

# Strange Duel.

"CAN'T you look where you are stepping, sir, and not walk into other people like that?"

"I beg your pardon. But as both of us were walking fast and turned the corner together from opposite directions, our meeting was an unavoidable accident. However, I apologize, though your rudeness would amply justify me in not complying with the formality."

"It was not an accident, sir. You did it on purpose. Because you are a priest, sir, you think you have the right to insult people just as you please. I know you priests. I was a Catholic once myself, but I gave up that nonsense long ago. I won't allow anyone to insult me, sir, be he priest or pope."

"My friend, is it a quarrel you are looking for, or a trap you wish to lay for me?"

"And whom do you call your friend, sir? I wish you to understand, sir, that I am not the friend of any man of your cloth. And then what do you mean by asking if I intend to entrap you? Do you mean to insinuate, sir, that I am a highwayman or a cut-throat?"

"You may be neither, sir, but you certainly are a very quarrelsome fellow, to say the least. Your early education must have been sadly neglected."

"My early education, sir, has been as good as, if not better than, your own. I am a graduate of one of the most renowned universities of the country, sir."

"Well, you are no credit to your Alma Mater. I am sorry you will not accept my apology. Now, as I am on my way to an urgent sick call, you will please excuse me. Good day, sir."

As Father Hington walked away, the incensed young man stood for a few moments following him with flashing eyes, and gesticulating violently. His face was livid with rage, and his lips worked convulsively.

"I'll teach him a lesson, yet," he muttered, grinding his teeth. "The priestly coward!"

He was about to walk away when someone tapped him gently on the shoulder. He turned about quickly and saw standing before him a young man of about twenty-five, tall, athletic and well dressed.

"What do you want with me, sir, and what do you mean by treating me with such unwarranted familiarity?"

"I beg your pardon, sir. Knowing that you are a stranger in this town, and seeing you gesticulating vehemently, I thought I might be of some service to you. Can I do anything for you, sir?"

"Yes; show me the way to the priest's house."

"Ah! you're a Catholic. I am pleased to meet you, sir. My name is Condon, and I am President of the St. Vincent de Paul Society. As you know, one of our works is to look after poor Catholics. I'll be happy to show you the way to Father Hington's house. I am sure you'll be delighted with your visit. Father Hington is a perfect gentleman. The townsfolk simply worship him—Catholics and Protestants alike. He—"

"Before going any further, sir, I want you to understand that I am not a Catholic, although I was baptized one and made my First Communion. I won't allow anybody, priest or pope, to lead me by the nose, you understand, sir? I am a free-born American citizen."

"Are you? Well, now I am glad to know it. From hearing you talk I never should have imagined it."

"Yes, sir, I am, and I don't believe in anything."

"Oh, indeed. You're not the only one that don't believe in anything. I've got a dog at home that resembles you in this respect."

"So you, too, wish to insult me, as your priest insulted me a while ago. But I'll get even with the coward."

"Father Hington insulted you! He a coward! Look here, sir, you had better measure your words when you speak of Father Hington. He insulted you! He, the most refined gentleman, the very soul of honor and kindness, to whom all of us, young and old, rich and poor, confide our troubles and sorrows, always sure of a kind, sympathetic word in return! Father Hington a coward! He who exposed himself fearlessly to danger during our late epidemic!"

"Like all priests, sir, your Father Hington is a lazy, good-for-nothing fellow. I hate priests."

"Look here, sir, you had better put a stop to this. You have lost your temper and I might lose mine; and the result might be disastrous. I know why you hate priests. It's for the very same reason that the devil hates them: because he sees in the priest the representative of that God who judges, condemns and punishes sin. As both the devil and the impious despise and hate the Master, so also do they despise and hate His ministers. But it's no use wasting words trying to convince you of your folly. And now, for your own good,

I would advise you to leave town as soon as you can. And, above all, do not talk to anyone else as you have talked to me. Fationes is not the strong point of the Catholics of this town, especially when it comes to insulting their priest. Father Hington's house is the last one on this street, a plain wooden building with bay windows and a veranda. Take care how you speak to him. He is forbearing, but the townsfolk are not, and they might wreak their just vengeance on you. And then we have no graveyard for strangers. Good day, sir."

