Hemming, The Adventurer

BY THEODORE ROBERTS

(Continued.)

"Hush—see, they are all staring at us. Oh, stop, or I shall certainly cry."

She snatched her hands away from his eager grasp.

"But, tell me," he begged, in a whisper, before she could turn away. For a wonderful second their eyes read what the years of longing has set behind the iris for love to translate. Then she bowed her face, and answered "Yes."

He did not know if she shouted it, or but murmured beneath her breath; it rang through his body and spirit like the chiming of a bell.

"Drag me away," he whispered to Hicks. "I don't want to make an ass of myself before all these people.'

"You've done that already. Come into my study," said Hicks.

Hemming, scenting the truth, followed them.

"What is the matter with you?" asked Hicks.

"Don't you know your friends? Is that the real girl?" asked Hemming.

O'Rourke ignored the questions.

"Give me a drink of something," he said, and, recovering a little of his composure, smote Hemming violently on the back.

"Is it the real girl?" repeated Hemming, staggering.

"Do you think I'd make a mistake?" cried the lover. He swallowed the brandy brought him by Hicks, and requested a cigarette. Their host supplied it from a tin box on the mantelpiece, all the while eyeing O'Rourke anxiously.

"What on earth made you act like that?" he asked. "There'll be wigs on the green when Marion gets hold of you."

"Oh, you must forgive him this time," laughed Hemming. "For, as far as I can gather, he has just met the lady of his heart after years of separation."

"Do you mean Miss Hudson? Why, where did you ever meet her?" cried Hicks.

"It's a long story," replied O'Rourke, "but perhaps Herbert will tell it to you—I can't spare the time."

He threw the half-smoked cigarette into the grate, and left the study, closing the door behind him.

Hicks glanced uneasily at Hemming.

"I hope O'Rourke is not drunk," he said. "An out and out city square poet, who stays at home and writes about the rolling billows, I can understand, but I never know what chaps like you and O'Rourke are up to."

Hemming laughed.

"Don't worry about O'Rourke," he said.

Later in the evening, Hemming found a gray-haired gentleman standing alone, lost in contemplation of a black and white hunting picture. He seemed dazed, and ill at ease.

"Mr. Hemming," he said, "my name is Hudson, and my daughter has just introduced me to a Mr. O'Rourke. Have you ever met him?"

"Several times," replied Hemming.

"A gentleman, I suppose?"

"Certainly."

"A man of property?"

"Inconsiderable."

"An adventurer, perhaps?"

"Just as I am."

"But, my dear sir, your connections and your reputation as a writer places you above suspicion. I had frequently heard of you before the Pernamba episode."

"Thank you," said Hemming, with a crispness in his voice.

"But this man O'Rourke?" continued the other.

"O'Rourke," said Hemming, "lacks neither personal distinction nor respectable family connections. I have watched him under the most trying circumstances, and his behaviour has always been above criticism. Also, he happens to be my dearest friend."

CHAPTER II.

A New Restlessness.

"All night long, in the dark and wet,
A man goes riding by." . . . R. L. S.

During the first few days following O'Rourke's sensational meeting with Miss Hudson, Hemming saw very little of that headstrong young man for the lover spent his afternoons and evenings in making up for lost time, and his mornings in rearing Spanish castles. At first Hemming took joy in his friend's happiness—then came envy, and bleak disgust at his own ease. He sought refuge in hard work, and toiled every morning with a half-heart for the subject in hand, and ears pricked up for O'Rourke's babble of joy and content. And behold, at the end of a morning's grind, twenty pages for the fire. Even his novel came to a standstill. The chapter of romance, which had the joyful meeting of O'Rourke and Miss Hudson for its inspiration, seemed to have no connection with the rest of the narrative, and no excuse for existence save its own beauty. He wondered if this chapter were a story in itself—a breath of life's real poetry, too fine and rare for marketing. One night, alone in the sitting-room brooding above the manuscript, he tried to rewrite it in verse. A new restlessness had him by the heart, lifting him, one moment, to the heights of confidence, only to drag him down, the next, to the depths of uncertainty and longing. Three lines pulsed up to his brain, and he wrote them down. Then he opened his sitting-room window and looked out. The lights in the square gleamed down on the wet pavement. The black tree-tops threshed in the wind. A cab shed down from Fifth Avenue, under the arch. A policeman paused beneath him, and yawned at the bright entrance.

Hemming sniffed the wind, and decided to go for a walk. He circled the square three times. Then he struck up Fifth Avenue, with his hands in the pockets of his mackintosh and his stick under his arm. The big old houses on each side of the avenue wore an air of kindness that was not for him. Lights were in the upper windows of most of them. One was still awake, and carriages waited in a solemn row at the curb. It seemed to Hemming that all the world but himself was at peace. The coachmen and footmen waited contentedly outside, while their masters and mistresses laughed and danced within. What had these people to do with the bitterness of the unattainable? His eyes were turned in upon his own heart, and nothing seemed real but this new restlessness, this nameless desire like a crying in the dark. It was not for fame, nor altogether for the power of expression, though that, at one time or another, will tear the heart of every artist. It was not bred of any regret for the past, nor inspired by apprehension for the future. On the fly-leaf of a friend's book he had once read the words, "There is only the eternal now—an oasis of fleeting actuality between two deserts of mirage." Now he remembered the words as he strolled up Fifth Avenue. The Eternal Now! Could it give him no more solace than this? For him would it be always this empty room, from the windows of which he might look backward upon one mirage and forward to another? He felt in his pockets for something to smoke. They were empty, so he decided to keep on until he could find a tobacconist's establishment. Deep in thought, buffeted and yet soothed by the bleak wind, he strode along with little heed to his course. Presently, upon glancing up, he found himself on a side street, before the area railings of a basement restaurant that he knew well. Here he could get a Porto Rican cigar to which he was particularly partial, or cigarettes of pungent tobacco rolled in sweet brown paper. He opened the iron gate, descended the steps, and rang the signal of the initiated on the bell. The Italian woman opened the door, and smilingly admitted him. In the larger of the two dining-rooms only one table was occupied, for stray customers were not welcomed after the regular dinner hours. At the table sat two men whom Hemming knew and one who was a stranger to him. They were drinking coffee and smoking, and from a chafing-dish in the centre of the table drifted an odour with a tang to it.

