

A SET OF ROGUES.

BY FRANK BARRETT AUTHOR OF THE GREAT HESPER "RECOLLECTED VENGEANCE" "OUT OF THE JAWS OF DEATH" ETC. ETC.

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER V.

Promising to make his story as short as he possibly could, Don Sanchez began:

"On the coming of our present king to his throne, Sir Richard Godwin was recalled from Italy, whither he had been sent as ambassador by the protector. He sailed from Livorno with his wife and daughter Judith, a child 9 years old at that time, in the Seahawk."

"I remember her," says Evans. "As stout a ship as ever was put to sea."

"On the second night of her voyage the Seahawk became parted from her convoy, and the next day she was pursued and overtaken by a pair of Barbary pirates, to whom she gave battle."

"Aye, and I'd have done the same," cries Evans, "though they had been a score."

"After a long and bloody fight," continues Don Sanchez, "the corsairs succeeded in boarding the Seahawk and overcoming the remnant of her company."

"Poor hearts! Would I had been there to help 'em!" says Evans.

"Exasperated by the obstinate resistance of these English and their own losses, the pirates would grant no mercy, but tying the living to the dead they cast all overboard save Mrs. Godwin and her daughter. Her lot was even worse, for her wounded husband, Sir Richard, was smothered from her arms and flung into the sea before her eyes, and she sank crying farewell to her."

"These Turks have no hearts in their bodies, you must understand," explains Evans. "And naught but venom in their veins."

"The Seahawk was taken to Algiers, and there Mrs. Godwin and her daughter were sold for slaves in the public market place."

"I have seen 'em sold by the score there," says Evans, "and fetch but an onion a head."

"By good fortune the mother and daughter were bought by Sidi ben Monia, a rich old merchant who was smitten by the pretty, delicate looks of Judith, whom he thenceforth treated as if she had been his own child. In this condition they lived with greater happiness than falls to the lot of most slaves until the beginning of last year, when Sidi died, and his possessions fell to his brother, Bare ben Monia. Then Mrs. Godwin appeals to Bare for her liberty and to be sent home to her country, saying that what price (in reason) he chooses to set upon their heads she will pay from her estate in England—a thing which she had proposed before to Sidi, but he would not hear of it because of his love for Judith and his need of no greater fortune than he had. But this Bare, though he would be very well content, being also an old man, to have his household managed by Mrs. Godwin and to adopt Judith as his child, being of a more avaricious turn than his brother, at length consents to it on condition that her ransoms be paid before she quits Barbary. And so, casting about how this may be done, Mrs. Godwin finds a captive whose price has been paid about to be taken to Maggiore, and to him she intrusts two letters." Here Don Sanchez pulls two folded sheets of vellum from his pocket, and presenting one to me he says:

"Mayhap you recognize this hand, Mr. Knight?"

And I, seeing the signature Elizabeth Godwin, answer quickly enough, "Aye, 'tis my dear cousin Bess, her own hand."

"This," says the don, handing the other to Evans, "you may understand."

"I can make out 'tis writ in the Moorish style," says Evans, "but the meaning of it I know not, for I can't tell a great A from a bull's foot, though it be in printed English."

"'Tis an undertaking on the part of Bare ben Monia," says the don, "to deliver up at Dellys in Barbary the persons of Mrs. Godwin and her daughter against the payment of 5,000 gold ducats within one year. The other writing tells its own story."

Mr. Hopkins took the first sheet from me and read it aloud. It was addressed to Mr. Thomas Godwin, Hurst Court, Chislehurst, in Kent, and after giving such particulars of her past as we had already heard from Don Sanchez she writes thus: "And now, my dear nephew, as I doubt not you (as the nearest of my kindred to my dear husband after us two poor relicts) have taken possession of his estate in the belief we were all lost in our voyage from Italy, I do pray you for the love of God and of mercy to deliver us from our bondage by sending hither a ship with money for our ransom forthwith, and be assured by this that I shall not dispossess you of your fortune (more than my bitter circumstances do now require), so that I but come home to die in a Christian country and have my sweet Judith where she may be less exposed to harm than in this infidel country. I count upon your love—being ever a dear nephew—and am your most hopeful, trusting and loving aunt, Elizabeth Godwin."

