

THE ST. JOHN EVENING TIMES, MONDAY, OCTOBER 10, 1904.

Hemming, The Adventurer

BY
THEODORE
ROBERTS

(Continued)

CHAPTER IX.

O'Rourke tells a sad story. Upon his arrival in New York, Hemming called immediately upon Mr. Dodder, in the New York News Syndicate Building on Fulton Street. He found the manager even stouter than at the time of their first meeting, and of a redder countenance. His manner was as cordial as before, but his mood was not so jovial.

"I am always worrying about something or other, and just now it is my health," he told Hemming. "You don't know what I'd give, captain, for a life like yours—and a good hard body like yours. But I can't drop this job now. It's the very devil. I can tell you, to have one's brain and nerves jumping and tripping all the time while one's carcass lolls about and puts on fat. I'm sorry I was so smart when I was a kid. Otherwise the old man would not have sent me to college, and I'd never have hunted myself in this slavery. My father was a lumberman, and so was my grandfather. They had big bodies, just like mine, but they lived the right kind of lives for their bodies."

Hemming felt sorry for him. He saw that the gigantic body was at strife with the manner of life to which it was held, and that the same physique that had proved itself a blessing to the lumberman, was a menace to the desk-worker.

"Better take a few months in the woods," he suggested.

Dodder laughed bitterly. "You might just as well advise me to take a few months in heaven," he said.

Hemming asked for news of O'Rourke.

The manager's face lighted. "O'Rourke," he exclaimed, "is a man wise in his generation. Shackles of gold couldn't hold that cap from his birthright of freedom. He did us some fine work for a time—ode with Gomez and got his news out somehow or other—but went under with nettle and left Cuba. We kept him on, of course, but as soon as he could move around again he resigned his position. He said he had some very pressing business affair to see to."

"Is he well again?" asked Hemming, anxiously.

"Oh, yes, he's able to travel," replied Dodder. "He was here only a few weeks ago. He seems to be making a tour of the Eastern cities. I guess he's looking for something."

"The editor, likely, who has lost some of his manuscripts," remarked Hemming.

"Or a girl," said the other.

"Why a girl?" asked the Englishman.

Dodder smiled pensively. "I like to think so," he said, "for though I am nothing but a corpulent business man for romance, and the heart of a Lochmara."

Hemming nodded gravely. Dodder laughed at him. "You are thinking what a devilish big horse I need," he said.

They dined together that evening at the Reform Club, and Hemming was amazed at the quantity of food the big man consumed. He had seen O'Rourke, the long lean, and broad, sit up to some hearty meals after a day in the saddle, but never had he met with an appetite like Dodder's.

It was the appetite of his ancestral lumbermen, changed a little in taste, perhaps, but the same in vigour.

War was in order between the United States of America and Spain. General Shafter's army was missing in Tampa, Florida, and Hemming, with letters from the syndicate, started for Washington to procure a pass from the War Office. But on the night before his departure from New York came news from London of his book, and the first batch of proof sheets for correction. He worked until far into the morning, and mailed the proofs, together with a letter, before breakfast. Arriving in Washington, he went immediately to the War Department building and handed in his letters. The clerk returned and asked him to follow to an inner room. There he found a pale young man, with an imposing, closely printed document in his hand.

"Captain Hemming?" inquired the gentleman.

Hemming bowed.

"Your credentials are correct," continued the official, "and the Secretary of War has signed your passport. Please put your name here."

Hemming signed his name on the margin of the document, folded it, and placed it in a waterproof pocketbook, and bowed himself out. He was about to close the door behind him when the official called back.

"You forgot something, captain," said the young man, holding a packet made up of about half a dozen letters towards him.

"Not I," replied Hemming. He glanced at the letters, and read on the top one "Bertram St. Ives O'Rourke, Esq."

"O'Rourke," he exclaimed.

"How stupid of me," cried the young man.

"Where is he? When was he here?" inquired Hemming. "He is a particular friend of mine," he added.

The official considered for a second or two.

"Tall chap with a yellow face and a silk hat, isn't he?" he asked.

"But he had neither a yellow face nor a silk hat when I saw him last—that was in Jamaica, about a year ago."

At that moment the door opened and O'Rourke entered. Without noticing Hemming he gave a folded paper to the clerk.

