

The Girl and the Bill

By Bannister Merwin

ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAY WALTERS



CHAPTER II.

Senor Poritolo.

When Orme answered the knock at the door a singular young man stood at the threshold. He was short, wiry, and very dark. His nose was long and complacently tilted at the end. His eyes were small and very black. His mouth was a wide, uncertain slit. In his hand he carried a light cane and a silk hat of the flat-brimmed French type. And he wore a gray sack suit, pressed and creased with painful exactness.

"Come in, Senor Poritolo," said Orme, motioning toward a chair.

The little man entered, with short, rapid steps. He drew from his pocket a clean pocket handkerchief, which he unfolded and spread out on the surface of the table. Upon the handkerchief he carefully placed his hat and then, after an ineffectual effort to make it stand against the table edge, laid his cane on the floor.

Not until all this ceremony had been completed did he appear to notice Orme. But now he turned, widening his face into a smile and extending his hand, which Orme took rather dubiously—it was supple and moist.

"Oh, this is Mr. Orme, is it not?" "Yes," said Orme, freeing himself from the unpleasant handshake.

"Mr. Robert Orme?" "Yes, that is my name. What can I do for you?"

For a moment Senor Poritolo appeared to hover like a timid bird; then he seated himself on the edge of a chair, only the tips of his toes touching the floor. His eyes danced brightly.

"To begin with, Mr. Orme," he said, "I am charmed to meet you—very charmed." He rolled his "r's" after a fashion that need not be reproduced. "And in the second place," he continued, "while actually I am a foreigner in your dear country, I regard myself as in spirit one of your natives. I came here when a boy, and was educated at your great University of Princeton."

"You are a Portuguese—I infer from your name," said Orme.

"Oh, dear, no! Oh, no, no, no!" exclaimed Senor Poritolo, tapping the floor nervously with his toes. "My country he freed himself from the Portuguese yoke many and many a year ago. I am a South American, Mr. Orme—one of the poor relations of your great country." Again the widened smile. Then he suddenly became grave, and leaned forward, his hands on his knees. "But this is not the business of our meeting, Mr. Orme."

"No," inquired Orme. "No, my dear sir. I have come to ask of you about the five-dollar bill which you received in the hat shop this afternoon." He peered anxiously. "You still have it? You have not spent it?"

"A marked bill, was it not?" "Yes, yes. Where is it, my dear sir, where is it?"

"Written across the face of it were the words, 'Remember person you pay this to.'"

"Oh, yes, yes."

"And on the back of it—"

"On the back of it!" gasped the little man.

"Was a curious cryptogram." "Do not torture me!" exclaimed Senor Poritolo. "Have you got it?" His fingers worked nervously.

"Yes," said Orme slowly, "I still have it."

Senor Poritolo hastily took a fresh five-dollar bill from his pocket. "See," he said, jumping to the floor, "here is another just as good a bill. I give this to you in return for the bill which was paid to you this afternoon." He thrust the new bill toward Orme, and waved his other hand rhetorically. "That, and that alone, is my business with you, dear sir."

Orme's hand went to his pocket. The visitor watched the motion eagerly, and a grimace of disappointment contracted his features when the hand came forth, holding a cigar case.

"Have one," Orme urged.

In his anxiety the little man almost danced. "But, sir," he broke forth, "I am in desperate hurry. I must meet a friend. I must catch a train."

"One moment," interrupted Orme. "I can't very well give up that bill until I know a little better what it means. You will have to show me that you are entitled to it—and—"

"—he smiled—"meantime you'd better smoke."

Senor Poritolo sighed. "I can assure you of my honesty of purpose, sir," he said. "I cannot tell you about it. I have not the time. Also, it is not my secret. This bill, sir, is just as good as the other one."

"Very likely," said Orme dryly. He was wondering whether this was some new counterfeiting dodge. How easily

the South American wrote "u his chair and leaned forward eagerly."

"That is the most distressing part of all," he exclaimed. "I had left Chicago at a time when my presence in this great city was very important indeed. Nothing but the call from a dying friend would have induced me to go away. My whole future in this country depended upon my returning in time to complete certain business."

"So, after dear Lopez was dead, I rushed to the local railroad station. A train was coming in. I searched my pocket for my money to buy my ticket. All I could find was the five-dollar bill!"

"It was necessary to return to Chicago; yet I could not lose the bill. A happy thought struck me. I wrote upon the face of it the words you have seen, and paid it to the ticket agent. I called his attention to the writing and implored him to save the bill if he could until I returned, and if not, to be sure to remember the person he gave it to."

