I saw emerge from the door of Gaultier's little cafe, across the street, the tall figure of an erstwhile friend of mine, Jack Dandridge of Tennessee, credited with being the youngest member in the house of representatives at Washington—and credited with little else.

Jack Dandridge, it may be said, was originally possessed of a splendid constitution. Nearly six feet tall, his full and somewhat protruding eye was as yet only a trifle watery, his wide lip only a trifle loose, his strong figure only a trifle portly. Socially he had been well received in our city, and during his stay east of the mountains he had found occasion to lay desperate suit to the hand of none other than Miss Elizabeth Churchill. We had been rivals, although not enemies; for Jack, finding which way the wind sat for him, withdrew like a cat and cherished no ill will. When I saw him now, a sudden idea came to me, so that I crossed the street at his invitation.

"Jack," I exclaimed, grasping him by the shoulder, "you are the man I want. You are the friend that I need—the very one."

"Certainly, certainly," he said; "but please do not disarrange my cravat. Will you have a Dream with me? I construct them now with three additional squirts of the absinthe." He locked his arm in mine.

"You may have a Dream," said I; "but for me, I need all my head to-day. In short, I need both our heads as well."

Jack was already rapping with the head of his cane upon the table, to call an attendant, but he turned to me. "What is the matter? Lady, this time?"

"Two of them."

"Indeed? One apiece, eh?"

"None apiece, perhaps. In any case, you lose."

"Then the names—at least one?"

I flushed a bit in spite of myself. "You know Miss Elizabeth Churchill?"

He nodded gravely. "And about the other lady?"

"I cannot tell you much about her," said I; "I have but little knowledge myself. I mean the Baroness von Ritz. I must be quick. I have in my possession—on the bureau in my little room at my quarters in Brown's hotel—a slipper which the baroness gave me last night—a white satin slipper—"

Jack finished the remainder of his glass at a gulp. "Good God!" he remarked.

"Quite right," I retorted hotly. "Accuse me! Anything you like! But go to this address with it—I scrawled on a piece of paper and thrust it at him—then get a carriage and hasten to Elmhurst drive, where it turns in at the road. Wait for me there, just before six."

He sat looking at me with amusement and amazement both upon his face, as I went on:

"Listen to what I am to do in the meantime. First I go post-haste to Mr. Calhoun's office. Then I am to take his message, which will send me to Canada, to-night. After I have my orders I hurry back to Brown's and dress for my wedding."

The glass in his hand dropped to the floor in splinters.

"Your wedding?"

"Yes, Miss Elizabeth and I concluded this very morning not to wait. I would ask you to help me as my best man, if I dare."

"You do dare," said he. "You're all a-fluster. Go on; I'll get a person—how'll Dr. Halford do?—and I'll take care of the license for you if I could—God! sorry it's not my own!"

"You are the finest fellow in the world, Jack. I have only one thing more to ask"—I pointed to the splintered glass upon the floor—"do not get another."

"Of course, not, of course not!" he expostulated. His voice was just a trifle thickened. We left now together for the license clerk, and I entrusted the proper document in my friend's hands. An instant later I was outside, mounted, and off for Calhoun's office at his residence in Georgetown.

At last, as for the fourth time I flung down the narrow walk and looked down the street, I saw his well-known form approaching. He walked slowly, somewhat stooped upon his cane. He raised a hand as I would have begun to speak. "You will take the railway train at eight. You will be joined by Dr. Samuel Ward, who will give you a sealed paper, which will contain your instructions and the proper moneys. He goes as far as Baltimore."

"You would be the better agent," he added presently. "If this love illness were out of your head, it is not myself you are serving, and not my party. It is this country you are serving."

"But, sir—" I began.

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