Upon Hemming's entrance, Potts, assistant editor of a ten-cent magazine, called to him to join them. The Englishman did so, gladly. Akerly, the illustrator, he knew, and he was introduced to the third, a thick-shouldered, blond-haired youth, by name Tarmont. Tarmont also proved to be an artist. He was a Canadian by birth, and had just arrived in New York from a two years' visit in England.

"I was staying in Norfolk awhile," he said, "with some cousins, and I met a friend of yours." He looked intently at Hemming as he spoke, and Hemming started eagerly in his chair. But in a moment he sat quiet again.

"More than one, for that matter," continued Tarmont. "There was Major Anderson,—he talked a great deal of you one night, after some one had mentioned wars, and that sort of thing,—and there was an old chap who argued about you with an old dame, the same evening. Really, your memory seemed to bulk large in their eyes." He paused, and smiled at his companions. "Oh, I forgot," he added; "there was a lady—very pretty, too— who stopped playing ping-pong with me to listen to what they were saying about Captain Hemming. Of course she didn't give that for a reason."

"What was her name,?" asked Hemming.

Tarmont shook his head, and producing his cigarette-case, lit a mild, fat Turkish.

"I'm no good at names," he said, "but she seemed to be about twenty-eight in age, and was beautifully set up, a trifle on the thin side—and had ripening fine eyes, and hair with copper on it."

Even Hemming laughed.

"You must have spent all your precious time starting at her," remarked Potts.

"Well, I did," confessed the artist, "for I was in love with her, man. Even now, whenever I draw a girl I make her waist and her arms. As for the look in her eyes—my dear fellow, I can never forget it."

"What sort of a look was it?" asked Akerley, hugely amused.

"A look of longing," replied Tarmont, in tragic tones. "It was deucedly disconcerting, too, for the man she happened to be talking to. It always made me feel as if I had a hole in the middle of my chest, through which she could see some chap whom she was anxious to embrace. We all noticed that Anderson didn't like it at all."

Potts and Akerly roared with laughter.

"You should be a novelist," said Potts.

Akerly ordered a round-bellied, wicker-covered flask. But Hemming only pondered over what he heard.

It was close upon two o'clock in the morning when Hemming got back to the Wellington. He found O'Rourke snug in his bed, smiling even in his sleep. He closed the bedroom doors softly, stirred up the fire, and sat down to his story. Still the wind galloped through the square, slashing the tree-tops, and riding against the house-fronts.

It was dawn when Hemming laid aside his pen, knocked the smouldering heel from his pipe, and went wearily to bed.

CHAPTER III.

A Rolling Stone.

The life of New York did not suit Hemming, although his work progressed at a round pace. He awoke in the mornings to no expectations of joy or adventure. The dulness of each approaching day weighed upon him even before his eyes opened. He saw but little of O'Rourke after the luncheon hour, and, though he and Tarmont became quite friendly, loneliness made his days miserable. He began to regret even the foolish, anxious days of the Pernamba revolution. In his blue mood he would sometimes call on the Tetsons and Hickses—but, alas, in conventional environment they had lost much of their charm. Hicks was growing fat and self-complacent. Marion was growing commonplace under the burden of formalities. Even the old man was undergoing a change—had already been weaned from his yellow cigar and taught to wear a four-in-hand necktie until dinner-time. As for Mrs. Tetson, kindly soul, why, she now spent most of her days in contented slumber, and sometimes drove in the park of an afternoon.

Hemming sometimes went to dinner at the Hudsons' with O'Rourke. Mrs. Hudson was dead, and Helen and her father made up the family. Hemming found these evenings quite worth while. Miss Hudson was as clever as she was charming, and as sympathetic as she was original. Mr. Hudson was a kind-hearted, exceedingly well-bred banker, with a cultivated taste in wines and cigars. Under his daughter's leadership he sometimes talked brilliantly. After these dinners Hemming would always stay as long as he could without feeling himself in the way; then, after a word or two with Mr. Hudson in the library, he would return to the lonely sitting-room and write letters to Miss Travers. These he burned as soon as written. This was foolishness, and worried Smith a good deal.

(To be continued.)

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The wealthy man shook his head.

"It is no use," he said, sadly. "If I had an airship they arrest me for scaring birds."

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Mr. Stubb—Well, I guess not. You don't suppose the Sultan is foolish enough to recognize such a holiday as that when he has 200 wives?

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