"Very well, sir," says Mr. Hopkins, returning the letter. "You have been to Chislehurst."

"I have," answers the don, "and there I find the estate in the hands of a most curious, puritanical steward, whose honesty is rather in the letter than the spirit. For though I have reason to believe that not one penny's value of the estate has been misemployed since it

has been in his hands, yet will he give nothing—no, not a maravedi—to the redemption of his mistress, saying that the letter is addressed to Thomas Godwin and not to him, etc., and that he hath no power to pay out moneys for this purpose, even though he believed the facts I have laid before him, which for his own ends doubtless he fains to misdoth."

"As a trader, sir," says Mr. Hopkins, "I cannot blame his conduct in that respect, for should the venture fall through the next heir might claim upon him to repay out of his own pocket all that he had put into this enterprise. But this Mr. Thomas Godwin, what of him?"

"He is nowhere to be found. The only relatives I have been able to discover are these two gentlemen."

"Who," remarks Mr. Hopkins, with a shrewd glance at our soiled clothes, "are not, I venture to think, in a position to pay their cousin's ransom."

"Alas, no, sir," says Jack. "We are but two poor shopkeepers of London undone by the great fire."

"Well, now, sir," says Mr. Hopkins, fetching an inkpot, a pen and a piece of paper from his pocket, "I may conclude that you wish me to adventure upon the redemption of these two ladies in Barbary upon the hazard of being repaid by Mrs. Godwin when she recovers her estate." And the don making him a reverence he continues: "We must first learn the extent of our liabilities. What sum is to be paid to Bare ben Monia?"

"Five thousand gold ducats—about £3,000 English."

"Two thousand," says Mr. Hopkins, writing. "Then, Robert Evans, what charge is yours for fetching the ladies from Dellys?"

"Master Hopkins, I have said £1,500," says he, "and I won't go from my word, though all laugh at me for a madman."

"That seems a great deal of money," says Mr. Hopkins.

"Well, if you think £1,500 too much for my carcass and a ship of 20 men you can go seek a cheaper market elsewhere."

"You think there is very small likelihood of coming back alive?"

"Why, comrade, 'tis as if you should go into a den of lions and hope to get out whole, for though I have the duke's pass, these Moors are no fitter to be trusted than a sackful of serpents. 'Tis ten to one our ship be taken, and we fools all sold into slavery."

"Ten to one," says Mr. Hopkins—"that is to say, as you would make this voyage for the tenth part of what you ask were you sure of returning safe."

"I would go as far anywhere outside the straits for £200 with a lighter heart."

Mr. Hopkins nods his head, and, setting down some figures on his paper, says:

"The bare outlay in hard money amounts to £3,500. Reckoning the risk at Robert Evans' own valuation (which I took to be a very low one), I must see reasonable prospect of winning £25,000 by my hazard."

"Mrs. Godwin's estate I know to be worth double that amount."

"But who will promise me that return?" asks Mr. Hopkins. "Not you?" (The don shook his head.) "Not you?" turning to us, with the same result. "Not Mrs. Godwin, for we have no means of communicating with her. Not

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the steward—you have shown me that. Who then remains but this Thomas Godwin, who cannot be found? If," adds he, getting up from his seat, "you can find Thomas Godwin, put him in possession of the estate, and obtain from him a reasonable promise that this sum shall be paid on the return of Mrs. Godwin, I may feel disposed to consider your proposal more seriously. But till then I can do nothing."

"Likewise, masters all," says Evans, fetching his hat and shawl from the corner, "I can't wait for a blue moon, and if you can't settle this here business in a week I'm off of my bargain and mighty glad to get out of it so cheap."