Orme laughed. "It does seem funny," said Senor Poritolo, rolling another cigarette, "but you cannot imagine my most frantic desperation. I returned to Chicago and transacted my business. Then I hastened back to the Wisconsin city. Woe is me! The ticket agent had paid the bill to a Chicago citizen. I secured the name of this man and finally found him at his office on La Salle street. Alas! he, too, had spent the bill, but I tracked it from person to person, until now, my dear sir, I have found it! So—" he paused and looked eloquently at Orme.

"Do you know a man named Evans?" Orme asked.

Senor Poritolo looked at him in bewilderment.

"S. R. Evans," insisted Orme. "Why, no, dear sir—I think not. But what has that to do—?"

Orme pushed a sheet of paper across the table. "Oblige me, Senor Poritolo," he said. "Oblige me, Senor Poritolo, R. Evans."

Senor Poritolo was apparently reluctant. However, under the compulsion of Orme's eye, he finally took out his fountain pen and wrote the name in flowing script. He then pushed the paper back toward Orme, with an inquiring look.

"No, that isn't what I mean," exclaimed Orme. "Print it. Print it in capital letters."

Senor Poritolo slowly printed out the name.

Orme took the paper, laying it before him. He then produced the coveted bill from his pocketbook. Senor Poritolo uttered a little cry of delight and stretched forth an eager hand, but Orme, who was busily comparing the letters on the paper with the letters on the bill, waved him back.

After a few moments Orme looked up. "Senor Poritolo," he said, "why didn't you write the secret on a timetable, or on your ticket, before you gave the bill to the agent?"

Senor Poritolo was flustered. "Why," he said uncertainly, "I did not think of that. How can we explain the mistakes we make in moments of great nervousness?"

"True," said Orme. "But one more point. You did not yourself write your friend's secret on the bill. The letters which you have just printed are differently made."

Senor Poritolo said nothing. He was breathing hard.

"On the other hand," continued Orme, turning the bill over and eyeing the inscription on its face, "your mistake in first writing the name instead of printing it shows me that you did write the words on the face of the bill." He returned the bill to his pocketbook. "I can't give you the bill," he said. "Your story doesn't hold together."

With a queer little scream the South American bounded from his chair and flung himself at Orme. He struck no blow, but clawed desperately at Orme's pocket. The struggle lasted only for a moment. Orme, seizing the little man by the collar, dragged him, wriggling, to the door.

"Now get out," said Orme. "If I find you hanging around I'll have you locked up."

Senor Poritolo whispered: "It is my secret. Why should I tell you the truth about it? You have no right to know."

Orme retained his hold. "I don't like your looks, my friend," he said. "There may have been reason why you should lie to me, but you will have to make things clear." He considered. After all, he must make allowance; so he said: "Come back tomorrow with evidence that you are entitled to the bill, and you shall have it."

The little man had recovered his composure. He went back to the table and took up his hat and cane, refolding the handkerchief and slipping it into his pocket. Once more he was the Latin fop. He approached Orme, and his manner was deprecatory.

"My most abject apologies for attacking you, sir. I was beside myself. But if you will only permit me I will bring up my friend, who is waiting below. He will, as you say, vouch for me."

"Who is he?" "A very, very distinguished man."

Orme pondered. The adventure was opening up, and he felt inclined to see it through. "Bring him," he said shortly.

When Senor Poritolo had disappeared Orme telephoned to the clerk. "Send me up a porter," he ordered, "and have him stand just outside my door, with orders to enter if he hears any disturbance." He waited at the door till the porter appeared, then told him to remain in a certain place until he was needed, or until the visitors left.

Senor Poritolo remained downstairs several minutes. Evidently he was adjusting the situation to his friend. Just after a time Orme heard the clang of the elevator door, and in response to the knock that quickly followed, he opened his own door. At the side of his former visitor stood a dapper foreigner. He wore a long frock coat and carried a glossy hat, and his eyes were framed by large gold spectacles.

"This is the Senor Alcatrante," explained Senor Poritolo.

The newcomer bowed with suave dignity.

"Senor Alcatrante? The name is familiar," said Orme, smiling.

Poritolo assumed an air. "He is the minister from my country to these United States."

Orme understood. This was the wary South American diplomat whose name had lately been so prominent in the Washington dispatches. What was he doing in Chicago?

"I am glad to meet you," said Orme. Alcatrante smiled, displaying a prominent row of uneven teeth.