So saying, young Condon sauntered off, leaving the solitary free-born American to his own angry thoughts.

"The impudent jackapes! to call Father Hington a good-for-nothing fellow, a man whose time, talents, purse, health and life belong to everybody in the town. And this coarse little fellow talks of teaching him a lesson. If Father Hington were to give him a sound beating, the scoundrel would get no more than he deserves. I'm half-sorry I didn't do it myself. But perhaps it's better not. I'm sure Father Hington will bring him back to his senses by mere Christian means. I don't believe there's a man living he can't win over by his kindness. In fact, I think he could win over the heart of the most rabid A.P.A. and persuade him to put a picture of the Sacred Heart on the American flag, instead of the little red school house."

In the meantime, Father Hington was administering the last rites of the Church to a dying old Irishwoman. He heard her confession and absolved her. A few minutes later, with the names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph on her dying lips, she appeared before her Judge, whom she had served faithfully and loved tenderly during her long life of suffering. Before dying, she asked Father Hington: "Father, what do you want me to ask the Sacred Heart for in heaven?"

"Ask Him," answered Father Hington, "to touch the heart of an obdurate young man who has, for a long time, resisted the grace of God."

"I will, Father. Jesus, Mary, Joseph!"

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when a dark-faced young man stopped before the garden gate of Father Hington's modest presbytery. The tall, straight muscular and kind-faced priest was just then pacing up and down the veranda. At sight of the young man, Father Hington put down the book he was reading, and went to meet his visitor, whom he greeted most cordially.

"Come in, my young friend, come in. I am delighted to see you."

The young man started at the words, but did not seem to heed the kind welcome. Together they entered the sitting room. Father Hington gave the young man an arm-chair and sat opposite to him.

"I presume, sir, you know the motive of my visit," said the young man.

"Well, think I do," replied Father Hington. "I suppose you come to apologize for your strange conduct towards me this morning. But then, I beg of you to forget the past as I forgive your insults. You are young and impulsive, and your words were—"

"My words were weighed and measured carefully, sir. I want you to understand, sir, that I have come here not to talk or to be talked to, but to obtain a suitable and entire satisfaction." He stared at Father Hington to see what impression his words had made. But the priest's countenance had lost nothing of its calm and self-control, there were the same unmistakable signs of strong resolve and utter scorn of all dangers, tempered by kindness.

"And pray, sir, what satisfaction can I offer you?" asked the priest, coolly.

"Sir, you have insulted, reviled, trampled a free-born American citizen. Now your insults can be washed out only in blood, and unless you are the most cowardly of men, you cannot refuse me the satisfaction I demand of you."

The young man sank back in his chair, as if exhausted by his outburst of senseless passion. But his angry words had an unexpected effect on Father Hington. His facial nerves seemed to relax for a moment. The strong lines of resolve vanished from his countenance, and to them succeeded those of fun and merriment. Then he broke into a short, sudden laugh.

"Do you mean a duel?"

"Easily, sir."

"But you must be mad! A duel because you ran into me and I ran into you while turning the corner of a street! You are joking, sir! And then, look at me. Think of the character bidden beneath this countenance."

"All I see beneath that countenance, sir, is a black, cowardly heart."

"Then you insist on fighting?"

"I do, sir, nothing else will satisfy me, sir."

"Very well, then. Please step into the next room with me, where we may discuss this matter more at ease, and without fear of interruption. Walk in, sir," he added, as he opened a door communicating with the sitting room.

The young man moved to the threshold, and then stopped as if

rooted to the spot. His eyes wandered about the apartment. His face wore the expression of one seized by awe, or overwhelmed and irascible.

"Walk in, sir, walk in," said Father Hington, encouragingly. "Ah! an obstacle, I see. I will remove it for you." He seized a heavy vaulting horse which stood two or three feet in front of the door and swung it aside as if it had been a toy. "You see," he said, smiling, "I would be quite an acquisition to a football team; I can interfere and tackle creditably, yet, in spite of my thirty-eight summers. Now, please walk in."