"You see," says Don Sanchez when they were gone out of the room, "how impossible it is that Mrs. Godwin and her daughter shall be redeemed from captivity. Tomorrow I shall show you what kind of a fellow this steward is that he should have the handling of this fortune rather than me."

Then presently, with an indifferent, careless air, as if 'twas naught, he gives us a purse and bids us go out in the town to furnish ourselves with what disguise was necessary to our purpose. Therewith Dawson gets him some seaman's old clothes at a Jew's, and a very neat, presentable suit of cloth, etc., and the rest of the money we take back to Don Sanchez without taking so much as a penny for our other uses, but he, doing all things very magnificently, would have none of it, but bade us keep it against our other necessities. And now, having his money in our pockets, we felt 'twould be more dishonest to go back from this business than to go forward with it, lead us whither it might.

Next morning off we go betimes, Jack more like Robert Evans than his mother's son, and I a most seeming substantial man (so that the very stableman took off his hat to me), and on very good horses a long ride to Chislehurst. And then coming to a monstrous park Don Sanchez staid us before the gates, and bidding us look up a broad avenue of great oaks to a most surprising fine house he told us this was Hurst Court, and we might have it for our own within a year if we were so minded.

Hence, at no great distance, we reach a square, plain house, the windows all barred with stout iron, and the most like a prison I did ever see. Here Don Sanchez ringing a bell, a little grating in the door is opened, and after some parley we are admitted by a sturdy fellow carrying a cudgel in his hand. So we into a cold room, with not a spark of fire on the hearth but a few ashes, no hangings to the windows, nor any ornament or comfort at all, but only a table and half a dozen wooden stools, and a number of shelves against the wall full of account books and papers protected by a grating of stout wire secured with sundry padlocks. And here, behind a tableful of papers, sat our steward, Simon Stout in faith, a most withered, lean old man, clothed all in leather, wearing no wig, but his own rusty gray hair falling lank on his shoulders, with a sour face of a very jaundiced complexion, and pale eyes that seemed to swim in a yellowish rheum, which he was forever a-mopping with a rag.

"I am come, Mr. Steward," says Don Sanchez, "to conclude the business we were upon last week."

"Aye," cries Dawson, for all the world in the manner of Evans, "but ere we get to this dry matter let's have a bottle to ease the way, for this riding of horseback has parched up my vitals confoundedly."

"If thou art athirst," says Simon, "Peter shall fetch thee a jug of water from the well, but other liquor have we none in this house."

"Let Peter drown in your well," says Dawson, with an oath; "I'll have none of it. Let's get this matter done and away, for I'd as lief sit in a leaky hold as in this here place for comfort."

"Here," says Don Sanchez, "is a master mariner who is prepared to risk his life, and here a merchant adventurer of London who will hazard his money to redeem your mistress and her daughter from slavery."

"Praise the Lord, Peter," says the steward, whereupon the sturdy fellow with the cudgel fell upon his knees, as likewise did Simon, and both in a snuffing voice render thanks to heaven in words which I do not think it proper to write here. Then, being done, they got up, and the steward, having dried his eyes, says:

"So far our prayers have been answered. Put me in mind, friend Peter, that tonight we pray these worthy men to prosper in their design."

"If they succeed," says Don Sanchez, "it will cost your mistress £27,000."

The steward clutched at the table as if at the fortune about to turn from him. His jaw fell, and he stared at

all I have made of the estate by a life of thrift and care and earnest seeking."

"'Tis in your power, Simon," says Don Sanchez, "to spare your mistress this terrible charge, for which your fine park must be felled, your farms out up and your economies be scattered. The master here will fetch your mistress home for £1,500."

"Why, even that is an extortion."

"Nay," says Jack, "if you think £1,500 too much for my carcass and a ship of 20 men, you may seek a cheaper market and welcome, for I've no stomach to risk my life and property for less."

