



# 54-40 OR FIGHT BY EMERSON HOUGH AUTHOR OF THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE ILLUSTRATIONS BY MAGNUS G. KETNER COPYRIGHT 1909 BY BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY



## 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 do, 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. Nicholas is sent to bring the baroness to Calhoun's apartments and misses a meeting with his sweetheart, Elizabeth Churchhill. 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.

## CHAPTER VI.

The Boudoir of the Baroness.  
A woman's counsel brought us first to woe.—Dryden.

"Wait!" she said. "We shall have candles." She clapped her hands sharply, and again there entered the silent old serving woman, who, obedient to a gesture, proceeded to light additional candles in the prism stands and sconces. The apartment was now distinct in all its details under this additional flood of light. Decently as I might I looked about. I was forced to stifle the exclamation of surprise which rose to my lips.

Here certainly was European luxury transferred to our shores. This in simple Washington, with its vast white unfinished capitol, its piecemeal miles of mixed residences, and hovels! I fancied stern Andrew Jackson or plain John Calhoun here!

The furniture I discovered to be exquisite in detail, of rosewood and mahogany, with many brass chasings and carvings, after the fashion of the empire, and here and there florid ornamentation following that of the court of the earlier Louis. Fanciful little clocks with carved scrolls stood about. Here and there a divan and couch showed elaborate care in comfort. Beyond a lace-screened grille I saw an alcove—doubtless cut through the original partition wall between two of these humble houses—and within this stood a high tester bed, its heavy mahogany posts beautifully carved, the couch itself piled deep with foundations of I know not what of down and spread most daintily with a coverlet of amber satin, whose edges fringed out almost to the floor. At the other extremity, screened off as in a distinct apartment, there stood a small couch, a Napoleon bed, with carved ends, furnished more simply, but with equal richness.

One reentered the liberties England took in establishing this manner of menage in our simple city, and arrogantly taking for granted our ignorance regarding it; but none the less one was forced to commend the thoroughness shown. My first impression was that of surprise; my second, as I have said, a feeling of resentment at the presumption which installed all this in our capital of Washington.

I presume my thought may have been reflected in some manner in my face. I heard a gentle laugh, and turned about. She sat there in a great carved chair, smiling, her white arms stretched out on the rails, the fingers just gently curling.

She had thrown back over the rail of the chair the rich cloak which covered her in the carriage, and sat now in the full light, in the splendor of satin and lace and gems, her arms bare, her throat and shoulders white and bare, her figure recognized graciously by every line of a superb gowning such as we had not yet learned on this side of the sea.

She did not speak at first, but sat and smiled, studying, I presume, to find what stuff I was made of.

"Be seated, pray," she said at last. "Let us talk over this matter."

Obedient to her gesture, I dropped into a chair opposite to her, she herself not varying her posture and still regarding me with the laugh in her half-closed eyes.

"What do you think of my little place?" she asked finally.

"Two things, madam," said I, half sternly. "If it belonged to a man, and to a minister plenipotentiary, I should not approve it. If it belonged to a lady of means and a desire to see the lands of this little world, I should approve it very much."

She looked at me with eyes slightly narrowed, but no trace of perturbation crossed her face. I saw it was no ordinary woman with whom we had to do.

"But," I went on, "in any case and at all events, I should say that the bird confined in such a cage, where secrecy is so imperative, would at times find weariness—would, in fact, wish to escape to other employment. You, madam—I looked at her directly—"are a woman of so much intellect that you could not be content merely to live."

"No," she said, "I would not be content merely to live."

"Precisely. Therefore, since to make life worth the living there must be occasionally a trifle of spice, a bit of adventure, either for man or woman, I suggest to you, as something of



In the Splendor of Satin and Lace and Gems.

fering amusement, this little journey with me to-night to meet my chief. You have his message. I am his messenger, and believe me, quite at your service in any way you may suggest. Let us be frank. If you are agent, so am I. See; I have come into your camp. Dare you not come into ours? Come; it is an adventure to see a tall, thin old man in a dressing gown and a red woolen nightcap. So you will find my chief; and in apartments much different from these."

She took up the missive with its broken seal. "So your chief, as you call him, asks me to come to him, at midnight, with you, a stranger?"

"Precisely. Could you go to the office of a United States senator and possible cabinet minister in broad daylight and the fact not be known? Could he come to your apartments in broad daylight and that fact not be known? What would 'that man Pakenham' suspect in either case? Believe me, my master is wise. Great necessity sets aside conventions, sets aside everything. Come, then?"