Still the young man stood irresolute. The vision before him seemed to have frozen the blood in his veins. At last he entered, or, more correctly, staggered into the apartment.

"A strange room for a priest's house!" he muttered to himself. And, indeed, it was a strange room. Every article of furniture belonged to that class known as "athletic supplies."

There were rowing machines, vaulting horses, parallel bars, Indian clubs, dumb-bells, evening rings, chest-expansors, fencing foils, punching-bags, etc. The walls were literally covered with photographs of uniformed athletes, baseball and football teams. A round table in one of the corners was littered with gold and silver cups and other athletic trophies of antique and most fantastic designs.

As the eyes of Father Hington's visitor fell upon this table, they glistened with something more than mere admiration.

"Well, sir, is not this a place well suited to our purpose? Are not the surroundings well calculated to inspire and help us in our talk about the arrangements for our coming duel?"

"Are you an athlete, sir?" gasped the young man.

"Well, I used to be, in my young days. And now, though a priest, and comparatively stiff, I indulge in athletic sports to lull my up and keep healthy. And then, this minister's gymnasium is also for the use of my young men's sodality. Yes, I have always been a firm believer in the practice of athletics. I look upon it as an important factor in a young man's training. In my opinion, strengthened by experience, it is nothing that contributes so much towards soundness of heart and mind as soundness of body and muscle. 'Mens sana in corpore sano' has always been one of my favorite mottoes. I have learned from experience at college and here, that nothing keeps a young man straight, physically and morally, so much as manly and well regulated exercise. Nothing would do my young sodalists but to have me at their instructor. For this reason I have to keep in training, as the sporting phrase goes. This very evening, at five o'clock, I have to give a number of them a few lessons in marksmanship, for, you see, we have a shooting gallery in the gym."

At these last words, the young man would be dullified fast a cold shiver run over his whole body.

"Do you give lessons in fencing, too?"

"Oh, yes. In fact, fencing is my forte. You see, in fencing, all the muscles of the body come into play. And then there is nothing like it to give a man a 'good eye,' as we say. But as my time is limited, we had better settle that business for which you came to see me."

"Well—before, uh—well, uh—I would like, sir, with your kind leave, sir, to examine some of those trophies (for I suppose they are trophies) which I see on that table yonder."

"Certainly, sir," answered Father Hington, with a significant twinkle in his clear, bright eyes. "And I shall be pleased to give you the history of some of them."

Together they approached the trophy-laden table.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! the young man kept repeating to himself, as he examined the precious and artistically wrought objects one by one. After reading each inscription, he would invariably turn to Father Hington and eye him from head to foot with a most scrutinizing look. A stranger would have found it difficult to tell what the young man's thoughts really were. But to Father Hington, the young man's mind was an open book.

"I prize these objects very highly," said the priest. "Are they not beautiful?"

"Yes, sir," answered the young man. "Great Beati!" he exclaimed as he took up the centipede, a solid gold cup resting gracefully on the slinky shoulders of an Apollo and surrounded by a winged Mercury: "Is this the famous '08 cup?"

"The same," replied Father Hington, with unassuming indifference.

"And how did you come by it, Father?"

"By winning seven of the eleven events at the intercollegiate meet, my friend."

"And is it possible that you are Ouseyong Hington, the record breaker of class '71'?"

"That's my name, and my class, my friend. And now may I ask your name?"

"Do you remember a poor young Irishman whom you helped so masterfully with money, and coached so faithfully in the classics?"

"Charlie McMaheus, the model Catholic lad? Of course I remember him. What has become of him?"

"He stands before you, Father. But he is no longer the model Catholic boy, but a most wretched, ungrateful, and despicable scoundrel who has insulted you most shamefully and—"

He was interrupted by Father Hington, who took the young man's hand and shook it frankly and affectionately. "My dear Mac, let us go back into the sitting-room," he said, as he took the young man by the arm.