"To the £1,500 you must add the ransom of £2,000. Then Mrs. Godwin and her daughter may be redeemed for £3,500 to her sowing of £23,500," says the don.

And here Dawson and I were secretly struck by his honesty in not seeking to affright the steward from an honest course, but rather tempting him to it by playing upon his parsimony and avarice.

"Three thousand five hundred," says Simon, putting it down in writing, that he might the better realize his position.

"But you say, friend merchant, that the risk is as seven to one against seeing thy money again."

"I will run the risk for £27,000 and no less," says I.

"But if it may be done for a seventh part, how then?"

"Why, 'tis your risk, sir, and not mine," says I.

"Yea, yea, my risk. And you tell me, friend sailor, that you stand in danger of being plundered by these infidels."

"Aye, more like than not."

"Why, then all is lost, and thus till all is lost."

In this manner did Simon halt betwixt two ways like one distracted, but only he did mangle a mass of sacred words with his arguments which seemed to me naught but profanity, his sole concern being the gain of money. Then he falls to the old excuses Don Sanchez had told us of, saying he had no money of his own, and offering to show his books that we might see he had taken not one penny beyond his bare expenses from the estate, save his yearly wage, and that no more than Sir Thomas had given him in his lifetime.

And on Don Sanchez showing Mrs. Godwin's letter as a fitting authority to draw out this money for her use he first feigns to doubt her hand, and then says he: "If an accident befalls these two women ere they return to justify me, how shall I answer to the next heir for this outlay? Verily," clasping his hands, "I am as one standing in darkness, and I dare not move until I am better enlightened. So prithee, friend, give me time to commune with my conscience."

Don Sanchez hunches up his shoulders and turns to us.

"Why, look here, master," says Dawson. "I can't see that you need much enlightenment to answer yes or no to a fair offer, and as for me I'm not going to hang in a hedge for a blue moon. So if you won't clap hands on the bargain without more ado I throw this business overboard and shall count I've done the best day's work of my life in getting out of the affair."

Then I made as if I would willingly draw out of my share in the project.

"My friends," says he, "there can be scarce any hope at all if thou wilt not hazard thy money for such a prodigious advantage." Then turning to Peter as his last hope he asks in despair, "What shall we do, my brother?"

"We can keep on a-praying, friend Simon," replies Peter in a sniveling voice.

"A blessed thought," exclaims the steward in glee. "Surely that is more righteous than to lay faith in our own vain effort. So do thou, friend," turning to me, "put thy money to this use, for I will none."

"I cannot do that, sir," says I, "without an assurance that Mrs. Godwin's estate will bear this charge."

With wondrous alacrity Simon fetches a book with a plan of the estate, whereby he showed us that not a building on the estate was untenanted, not a single tenant in arrear with his rent, and that the value of the property with all deductions made was £65,000.

"Very good, sir," says I. "Now you must give me a written note, stating what you have shown, with your sanction to my making this venture on Mrs. Godwin's behalf, that I may justify my claim hereafter."

But this Simon strongly refused to do, saying his conscience would not allow him to sign any bond (clearly with the hope that he might in the end shuffle out of paying anything at all), until Don Sanchez, losing patience, declared he would certainly hunt all London through to find that Mr. Richard Godwin who was the next of kin, hinting that he would certainly give us such sanction as we required if only to prove his right to the succession should our venture fail.

This put the steward to a new taking, but the don holding firm he at length agreed to give us this note upon Don Sanchez writing another to the effect that he had seen Mrs. Godwin and her daughter in Barbary and was going forth to fetch them, that should Mr. Thomas Godwin come to claim the estate he might be justly put off.

And so this business ended to our great satisfaction, we saying to ourselves that we had done all that man could to redeem the captives, and that it would be no harm at all to put a cheat upon the miserly steward. Whether we were any way more honest than he in shaping our conduct according to our inclinations is a question which troubled us then very little.

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