But still she only sat and smiled at me. I felt that purple and amber glow, the emanation of her personality, of her senses, creeping around me again as she leaned forward finally, her parted red-bowed lips disclosing her delicate white teeth. I saw the little heave of her bosom, whether in laughter or emotion I could not tell. I was young. Resenting the spell which I felt coming upon me, all I could do was to reiterate my demand for haste. She was not in the least impressed by this.

"Come!" she said. "I am pleased with these Americans. Yes, I am not displeased with this little adventure."

I rose impatiently, and walked apart in the room. "You cannot evade me, madam, so easily as you did the Mexican gentleman who followed you. You have him in the net also? Is not the net full enough?"

"Never!" she said, her head swaying slowly from side to side, her face inscrutable. "Am I not a woman? Ah, am I not?"

"Madam," said I, whirling upon her, "let me, at least, alone. I am too small game for you. I am but a messenger. Time passes. Let us arrive at our business."

"What would you do if I refused to go with you?" she asked, still smiling at me. But I saw that her attitude toward me held no more than that of a bird of prey and some little creature well within its power. It made me angry to be so rated.

"You ask me what I should do?" I retorted savagely. "I shall tell you first what I will do if you continue your refusal. I will take you with me, and so keep my engagement with my chief. Keep away from the bell rope! Remain silent! Do not move! You should go if I had to carry you there in a sack—because that is my errand!"

"Oh, listen at him threaten!" she laughed still. "And he despises my poor little castle here in the side street, where half the time I am so lonely! What would monsieur do if I conspired were in my place—and if I were in monsieur's place? But, bah!

you would not have me following you in the first hour we met, boy!"

I flushed again hotly at this last word. "Madam may discontinue the thought of my boyhood; I am older than she. But if you ask me what I would do with a woman if I followed her, or if she followed me, then I will tell you. If I owned this place and all in it, I would tear down every picture from these walls, every silken cover from yonder couches; I would rip out these walls and put back the ones that once were here! A house of logs far out in the countries that I know would do for you, madam!" I went on hotly. "You should forget the touch of silk and lace. No neighbor you should know until I was willing. Any man who followed you should meet me!"

"Excellent! What then?"

"Then, madam the baroness, I would in turn build you a palace, one of logs, and would make you a most excellent couch of the husks of corn. You should cook at my fireplace, and for me!"

She smiled slowly past me, at me. "Pray be seated," she said. "You interest me."

"It is late," I reiterated. "Come! Must I do some of these things—force you into obedience—carry you away in a sack? My master cannot wait."

She smiled, lazily extending her flawless arms and looking down at them, at all of her splendid figure, as though in interested examination. "I am alone so much—so bored!" she went on. "And Sir Richard Pakenham is so very, very fat. Ah, God! You cannot guess how fat he is. But you, you are not fat." She looked me over critically, to my great uneasiness.

"All the more reason for doing as I have suggested, madam; for Mr. Calhoun is not even so fat as I am. This little interview with my chief, I doubt not, will prove of interest. Indeed—I went on seriously and intently—"I venture to say this much without presuming on my station: the talk which you will have with my chief to-night will show you things you have never known, give you an interest in living which perhaps you have not felt. If I am not mistaken, you will find much in common between you and my master. I speak not to the agent of England, but to the lady Helena von Ritz."

"He is old," she went on. "He is very old. His face is thin and bloodless and fleshless. He is old."

"Madam," I said, "his mind is young, his purpose young, his ambition young; and his country is young. Is not the youth of all these things still your own?"

She made no answer, but sat musing, drumming lightly on the chair arm. I was reaching for her cloak. Then at once I caught a glimpse of her stockinged foot, the toe of which slightly protruded from beneath her ball gown. She saw the glance and laughed.

"Poor feet," she said. "Ah, mes pauvres pieds! You would like to see them bruised by the hard going in some heathen country? See, you have no carriage, and mine is gone. I have not even a pair of shoes. Go look under the bed beyond."

I obeyed her gladly enough. Under

the fringe of the satin counterpane I found a box of boots, slippers, all manner of footwear, daintily and neatly arranged. Taking out a pair to my fancy, I carried them out and knelt before her.

"Then, madam," said I, "since you insist on this, I shall choose. America is not Europe. Our feet here have rougher going and must be shod for it. Allow me!"

Without the least hesitation in the world, or the least immodesty, she half protruded the foot which still retained its slipper. As I removed this latter, through some gay impulse, whose nature I did not pause to analyze, I half mechanically thrust it into the side pocket of my coat.

