

Hemming, The Adventurer

BY
THEODORE
ROBERTS

(Continued.)

"Belay that talk," he said, "and stop up the slack of it neat and shipshape."

The man of the sea railed his eyes in pained astonishment.

"So it was you, Mr. O'Rourke," he sneered. "Now that's a gentleman's trick for you."

"Yes it was I kicked you down the hatch, if that is what you are mentioning," replied O'Rourke, "and I think you know enough of me to obey my orders on the jump. I've eaten enough of your slush-fried grub to kill a whole ship's crew, you thiefing sea-cook. I know you for too big a coward to step out on to the foot-ropes, but brave enough to jab a marlinpike between a mate's ribs. So clear out of this."

The seaman shuffled his feet and grinned.

"Not so quick," he retorted; "and over that dimund an' I'll go, Mister O'Rourke."

"Dimund, you longshore gallow-berd, I don't know what you are talking about, but I'll hand over something that'll make you hop, in a minute," cried O'Rourke, in a fury.

Hicks threw his Winchester to his shoulder. "Come right in," he said, "or I'll blow the third button of your dirty shirt, counting from the top, right through your chest."

The seaman pulled a hideous face, and spat into the dust.

"Guess I'll accept your kind invite," he said. "It's real civil of gents like you to treat a poor sailorman like this." But he did not move.

O'Rourke eyed him with a new interest, and Hicks squinted along the black barrel.

"Don't trouble about that knife. We will lend you one if we keep you to lunch," said O'Rourke.

The fellow's face widened in a sickly smile as he entered the billiard-room by way of the open window. After relieving him of an amazingly sharp sheath-knife, they tied his hands and feet and locked him safe in an empty room.

"You see, O'Rourke, I am the man he is after; I have the diamond he talks about," explained Hicks.

O'Rourke whistled softly, and smiled inquiringly at the big-fever-thinned secretary.

"Take it from him?" he queried.

"I bought it from him," replied Hicks, "and it's on me now."

"Hold on to it, then, old chap," said O'Rourke, "and don't gab. He hates me, anyway, so he may just as well keep on thinking I have the stone. He was cook aboard a barquentine in which I made a voyage last year. I was a passenger—the skipper's friend,—and when the skip-

per was sick I had to interview the cook once or twice.

The colonel died that evening, at a quarter past six, of too much rum and whiskey and not enough medical treatment. His soldiers had done their best to save his life. Three of them, with the best intentions, held him upside down in a fountain for a good fifteen minutes, at the very beginning of his illness. Then they had carried him to his own quarters, and watched him expire.

The Senior Cuddiehead now took command, for the officers were in a funk. Through an interpreter he lectured and encouraged the men. He assured them that, should Hemming escape from the house alive, they would all swing for it, sooner or later; and that should they capture and bear away the other inmates, every man would find himself rich. What matter if the ladies had escaped, he said—surely the friends of Mr. Hicks would gladly pay a great ransom, should they succeed in carrying him away to the hills.

CHAPTER XIV. The Attack.

When news of the colonel's death reached Hemming, he sighed with relief.

"That ends it," he said. "The old man was a fool, but he held them together."

"What about that Penthouse-Cuddiehead chap? He seems to be taking an interest in it," said Hicks.

"He is sneak enough for anything, but he is also a coward," replied Hemming.

"This is a poor sort of revolution," said O'Rourke. "I have had more excitement waiting for my mail at the window of a country post-office. A Sunday-school treat beats it hands down. Davis could invent a better one in his sleep."

"Please don't talk like an ass, old chap," said Hemming. He found the revolution quite exciting enough.

"I shall go and look at my prisoner—he may be in a better humour than you," remarked O'Rourke, pensively.

Hicks followed him to the door of the locked room.

"These duffers don't want to fight. They never did, either. It was all a bluff of the colonel's," he said.

The other shook his head.

"Wait until we hear from Hemming's enemy. I think he'll take a turn before we get out of this," he replied. "He has played poor old Hemming some low tricks before now," he added, and gave Hicks a hint of the trouble in Hemming's past.

Hicks passed on and descended to the billiard-room, and O'Rourke paused at the door. He turned the

key and stepped into the room. He dodged before his eyes had warned him of danger. The huge fist landed on a point of his left shoulder, and sent him spinning across the room. He recovered himself in time to partially evade the seaman's bull-like rush. Staggered and hurt, he closed with his antagonist, wondering dully if the fellow had broken the cords, or had worked the knots loose. It did not occur to him to call for help. The door had closed behind him. The mariner's huge arms seemed to force his very heart out of its place. The bowed, sturdy legs writhed at his knees. The hot, evil breath burned against his neck. For a moment the pain of it closed his eyes. He was bent nearly double, and pin-points of light flashed in his brain. Then he recovered his wits and his courage. He twisted himself so that his shoulder caught the sailor's chin. This gave him a chance to breathe, and eased the crushing weight upon his ribs. It was O'Rourke's belief that, in a rough and tumble fight, without knives, and muscles being equal, the gentleman has always the advantage of the plebeian. So once again he settled himself to prove it. But this time the plebeian was unusually desperate. He wanted a diamond, and he hated the man his hands were upon. All his superiors were detestable to his unchivalrous soul. He had feared O'Rourke before this. Now he felt no fear—only a mad desire to knock the breath out of that well-kept body, and mark with blood the hard-set, scornful face. Then for the coast again, with the stone of fabulous price. For a minute or two O'Rourke played a waiting game. Twice, by his quickness and length of leg, he avoided a bad throw. His back and neck had some close calls. After covering that he was in better condition than his opponent, he began to force matters. Within ten minutes of his entrance, he knelt upon the sailor's bulky shoulders, and with colourless lips muttered strange oaths. Though his eyes were bright, he was not nice to look at.