"You'll find that right enough," he said, and then his eye lighted upon his old comrade. He grasped the Englishman by the shoulders and shook him backward and forward, grinning all the while a wide, yellow grin.

"My dear chap," protested Hemming, "where have you been to acquire this demonstrative nature?"

"Lots of places. Come and have a drink," exclaimed O'Rourke.

"I'll mail that to your hotel," called the pale young man after them, as they hurried out.

"What are you up to now, my son?" inquired Hemming, critically surveying the other's fatigued features.

"You look no end of a toff, in spite of your yellow face."

"Thank you, and I feel it," replied his friend, "but my release is at hand, for tonight I shall be free to mine uncle's and there deposit these polite and costly garments. Already my riding-breeches and khaki tunic are stirring over the end of my bed."

"But why this grandeur, and this wandering about from town to town?" asked Hemming. He caught the quick look of inquiry on his friend's face.

"Dodder told me you'd been aimlessly touring through the Eastern States," he added.

"Here we are—come in and I'll tell you about it," replied O'Rourke. They entered the Army and Navy Club, and O'Rourke, with a very much-at-home air, led the way to a quiet inner room.

"I suppose we'll split the soda the same old way—as we did before sorrow and wisdom came to us," sighed O'Rourke. He gave a familiar order to the attentive waiter. Hemming looked closely at his companion, and decided that the lightness was only a disguise.

"Toll me the yarn, old boy—I know it's more than fighting and fever," he said, settling himself comfortably in his chair.

O'Rourke waited until the servant had deposited the glasses and retired. Then he selected two cigars from his case with commendable care, and rolling one across the table, lit the other. He inhaled the first draught lazily.

"These are deuced fine cigars," remarked Hemming. O'Rourke nodded his head, and with his gaze upon the

blue drift of smoke, began his story. "I was in a very bad way when I got out of that island last time. I had a dose of fever that quite eclipsed any of my former experiences that line—also a bullet-hole in the calf of my left leg. Maybe you noticed my limp, and thought I was feigning going. A big brought me back to this country, landing me at Port Tampa. Some patriotic Cubans were waiting for me, and I made the run up to Tampa in a car decorated with flags. I wore my Cuban uniform, you know, and must have looked more heroic than I felt."

Hemming raised his eyebrows at last.

"I'm a major in the Cuban army," he said, "the devil take it," explained O'Rourke.

"The patriots escorted me to a hotel," he continued, "but the manager looked at my bunarashed face and refused to have anything to do with me at any price. Failing in this, my numerous friends rushed me to a wooden hospital, at the end of a river of brown sand which the inhabitants of that town call an avenue. I was put to bed in the best room in the place, and then my friends hurried away, each one to find his own doctor to offer me. I was glad of the quiet, for I felt about as beastly as a man can feel without flickering out."

"I don't think my insides just then would have been worth more than two cents to any one but a medical student. The matron—at least that's what they called her—came in to have a look at me, and ask me questions. She was young, and she was pretty, and her impersonal manner grieved me even then."

"I might have been a dashed pacifier for all the interest she showed in me, beyond taking my temperature and ordering the fumigation of my clothes. I wouldn't have felt so badly about it if she had not been a lady—but she was, sure enough, and her off-hand treatment very nearly made me forget my cramps and visions of advancing land-crabs. During the next few days I didn't know much of anything. When my head felt a little clearer, the youthful matron brought me a couple of telegrams. I asked her to open them, and read them to me. Evidently my Cuban friend had reported the state of my health, and other things, for both telegrams were tender inquiries after my condition."

"You seem to be a person of some importance," she said, regarding me as if I were a specimen in a jar.

"My name is O'Rourke," I murmured. "For awhile she stared at me in a puzzled sort of way. Suddenly she blushed."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. O'Rourke," she said, and blushed as if she meant it. "I felt more comfortable, and sucked my ration of milk and lime-water with relish. Next day the black orderly told me that the matron was Miss Hudson, from somewhere up North. He didn't know just where. I gave him a verbal order on the hospital for a dollar."

"Presently Miss Hudson came in and greeted me cheerfully. Why do you want Harley to have a dollar?" she asked.

