THE FOOL OF HARVEY'S SLUICE

By CONAN DOYLE

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ABE WAS in good spirits this morning. It may have been the sunshine, or it may have been the rapid rise of shares in the Conemara, which lightened his heart. I am inclined to think, however, that it was referable to neither of these causes. Simple as he was, the scene which he had witnessed the night before could only lead to one conclusion. He pictured himself walking as wildly down the valley under similar circumstances, and his heart was touched with pity for his rival. He felt very certain that the ill-omened face of Mr. Thomas Ferguson, of Rochdale Ferry, would never more be seen within the walls of Azalea Villa. Then, why did she refuse him? He was handsome, he was fairly rich. Could it—? No, it couldn't; of course, it couldn't; how could it! The idea was ridiculous—so very ridiculous that it had fermented in the young man's brain all night, and that he could do nothing but ponder over it in the morning, and cherish it in his perturbed bosom.

They passed down the red pathway together, and along by the river's bank. Abe had relaxed into his nomal condition of taciturnity. He had made one gallant effort to hold forth upon the subject of ferns, stimulated by the basket which he held in his hand, but the theme was not a thrilling one, and after a spasmodic flicker he had abandoned the attempt. While coming along he had been full of racy anecdotes and humorous observations. He had rehearsed innumerable remarks which were to be poured into Miss Sinclair's appreciative ear. But now his brain seemed of a sudden to have become a vacuum, and utterly devoid of any idea save an insane and overpowering impulse to comment upon the heat of the sun. No astronomer who ever reckoned a parallax was so entirely absorbed in the condition of the celestial bodies as honest Bones while he trudged along by the slow-flowing Australian river.

Suddenly his conversation with his partner came back into his mind. What was it Boss had said upon the subject? "Tell her how they live at the mines." He revolved it in his brain. It seemed a curious thing to talk about; but Boss had said it, and Boss was always right. He would take the plunge; so with a premonitory hem, he blurted out:

"They live mostly on bacon and beans in the valley."

He could not see what effect this communication had upon his companion. He was too tall to be able to peer under the little straw bonnet. She did not answer. He would try again.

"Mutton on Sundays," he said.

Even this failed to arouse any enthusiasm. In fact, she seemed to be laughing. Boss was evidently wrong. The young man was in despair. The sight of a ruined hut beside the patnway conjured up a fresh idea. He grasped at it as a drowning man to a straw.

"Cockney Jack built that," he remarked. "Lived there till he died."

"What did he die of?" asked his companion.

"Three-star brandy," said Abe, decisively. "I used to come over of a night when he was bad and sit by him. Poor chap! He had a wife and two children in Putney. He'd rave and call me Polly by the hour. He was cleaned out, hadn't a red cent; but the boys collected rough gold enough to see him through. He's buried there, in that shaft; that was his claim, so we just dropped him down it an' filled it up. Put down his pick, too, an' a spade an' a bucket, so's he'd feel kinder perky and at home."

Miss Carrie seemed more interested now.

"Do they often die like that?" she asked.

"Well, brandy kills many; but there's more get dropped—shot, you know."

"I don't mean that. Do many men die alone and miserable down there, with no one to care for them?" and she pointed to the cluster of houses beneath them. "Is there any one dying now? It is awful to think of."

"There's none as I knows on likely to throw up their hand."

"I wish you wouldn't use so much slang, Mr. Durton," said Carrie, looking up at him reprovingly out of her violet eyes. It was strange what an air of proprietorship this young lady was gradually assuming toward her gigantic companion. "You know it isn't polite. You should get a dictionary and learn the proper words."

"Ah, that's it," said Bones, apologetically. "It's gettin' your hand on the proper one. When you've not got a steam drill, you've got to put up with a pick."

"Yes, but it's easy if you really try. You could say that a man was 'dying,' or 'moribund,' if you like."

"That's it," said the miner, enthusiastically. "'Moribund!' That's a word. Why, you could lay over Boss Morgan in the matter of words. 'Moribund!' There's some sound about that."

Carrie laughed.

"It's not the sound you must think of, but whether it will express your meaning. Seriously, Mr. Durton, if any one should be ill in the camp you must let me know. I can nurse, and I might be of use. You will, won't you?"