"My young friend, Poritolo," he began, "tells me that you have in your possession the record of a secret belonging to me. What that secret is, is immaterial to you and me, I take it. He is an honorable young man—excitable, perhaps, but well-meaning. I would suggest that you give him the five-dollar bill he desires, accepting from him another in exchange. Or, if you still doubt him, permit me to offer you a bill from my own pocket."

He drew out a fat wallet.

The situation appeared to be simplified. And yet Orme was dubious. There was mischief in the bill; so much he felt sure of. Alcatrante's reputation was that of a fox, and as for Poritolo, he was, to say the least, a person of uncertain qualities. Orme could not but admire the subtle manner in which Alcatrante sought delicately to limit his doubts to the mere possibility that Poritolo was trying to pass spurious money. He decided not to settle the question at this moment.

"This seems to be rather a mixed up affair, Senor Alcatrante," he said. "There is much more in it than appears. Call on me tomorrow morning and you shall have my decision."

Alcatrante and Poritolo looked at each other. The minister spoke: "Will you engage not to give the bill to anyone else in the interval?"

"I will promise that," said Orme. "It is only fair. Yes, I will keep the bill until tomorrow morning."

"One other suggestion," continued Alcatrante. "You may not be willing to give up the bill, but is there any reason why you should refuse to let Senor Poritolo copy the writing that is on it?"

"Only my determination to think the whole matter over before I do anything at all," Orme replied.

"But the bill came into your hands by chance," insisted the minister. "The information means nothing to you, though obviously it means a great deal to my young friend, here. May I ask what right you have to deny this request?"

"What right," Orme's eyes narrowed. "My right is that I have the bill and the information, and I intend to understand the situation better before I give the information to anyone else."

"But you recognized Senor Poritolo's handwriting on the bill," exclaimed the minister.

"On the face of it, yes. He did not write the abbreviations on the back."

"Abbreviations!" exclaimed Poritolo. "Please let the matter rest till morning," said Orme stubbornly. "I have told you just what I would do."

Poritolo opened his mouth to speak, but Alcatrante silenced him with a frown. "Your word is sufficient, Mr. Orme," he said. "We will call tomorrow morning. Is ten o'clock too early?"

"Not at all," said Orme. "Doubtless I shall be able to satisfy you. I merely wish to think it over."

With a formal bow, Alcatrante turned to the door and departed, Poritolo following.

Orme strolled back to his window and stood idly watching the lights of the vessels on the lake. But his mind was not on the unfolded view before him. He was puzzling over this mystery in which he had so suddenly become a factor. Unquestionably the five-dollar bill held the key to some serious problem.

Surely Alcatrante had not come merely as the friend of Poritolo, for the difference in the station of the two South Americans was marked. Poritolo was a cheap character—useful, no doubt, in certain kinds of work, but vulgar and unconvincing. He might well be one of those promoters who hang on at the edge of great projects, hoping to pick up a commission here and there. His strongest point was his obvious effort to triumph over his own insignificance, for this effort, by its comic but desperate earnestness, could not but command a certain degree of respect.

Alcatrante, on the other hand, was a name to make statesmen knit their brows. A smooth trouble-maker, he had set Europe by the ears in the matter of unsettled South American loans, dexterously appealing to the much-overworked Monroe doctrine every time his country was threatened by a French or German or British blockade. But his mind was of no small caliber. He could hold his own not only at his own game of international chess, but in the cultured discussion of polite topics. Orme knew of him as a clever after-dinner speaker, a man who could, when he so desired, please greatly by his personal charm.

No, Alcatrante was no friend of Poritolo's; nor was it likely that, as protector of the interests of his countrymen, he would go so far as to ac-



The Struggle Lasted Only for a Moment.

company them on their errands unless much was at stake. Perhaps Poritolo was Alcatrante's tool and had bungled some important commission. It occurred to Orme that the secret of the bill might be connected with the negotiation of a big business concession in Alcatrante's country. "S. R. Evans" might be trying to get control of rubber forests or mines—in the Urinaba mountains, perhaps, after all.

In any event, he felt positive that the secret of the bill did not rightfully belong to Poritolo. If the bill had been in his possession, he should have been able to copy the abbreviated message. Indeed, the lies that he told were all against the notion of placing any confidence in him. The two South Americans were altogether too eager.

Orme decided to go for a walk. He could think better in the open air. He took up his hat and cane and descended the elevator.