The original savage glared exultingly from that white face. The sailor lay still, with blood from lips and nose staining the floor, a pitiful and ungainly figure.

Presently O'Rourke got to his feet and staggered from the room. Smith caught him just in time to help him to a chair. It had been a big effort for a warm day.

Hicks nursed the mariner back to his miserable existence. This required only a few minutes, for brandy had an almost magic effect upon this outcast of the sea. He emptied one decanter, and, seeing no chance of a

second, made a dash for the open window, taking the sill in a flying jump. But the window was on the second floor. When Smith went out to look at the body there was no trace of it.

"I could have sworn," said Hicks, with a shudder, "that I heard his neck break, but maybe it was just the bushes giving way."

The night was bright with stars. The little garrison sat up and smoked by the open windows. On the lower floor, windows were shuttered and barred, and doors were locked. If this game of war were worth playing at all, it was worth playing well. Shortly before midnight some one staggered up to the front of the house, carrying a paper lantern at the end of a stick, and singing. The guards jeered him. It was the sea-cook, drunk and bedraggled. He stopped his song in the middle of a line, and waved his lantern toward the window above him.

"Come out," he bawled, "an' gimme that dimund. Gesh you thought I couldn't jump out er that windy, didn't yer? Gesh yer'll be jumpin' outa it yerself perty soon."

The lantern caught fire, and the gaudy paper globe went up in a little burst of flame. The man threw it from him, and lurched on to the veranda. A scattered volley broke, here and there, from the garden. A few bullets pinged into the woodwork of the windows. Shouts of laughter went up from the clusters of trees and shrubs. The sailor hammered the front door. The guards sneaked away into the friendly shadows.

"They are all drunk," said Hicks, "and they'll try to rush us, for sure."

"Then the colonel's death was not an unmixed blessing," remarked O'Rourke.

Hemming ordered Smith and Hicks to windows on the other side of the house.

"Shall we shoot over their heads, or may we pump it right into them?" asked Hicks.

"I leave it to your own discretion," replied Hemming. "Smith, I promised him an easy interpretation of the word."

Hemming took the window in the upper hall, overlooking the front steps and the driveway, himself.

There was not a figure in sight. But the glass of the window lay broken on the floor, and the diamond-hunter kept up his drunken disturbance on the veranda below.

The firing out of the shadows continued, and drew nearer. Hemming extinguished his cigar and sat on the floor. He enjoyed quite a novel sensation when a bullet sang its way through the open window, like a great bee, and ripped into a shelf full of books half-way down the hall. He had never before been under fire behind a window. All about him he could hear the thumping of bullets against the tiles of the outer wall. Some one shouted in English, ordering the drunken sailor to come away from the house.

"Yer want my dimund, that's wot yer want," he shouted back, "but yer don't get so much ash a peep at it."

Hemming heard and frowned, as he

polished his eye-glass on his sleeve. Two shots sounded in quick succession from a room on the left of the hall. Hemming heard Santosia laugh, and O'Rourke congratulate him. The firing now seemed to centre mostly upon the front of the villa. Hemming, as yet, had not returned a shot. Suddenly the white man, moved by a drunken whim, left his hammering at the door, and pranced into the starlight. The shooting of his friends was everywhere. Elevation had little attention from them, and an unusually low ball found him out. He did not spring forward with uplifted hands; neither did he clutch at his breast and stagger onward. With an expression of pained astonishment on his face, and a heave of his fat shoulders, he sank to his hips, and then rolled over and lay still. To Hemming, it looked as if his fat legs had simply crumpled under him like paper.

A dozen men charged across the starlit driveway. Hemming dropped two of them. The others ran up the steps and across the veranda, and threw themselves against the door. But they were small men, and the door was a heavy one, and well bolted. Hemming left the window, and at the head of the stairs met O'Rourke.

"A brace and a half to me," said the gentleman, lightly.

The bitter smoke drifted from doorway to doorway through the dark. Hemming got his sword from his bedroom, and he and O'Rourke waited at the top of the stairs.

O'Rourke's heart was glad within him. Shoulder to shoulder with a man like Hemming, it would be a lovely fight. The door could not give in soon enough to suit him. He had ten shots in his revolver. Then he could break a few heads with his clubbed rifle, surely, and, after that, when they had him down, he could kick for a while. He did not think of his parents in the North, his friends, his half-written articles, nor his creditors. But he was sorry that Miss Hudson would never hear of his heroic finish.

"We have had some fun together, and I hope this will not be the last," said Hemming. They shook hands. Then the door came in with a rending sideling fall. A bunch of men sprang across it and made for the staircase, just discernible to them by the light from the doorway.

"Fire into the brown," said Hemming, quietly.

(To be continued.)

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"Yes'm," answered Harry, with an air of resignation. "That's what everybody says, but I can't help it."—London Tit-Bits.

"Of course, Charlie," said the wife. "I thank you for this money, but it isn't enough to buy a real fur coat."

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