Abe readily acquiesced, and relapsed into silence as he pondered over the possibility of inoculating himself with some long and tedious disease. There was a mad dog reported from Buckhurst. Perhaps something might be done with that.

"And now I must say good morning," said Carrie, as they came to a spot where a crooked pathway branched off from the track and wound up to Azalea Villa. "Thank you ever so much for escorting me."

In vain Abe pleaded for the additional hundred yards, and adduced the overwhelming weight of the diminutive basket as a cogent reason. She was inexorable. She had taken him too far out of his way already. She was ashamed of herself; she wouldn't hear of it.

So poor Bones departed in a mixture of many opposite feelings. He had interested her. She had spoken kindly to him. But then she had sent him away before there was any necessity; she couldn't care much about him if she would do that. I think he might have felt a little more cheerful, however, had he seen Miss Carrie Sinclair as she watched his retiring figure from the garden gate with a loving look upon her saucy face, and a mischievous smile at his bent head and responding appearance.

The Colonial Bar was the favorite haunt of the inhabitants of Harvey's Sluice in their hours of relaxation. There had been a fierce competition between it and the rival establishment termed the Grocery, which, in spite of its innocent appellation, aspired also to dispense spirituous refreshments. The importation of chairs into the latter had led to the appearance of a settee in the former. Spittoons appeared in the Grocery against a picture in the Bar, and, as the frequenters expressed it, the honors were even. When, however, the Grocery led a window curtain, and its opponent returned a snuggery and a mirror, the game was declared to be in favor of the latter, and Harvey's Sluice showed its sense of the spirit of the proprietor by withdrawing their custom from its opponent.

Though every man was at liberty to swagger into the Bar itself, and bask in the shimmer of its many colored bottles, there was a general feeling that the snuggery, or special apartment, should be reserved for the use of the more prominent citizens. It was in this room that committees met, that opulent companies were conceived and born, and that inquests were generally held. The latter, I regret to state, was, in 1861, a pretty frequent ceremony at the Sluice; and the findings of the coroner were sometimes characterized by a fine breezy originality. Witness when Bully Burke, a notorious desperado, was shot down by a quiet young medical man, and a sympathetic jury brought in that "the deceased had met his death in an ill-advised attempt to stop a pistol ball while in motion," a verdict which was looked upon as a triumph of jurisprudence in the camp, as simultaneously exonerating the culprit and adhering to the rigid and undesirable truth.

On this particular evening there was an assemblage of notabilities in the snuggery, though no such pathological ceremony had called them together. Many changes had occurred of late which merited discussion; and it was in this chamber, gorgeous in all the effete luxury of the mirror and settee, that Harvey's Sluice was wont to exchange ideas. The recent cleansing of the population was still causing some ferment in men's minds. Then there was Miss Sinclair and her movements to be commented on, and the paying lead in the Conemara, and the recent rumors of bushrangers. It was no wonder that the leading men in the township had come together in the Colonial Bar.

The rangers were the present subject of discussion. For some few days rumors of their presence had been flying about, and an uneasy feeling had pervaded the colony. Physical fear was a thing little known in Harvey's Sluice. The miners would have turned out to hunt down the desperadoes with as much zest as if they had been so many kangaroos. It was the presence of a large quantity of gold in the town which caused anxiety. It was felt that the fruits of their labor must be secured at any cost. Messages had been sent over to Buckhurst for as many troopers as could be spared, and in the meantime the main street of the Sluice was paraded at night by volunteer sentinels.

A fresh impetus had been given to the panic by the report brought in to-day by Jim Struggles. Jim was of an ambitious and aspiring turn of mind, and after gazing in silent disgust at his last week's clean up, he had metaphorically shaken the clay of Harvey's Sluice from his feet, and had started off into the woods with the intention of prospecting round until he could hit upon some likely piece of ground for himself. Jim's story was that he was sitting upon a fallen trunk eating his midday damper and rusty bacon, when his trained ear had caught the clink of horses' hoofs. He had hardly time to take the precaution of rolling off the tree, and crouching down behind it, before a troop of men came riding down through the bush, and passed within a stone's-throw of him.

"There was Bill Smeaton and Murphy Duff," said Struggles, naming two notorious ruffians; "and there was three more that I couldn't rightly see. And they took the trail to the right, and looked like business all over, with their guns in their hands."