"This shall be security," said I, "that what you speak with my master shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

There was a curious deeper red in her cheek. I saw her bosom beat the faster rhythm.

"Quite agreed!" she answered. But she motioned me away, taking the stout boot in her own hand and turning aside as she fastened it. She looked over her shoulder at me now and again while thus engaged.

"Tell me," she said gently, "what security do I have? You come, by my invitation, it is true, but none the less an intrusion, into my apartments. You demand of me something which no man has a right to demand. Because I am disposed to be gracious, and because I am disposed to be envious, and because Mr. Pakenham is fat, I am willing to take into consideration what you ask. I have never seen a thin gentleman in a woolen nightcap, and I am curious. But no gentleman plays games with a lady in which the dice are loaded for himself. Come, what security shall I have?"

I did not pretend to understand her. Perhaps, after all, we all had been misinformed regarding her? I could not tell. But her spirit of camaraderie, her good-fellowship, her courage, quite aside from her personal charm, had now begun to impress me.

"Madam," said I, feeling in my pocket: "no heathen has much of this world's goods. All my possessions would not furnish one of these rooms. I cannot offer gems, as does Senor Yturrio—but, would this be of service—until to-morrow? That will leave him and me with a slipper each. It is with reluctance I pledge to return mine!"

By chance I had felt in my pocket a little object which I had placed there that very day for quite another purpose. It was only a little trinket of Indian manufacture, which I had intended to give Elizabeth that very evening; a sort of cloak clasp, originally made as an Indian blanket fastening, with two round discs ground out of shells and connected by beaded threads. The trinket was curious, though of small value. The baroness looked at it with interest.

"How it reminds me of this heathen country!" she said. "Is this all that your art can do in jewelry? Yet it is beautiful. Come, will you not give it to me?"

"Until to-morrow, madam."

"No longer?"

"I cannot promise it longer. I must, unfortunately, have it back when I send a messenger—I shall hardly come myself, madam."

"Ah!" she scoffed. "Then it belongs to another woman?"

"Yes, it is promised to another."

"Then this is to be the last time we meet?"

"I do not doubt it."

"Are you not sorry?"

"Naturally, madam!"

She sighed, laughing as she did so. Yet I could not evade seeing the curious color on her cheek, the rise and fall of the laces over her bosom. Utterly self-possessed, satisfied with life as it had come to her, without illusion as to life, absorbed in the great game of living and adventuring—so I should have described her. Then why should her heart beat one stroke faster now? I dismissed that question, and rebuked my eyes, which I found continually turning toward her.

She motioned to a little table near by. "Put the slipper there," she said. "Your little neck clasp, also." Again I obeyed her.

"Stand there!" she said, motioning to the opposite side of the table; and I did so. "Now," said she, looking at me gravely, "I am going with you to see this man whom you call your chief. The favor may mean as much on one side as on the other—I shall not tell you why. But we shall play fair until, as you say, perhaps to-morrow. After that—"

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Not as Bad as He Had Feared.  
"I should think," said the beautiful young widow, "you would resent Mr. Brown's remarks concerning you."  
"What has he been saying about me?" asked Senator Piffle.  
"He says you are a politician and not a statesman."  
"Oh, pshaw! I don't mind that. I was afraid you were going to tell me he had been saying I was not true to my party."

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Yours very truly,  
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Clinton, Ia.

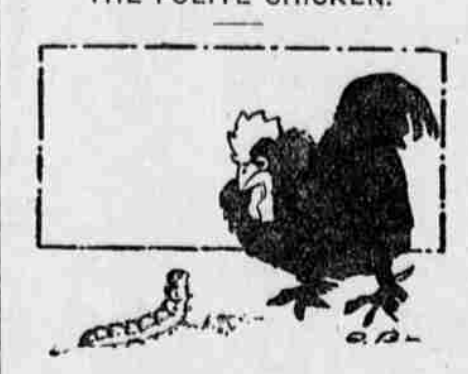
State of Iowa }  
Clinton County } ss.  
On this 13th day of July, A. D., 1909,  
W. C. Cook to me personally known appeared before me and in my presence subscribed and swore to the above and foregoing statement.

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THOUGH AMAZEMENT YOU SHOW  
I AM CERTAIN YOU KNOW  
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## Thorough.

"You are an optimist?"

"I am," replied Mr. Dustin Stax. "I not only hope for the best, but I make practical arrangements to get it."

A man ought to know a great deal to acquire a knowledge of the immensity of his ignorance.—Lord Palmerston.

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