"Just for a tip," I replied, wear-

"He is paid to do his work, and if the patients fee him, the poorer ones will suffer," she said.

"But I want him to have it, please. He told me your name," I said.

"She paid no more attention to this foolish remark than if I had sneezed. Indeed, even less, for if I had sneezed she would have taken my pulse or my temperature. I watched her as she moved about the room seeing that all was clean and in good order."

"Miss Hudson," I said, gaining courage, "will you tell me what is going on in the world? Have you a New York paper?"

"Yes, some papers have come for you," she answered, "and I will read to you for a little while, if you feel strong enough to listen. There is a letter, too. Shall I open it for you?"

"No," I said, "when you cause," she said, "and first of all, I amamed the letter."

"From the New York News Syndicate," she said.

"Then it's only a check," I sighed. "I shall put it away with the money you had when you came," she said. She opened a paper, glanced at it, and wrinkled her white brow at me.

"Are you the Bertram St. Ives O'Rourke?" she asked.

"No, indeed," I replied. "He has been dead a long time. He was an admiral in the British navy."

"If I have never heard of him," she answered, "but there is a man with that name who writes charming little stories, and verses, too, I think."

"Oh, that duffer," I exclaimed, faintly.

"She laughed quietly. There is an article about him here—at least I suppose it is the same man." She glanced down the page and then up at me. "An angel answers," she laughed, and chafed me kindly about my modesty.

"After that we became better friends every day, though she often laughed at the way some of the papers tried to make a hero of me. That hurt me, because really I had gone through some awful messes, and been sniped at a dozen times. The Spaniards had a price on my head. I told her that but she didn't seem impressed. As soon as I was able to see people, my friends the Cuban cigar manufacturers called upon me, singly and in pairs, each with a gift of cigars. These are out of their offerings. The more they did homage to me, the less seriously did Miss Hudson seem to regard my heroism. But she liked me—yes, we were good friends."

O'Rourke ceased talking and pensively flipped the ash off his cigar. Leaning back in his chair, he stared at the ceiling.

"Well?" inquired his friend. O'Rourke returned to the narration of his experience with a visible effort.

"After awhile she read to me, for half an hour or so, every day. One evening she read a ballad of my own by gad, it was fine. But then, even the journal sounded like poetry when she got hold of it. From that we got to talking about ourselves to each other, and she told me that she had learned nursing, after her freshman year at Vassar, because of a change in her father's affairs. She had come South with a wealthy pat-

ient, and, after his recovery, had accepted the position of matron, or head nurse, of that little hospital in return. I yawned away about my boyhood, my more recent adventures my friends, and my ambitions. As last my doctor said I could leave the hospital, but must go North right away. My leg was healed, but otherwise I looked and felt a wreck. I was so horribly weak, and my nights continued so crowded with suffering and delirium, that I feared my constitution was ruined. I tried to keep myself in hand when Miss Hudson was around, but she surely guessed that I loved her."

"What's that?" interrupted Hemming.

"I said that I loved her," rejoined O'Rourke, defiantly.

"Go ahead with the story," said the Englishman.

"When the time came for my departure," continued O'Rourke, "and the carriage was waiting at the curb, I just kissed her hand and left without saying a word. I came North and got doctors to examine me. They said that my heart and lungs were right as could be, and that the rest of my year would straighten up in time. They promised even a return of my complexion with the departure of the malaria from my blood. But I must live a quiet life for awhile, they said, so to begin the quiet life I returned to Tampa, and the hospital. But I did not find the girl."

"No," said O'Rourke, "she had resigned, and left the town with her father. Evidently her troubles were ended—just as mine were begun."

"What did you do about it?" asked Hemming, whose interest was thoroughly aroused.

"Oh, I looked for her everywhere—in Boston, and New York, and Baltimore, and Washington, and read all the city directories," replied the disconsolate lover, "but I do not know her father's first name, and have no idea what a lot of Hudsons there are in the world."

Hemming discarded the butt of his cigar, and eyed his friend contemplatively.

"I suppose you looked in the registers of the Tampa hospital?" he queried. "The old chap's name and perhaps his address would be there."

O'Rourke stared from his chair, with dismay and shame written on his face.

"Sit down and have another," said Hemming. "We'll look it up in a few days."

(To be continued.)

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