Jim was submitted to a searching cross-examination that evening; but nothing could shake his testimony or throw a further light upon what he had seen. He told the story several times and at long intervals; and though there might be a pleasing variety in the minor incidents, the main facts were always identically the same. The matter began to look serious.

There were a few, however, who were loudly skeptical as to the existence of the rangers, and the most prominent of these was a young man who was perched on a barrel in the center of the room, and was evidently one of the leading spirits in the community. We have already seen that dark, curling hair, lack-luster eye, and thin, cruel lip, in the person of Black Tom Ferguson, the rejected suitor of Miss Sinclair. He was easily distinguishable from the rest of the party by a tweed coat and other systems of effeminacy in his dress, which might have brought him into disrepute had he not, like Abe Durton' partner, early established the reputation of being a quietly dangerous man. On the present occasion he seemed somewhat under the influence of liquor, a rare occurrence with him, and probably to be ascribed to his recent disappointment. He was almost fierce in his denunciation of Jim Struggles and his story.

"It's always the same," he said. "If a man meets a few travelers in the bush he's bound to come back raging about rangers. If they'd seen Struggles there, they would have gone off with a long yarn about a ranger crouching behind a tree. As to recognizing people riding fast among tree trunks—it is an impossibility."

Struggles, however, stoutly maintained his original assertion, and all the sarcasms and arguments of his opponent were thrown away upon his stolid complacency. It was noticed that Ferguson seemed unaccountably put out about the whole matter. Something seemed to be on his mind, too; for occasionaly he would spring off his perch and pace up and down the room with an abstracted and very forbidding look upon his swarthy face.

It was a relief to every one when, suddenly catching up his hat and wishing the company a curt "Good night," he walked off through the bar and into the street beyond.

"Seems kinder put out," remarked Long McCoy.

"He can't be afeard of the rangers, surely," said Joe Shamus, another man of consequence, and principal shareholder of the Eldorado.

"No, he's not the man to be afraid," answered another. "There's something queer about him the last day or two. He's been long trips in the woods without any tools. They do say that the assayer's daughter has chucked him over."

"Quite right, too. A darned sight too good for him," remarked several voices.

"It's odds but he has another try," said Shamus. "He's a hard man to beat when he's set his mind on a thing."

"Abe Durton's the horse to win," remarked Houlahan, a little bearded Irishman. "It's givin to four I'd be willin' to lay on him."

"And you'd be afther losing your money, a-vich," said a young man, with a laugh. "She'll want more brains than ever Bones had in his skull, you bet."

"Who's seen Bones to-day?" asked McCoy.

"I've seen him," said the young miner. "He came round all through the camp asking for a dictionary. Wanted to write a letter likely."

"I saw him reading it," said Shamus. "He came over to me an' told me he'd struck something good at the first show. Showed me a word about as long as your arm—'abdicate,' or something."

"It's a rish man he is now, I suppose," said the Irishman.

"Well, he's about made his pile. He holds a hundred feet of the Conemara, and the shares go up every hour. If he'd sell out he'd be about fit to go home."

"Guess he wants to take somebody home with him," said another. "Old Joshua wouldn't object, seein' that the money is there."

I think it has been already recorded in this narrative that Jim Struggles, the wandering prospector, had gained the reputation of being the wit of the camp. It was not only in airy badinage, but in the conception and execution of more pretentious practical pleasantries, that Jim had earned his reputation. His adventure in the morning had caused a certain stagnation in his usual flow of humor, but the company and his potations were gradually restoring him to a more cheerful state of mind. He had been brooding in silence over some idea since the departure of Ferguson, and he now proceeded to evolve it to his expectant companions.

"Say, boys," he began, "what day's this?"

"Friday, ain't it?"

"No; not that. What day of the month?"

"Darned if I know!"

"Well, I'll tell you now. It's the first o' April. I've got a calendar in the hut as says so."

"What if it is?" said several voices.

"Well, don't you see, it's All Fools' Day. Couldn't we fix up some little joke on some one, eh? Couldn't we get a laugh out of it? Now there's old Bones, for instance; he'll never smell at rat. Couldn't we send him off somewhere, and watch him go, maybe? We'd have something to chaff him on for a month to come, eh?"

There was a general murmur of assent. A joke, however poor, was always welcome to the Sluice. The broader the point, the more thoroughly was it appreciated. There was no morbid delicacy of feeling in the gulches.