"Father Hington," began young McMaheus, "you cannot imagine how low, how mean, how abject I feel when I think of the way—"

"Now, Mac, none of that. For the sake of Auld Lang Syne, not another word about our bumping together in the street and the little comedy that followed."

"But—"

"There is no butting, in my house. Tell me what you have been doing with yourself these last fourteen years? By this time you ought to be a most successful lawyer."

"I ought to be; but alas! I am nothing but a vile, wretched, dissipated spend-thrift. I have squandered my talents, my money, my time, in search of pleasure, and I have found nothing but disappointment, misery and mental suffering. Ever since I gave up the practice of my religion, I have never enjoyed a moment of real happiness. My temper has been soured, my health impaired, my mind obscured, my will weakened. In fact, my whole existence has been poisoned. If I had the courage to burst asunder the heavy and loathsome chains that bind me to the earth, I would—"

"You would make a good confession, my dear Mac, and repair the past and be happy, as happy as you were at Shaftsbury, when you practiced your religion."

"Confession! Religion! I have lost all faith. I am confronted with too many objections against—"

"Some of the Commandments," Father Hington supplemented.

"That's what I (Catholics mean generally when they speak of objections against their religion. A good confession never fails to settle all their doubts. Is that not your great objection, Mac, the Commandments?"

The young man bowed his head, but spoke not a word.

"Yes," continued Father Hington, in a most impressive manner, "the want of faith, in most cases, means an unwillingness to live according to faith; it means lack of strength and courage to follow the dictates of right reason and conscience. With the most part of the so-called unbelievers, cowardice to combat and conquer their animal appetites and to subdue their passions, is the true reason and ultimate cause of their irreligiosity. No, my dear Mac, believe me, you have not lost your faith; you have simply followed your passions blindly, and stifled the voice of your conscience. And if you have objections against the holy religion in which you were born and bred, they are groundless and imaginary. The fear of hell is the strongest objection that the impious have against its existence. If you remember well, I was a Protestant when you knew me at Shaftsbury."

"Yes," replied Mac. "How did you become a Catholic?"

"I will tell you in a few words. And first of all, you, dear Mac, had a great share in the work of my conversion. May the good and merciful God reward you for it."

"How is that?" asked Mac, anxiously.

"Your example at Shaftsbury. You were then a most virtuous, edifying young man; and I attributed your most heroic conduct to the sole fact that you were a Catholic. This set me a thinking, I studied the Catholic religion, and the year after taking my degree of LL.D., I was instructed and baptized by a good, simple and holy priest of my native city. Resolved to consecrate my life solely and entirely to God, I entered a Seminary and was ordained a priest eleven years ago. I have been in charge of this parish for nearly eight years, and I am very happy, for my flock is most faithful to God and devoted to me."

"How I envy your happiness, Father."

"My dear friend, true happiness is within the reach of every one. The great secret is to look for it where it is to be found. There is nothing in this life that is more talked of and more sought after than happiness. At the same time there is nothing that is less understood. Yes, happiness is every man's wish; and yet not one out of a thousand knows wherein it consists. Men mistake pleasure for joy, thoughtlessness for peace, wealth, honors and the unbounded indulgence of their appetites and desires, are believed to be the sources of happiness. Now, dear Mac, the only source of true happiness are wisdom and virtue; that is to say, happiness consists first in knowing our duties towards God, our neighbor and ourselves, and secondly in acting in conformity with that knowledge. To look for happiness in anything else is folly. Now you possess already the first requisite for happiness, viz: wisdom, for you know as well as I do what your duties are towards God, your neighbor and yourself; and you need in strength of virtue, viz: to conform your conduct to your knowledge."

"I cannot. It is impossible."

"I am not going to press; to you say longer. You came here to fight

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a duel, and fight you must. Here is my weapon." Father Hington took a violet stole out of his pocket and put it around his neck. "Now," he continued, "you just kneel down here and hurl your sins at me with all your might. Don't be afraid of hurting me."

The young man could not resist. He knelt down at the feet of his friend and made a general confession. And so the duel was fought and both were satisfied with the result.