In the office the clerk stopped him. "A man called to see you a few minutes ago, Mr. Orme. When I told him that you were engaged with two visitors he went away."

"Did he leave his name?" asked Orme.

"No, sir. He was a Japanese." Orme nodded and went on out to the street. What could a Japanese want of him?

To be continued.

A TALE WITH A STRONG MORAL

A Treatise on the Catalogue and Mail Order Evil

Henry J. Aufgang was a prosperous farmer.

He saved money and got to be well off.

He bought his stuff at the store in town and so did his neighbors.

Almost every day Henry drove to the store with a load of something which he sold and then "visited around" with his neighbors in town and his brother farmers who, like him, droven in often.

The women folks came sometimes and it was nice and sociable and everybody grew to know everybody else.

Henry J. Aufgang had a telephone in his house and a rural free delivery carrier brought him a daily paper

from the Big Cities every day. He could call up the doctor in town if his folks took sick or he could ask the storekeeper the price of eggs over the 'phone and take some in if the price was right.

One day he got a catalogue from a "mail order house" and read what it said about saving money by buying of the big concern (which was many stories high according to the picture on the cover of the catalogue and employed thousands and thousands of people.)

Henry thought as he read the catalogue.

"Business is business," he said and sent in an order for a stove—not to his friend, the storekeeper in the town, who in the past trusted him and credited him when he was hard up, but to the man he had never seen—the man who ran the mail order house in the Big City.

"Business is business," Henry got his stove. One of the legs was loose—wouldn't fit. His friend the blacksmith in town fixed it. He ordered his clothes and his hats and his shoes and his wagons and his furniture and his carpets and his crockery and his boots and chocs and rubber boots from the mail order house.

"Business is business," Many of his neighbors followed his example—"business is business."

Henry had been so busy getting in

the crop and sending orders to the mail order house that he forgot all about going to town for some months.

One day he thought he would take in some dressed poultry and fresh eggs and visit 'round.

He called up the storekeeper to find the price of his stuff.

Central said "line disconnected" and Henry wondered.

Finally he went out and hitched

up. Went into town; didn't seem to be much doing there.

Drove to the store—it was closed! Went over to the furniture store—closed too. So was the dry goods store; also the millinery store and the hotel and restaurant didn't look prosperous.

"Nobody makes the town now," said the hotel man to Henry. "Business too poor—town going back—stores all closed."

Henry then sought his friend, the blacksmith—yes he was doing business at the old stand.

"What's the matter with the town?" inquired Aufgang.

"Nothin'," said the blacksmith, "except a lot of crazy people around here have taken the notion that they don't need any town and are sending all their money away to the millionaires who run the catalogue houses. Course they've got to come to me and I'm here yet just because the catalogue fellows haven't devised ways and means for shoeing horses by mail. But when they do I'll have to fit, too."

Henry was astounded.

"Why, I'd no idea—" he commenced.

"Course you hadn't," rejoined the blacksmith. "Course you hadn't, you hadn't an idea. You don't think. Well you had better do so now. Where are you going to sell your butter and eggs? Can you sell 'em to the mail order houses? You can get rid of your wheat at the elevator, but you won't have any fun any more in this town visiting with your neighbors 'cause there isn't any town and the people you used to know have all gone away to some place where they can make a living."

"Pretty soon the town will be all gone. Then your good roads will be gone, too. And you can't bring your mail order jewelry and castings to town to be repaired. If your mail order shoes don't fit you'll just naturally have to squeeze your feet and bear it. If your mail order clothes which you buy 'sight unseen' aren't what you want, what are you going to do about it?"

The blacksmith paused. It was a long speech for him and it had got to Aufgang.

"Business is business," finally said Henry.

"Yes, and foolishness is foolishness," answered his friend. "You may think it business to kill off your town, but I don't. Think it over, Henry; think it over."

Henry did "think it over" as he drove slowly homeward with the dressed poultry and eggs which he had intended to sell to his friend, the storekeeper.

As he neared the house his lips moved. "Business is business," he said to himself, "and self-preservation is nature's first law. We've got to preserve our town and our neighborhood and our good roads. That's business."

The next day he called a meeting of his brother farmers for miles around and they all came.

After the meeting Henry invited them all to stay to supper and after supper there was a big bonfire out in Aufgang's yard near the well.

In that bonfire were consumed all the mail order catalogues in the county!

Moral—Don't wait for it to get too bad.

"Almost every day he drove to town with things to sell."

"The man who ran the mail order house in the big city."

"A lot of crazy people are sending all their money away."

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