"Where shall we send him?" was the query.

Jim Struggles was buried in thought for a moment. Then an unhallowed inspiration seemed to come over him, and he laughed uproariously, rubbing his hands between his knees in the excess of his delight.

"Well, what is it?" asked the eager audience.

"See here, boys. There's Miss Sinclair. You was saying as Abe's gone on her. She don't fancy him much, you think. Suppose we write him a note—send it to him to-night, you know."

"Well, what then?" said McCoy.

"Well, pretend the note is from her, d'ye see? Put her name at the bottom. Let on as she wants him to come an' meet her in the garden at 12. He's bound to go. He'll think she wants to go off with him. It'll be the biggest thing played this year."

There was a roar of laughter. The idea conjured up of honest Bones mooning about in the garden, and of old Joshua coming out to remonstrate with a double-barreled shotgun, was irresistibly comic. The plan was approved of unanimously.

"Here's pencil and here's paper," said the humorist. "Who's goin' to write the letter?"

"Write it yourself, Jim," said Shamus.

"Well, what shall I say?"

"Say what you think right."

"I don't know how she'd put it," said Jim, scratching his head in great perplexity. "However, Bones will never know the difference. How will this do: 'Dear old man. Come to the garden at 12 to-night, else I'll never speak to you again,' eh?"

"No, that's not the style," said the young miner. "Mind, she's a lass of eddication. She'd put it kinder flowery and soft."

"Well, write it yourself," said Jim, sulkily, handing him over the pencil.

"This is the sort of thing," said the miner, moistening the point of it in his mouth. "'When the moon is in the sky——'"

"There it is. That's bully," from the company.

"'And the stars a-shinin' bright, meet, O meet me, Adolphus, by the garden gate at twelve.'"

"His name ain't Adolphus," observed a critic.

"That's how the poetry comes in," said the miner. "It's kinder fanciful, d'ye see. Sounds a darned sight better than Abe. Trust him for guessing who she means. I'll sign it Carrie. There!"

This epistle was gravely passed round the room from hand to hand, and reverentially gazed upon as being a remarkable production of the human brain. It was then folded up and committed to the care of a small boy, who was solemnly charged under dire threats to deliver it at the shanty, and to make off before any awkward questions were asked him. It was only after he had disappeared in the darkness that some slight compunction visited one or two of the company.

"Ain't it playing it rather low on the girl?" said Shamus.

"And rough on old Bones?" suggested another.

However, these objections were overruled by the majority, and disappeared entirely upon the appearance of a second jorum of whisky. The matter had almost been forgotten by the time that Abe had received his note, and was spelling it out with a palpitating heart under the light of his solitary candle.

That night has long been remembered in Harvey's Sluice. A fitful breeze was sweeping down from the distant mountains, moaning and sighing among the deserted claims. Dark clouds were hurrying across the moon, one moment throwing a shadow over the landscape, and the next allowing the silvery radiance to shine down, cold and clear, upon the little valley, and bathe in a weird and mysterious light the great stretch of bushland on either side of it. A great loneliness seemed to rest on the face of nature. Men remarked afterward on the strange eerie atmosphere which hung over the little town.

It was in the darkness that Abe Durton sallied out from his little shanty. His partner, Boss Morgan, was still absent in the bush, so that beyond the ever-watchful Blinky there was no living being to observe his movements. A feeling of mild surprise filled his simple soul that his angel's delicate fingers could have formed those great straggling hieroglyphics; however, there was the name at the foot, and that was enough for him. She wanted him, no matter for what, and with a heart as pure and as heroic as any knight-errant, this rough miner went forth at the summons of his love.

He groped his way up the steep winding track which led to Azalea Villa. There was a little clump of small trees and shrubs about 50 yards from the entrance of the garden. Abe stopped for a moment when he had reached them in order to collect himself. It was hardly 12 yet, so that he had a few minutes to spare. He stood under their dark canopy peering at the white house vaguely outlined in front of him. A plain enough dwelling-place to any prosaic mortal, but girt with reverence and awe in the eyes of the lover.

The miner paused under the shade of the trees, and then moved on to the garden gate. There was no one there. He was evidently rather early. The moon was shining brightly now, and the country round was as clear as day. Abe looked past the little villa at the road which ran like a white winding streak over the brow of the hill. A watcher behind could have seen his square athletic figure standing out sharp and clear. Then he gave a start as if he had been shot, and staggered up against the little gate beside him.

He had seen something which caused his sun-burned face to become a shade paler as he thought of the girl so near him. Just at the bend of the road, not 200 yards away, he saw a dark moving mass coming round the curve, and lost in the shadow of the hill. It was but for a moment; yet in that moment the quick perception of the practiced woodman had realized the whole situation. It was a band of horsemen bound for the villa; and what horsemen would ride so by night save the terror of the woodlands—the dreaded rangers of the bush?

It is true that on ordinary occasions Abe was as sluggish in his intellect as he was heavy in his movements. In the hour of danger, however, he was as remarkable for cool deliberation as for prompt and decisive action. As he advanced up the garden he rapidly reckoned up the chances against him. There were half a dozen of the assailants at the most moderate computation, all desperate and fearless men. The question was whether he could keep them at bay for a short time and prevent their forcing a passage into the house. We have already mentioned that sentinels had been placed in the main street of the town. Abe reckoned that help would be at hand within 10 minutes of the firing of the first shot.

Were he inside the house he could confidently reckon on holding his own for a longer period than that. Before he could rouse the sleepers and gain admission, however, the rangers would be upon him. He must content himself with doing his utmost. At any rate, he would show Carrie that if he could not talk to her he could at least die for her. The thought gave him quite a glow of pleasure, as he crept under the shadow of the house. He cocked his revolver. Experience had taught him the advantage of the first shot.

The road along which the rangers were coming ended at a wooden gate opening into the upper part of the assayer's little garden. This gate had a high acacia hedge on either side of it, and opened into a short walk also lined by impassable thorny walls. Abe knew the place well. One resolute man might, he thought, hold the passage for a few minutes until the assailants broke through elsewhere and took him in the rear. At any rate, it was his best chance. He passed the front door, but forbode to give any alarm. Sinclair was an elderly man, and would be of little assistance in such a desperate struggle as was before him, and the appearance of lights in the house would warn the rangers of the resistance awaiting them. Oh, for his partner the Boss, for Chicago Bill, for any one of the twenty gallant men who would have come at his call and stood by him in such a quarrel. He turned into the narrow pathway. There was the well-remembered wooden gate; and there, perched upon the gate, languidly swinging his legs backward and forward, and peering down the road in front of him, was Mr. John Morgan, the very man for whom Abe had been longing from the bottom of his heart.

There was short time for explanations. A few hurried words announced that Boss, returning from his little tour, had come across the rangers riding on their mission of darkness, and, overhearing their destination, had managed by hard running and knowledge of the country to arrive before them. "No time to alarm any one," he explained, still panting from his exertions; "must stop them ourselves—not come for swag—come for your girl. Only over our bodies, Bones." And with these few broken words the strangely assorted friends shook hands and looked lovingly into each other's eyes, while the tramp of the horses came down to them on the fragrant breeze of the woods.

There were six rangers in all. One who appeared to be the leader rode in front, while the others followed in a body. They flung themselves off their horses when they were opposite the house, and after a few muttered words from their captain, tethered the animals to a small tree, and walked confidently toward the gate.

Boss Morgan and Abe were crouching down under the shadow of the hedge, at the extreme end of the narrow passage. They were invisible to the rangers, who evidently reckoned on meeting little resistance in this isolated house. As the first man came forward, and half turned to give some order to his comrades, both the friends recognized the stern profile and heavy mustache of Black Ferguson, the rejected suitor of Miss Carrie Sinclair. Honest Abe made a mental vow that he, at least, should never reach the door alive.

The ruffian stepped up to the gate and put his hand upon the latch. He started as a stentorian "Stand back!" came thundering out from among the bushes. In war, as in love, the miner was a man of few words.

"There's no road this way," explained another voice, with an infinite sadness and gentleness about it which was characteristic of its owner when the devil was rampant in his soul. The ranger recognized it. He remembered the soft languid address which he had listened to in the billiard-room of the Buckhurst Arms, and which had wound up by the mild orator putting his back against the door, drawing a derringer, and asking to see the sharper who would dare to force a passage. "It's that infernal fool, Durton," he said, "and his white-faced friend."

Both were well-known names in the country round. But the rangers were reckless and desperate men. They drew up to the gate in a body.

"Clear out of that!" said their leader in a grim whisper. "You can't save the girl. Go off with whole skins while you have the chance."

The partners laughed.

"Then, curse you, come on!"

The gate was flung open and the party fired a straggling volley, and made a rush toward the graveled walk.

The revolvers cracked merrily in the silence of the night from the bushes at the other end. It was hard to aim with precision in the darkness. The second man sprang convulsively into the air, and fell upon his face with his arms extended, writhing horribly in the moonlight. The third was grazed in the leg and stopped. The others stopped out of sympathy, too. After all, the girl was not for them, and their heart was hardly in the work. Their captain rushed madly on, like a vallant blackguard as he was, but was met by a crashing blow from the butt of Abe Durton's pistol, delivered with a fierce energy which sent him reeling back among his comrades with the blood streaming from his shattered jaw, and his capacity for cursing cut short at the very moment when he needed to draw upon it most.

"Don't go yet!" said the voice in the darkness.

However, they had no intention of going yet. A few minutes must elapse, they knew, before Harvey's Sluice could be upon them. There was still time to force the door if they could succeed in mastering the defenders. What Abe had feared came to pass. Black Ferguson knew the ground as well as he did. He run rapidly along the hedge, and the five crashed through it where there was some appearance of a gap. The two friends glanced at each other. Their flank was turned. They stood up like men who knew their fate and did not fear to meet it.

There was a wild medley of dark figures in the moonlight, and a ringing cheer from well-known voices. The humorists of Harvey's Sluice had found something even more practical than the joke which they had come to witness. The partners saw the faces of friends beside them—Shamus, Struggles, McCoy. There was a desperate rally, a sweeping fiery rush, a cloud of smoke, with pistol shots and fierce oaths ringing out of it, and when it lifted a single dark shadow flying for dear life to the shelter of the broken hedge was the only ranger upon his feet within the little garden. But there was no sound of triumph among the victors; a strange hush had come over them, and a murmur as of grief—for there, lying across the threshold which he had fought so gallantly to defend, lay poor Abe, the loyal and simple-hearted, breathing heavily with a bullet through his lungs.

He was carried inside with all the rough tenderness of the mines. There were men there, I think, who would have borne his hurt to have had the love of that white girlish figure, which ment over the blood-stained bed and whispered so softly and so tenderly in his ear. Her voice seemed to rouse him. He opened his dreamy blue eyes and looked about him. They rested on her face.

"Played out," he murmured; "pardon, Carrie, morib——" and with a faint smile he sank back upon the pillow.

However, Abe failed for once to be as good as his word. His hardy constitution asserted itself, and he shook off what might in a weaker man have proved a deadly wound. Whether it was the balmy air of the woodlands which came sweeping over a thousand miles of forest into the sick man's room, or whether it was the little nurse who tended him so gently, certain it is that within two months we heard that he had realized his shares in the Conemara, and gone from Harvey's Sluice and the little shanty upon the hill forever.

I had the advantage, a short time afterward, of seeing an extract from the letter of a young lady named Amelia. We have already broken the privacy of one feminine epistle, so we shall have fewer scruples in glancing over another. "I was bridesmaid," she remarks, "and Carrie looked charming" (underlined) "in the veil and orange blossoms. Such a man—he is twice as big as your Jack; and he was so funny, and blushed, and dropped the prayer-book. And when they asked the question, you could have heard him roar, 'I do!' at the other end of George street. His best man was a darling" (twice underlined), "so quiet and handsome and nice. Too gentle to take care of himself among these rough men, I am sure." I think it quite possible that in the fullness of time Miss Amelia managed to take upon herself the care of our old friend, Mr. Jack Morgan, commonly known as the Boss.

A tree is still pointed out at the bend as Ferguson's gum tree. There is no need to enter into unsavory details. Justice is short and sharp in primitive colonies, and the dwellers in Harvey's Sluice were a serious and practical race.

It is still the custom for a select party to meet on a Saturday evening on the snuggery of the Colonial Bar. On such occasions, if there be a stranger or guest to be entertained, the same solemn ceremony is always observed. Glasses are charged in silence; there is a tapping of the same upon the table, and then, with a deprecating cough, Jim Struggles comes forward and tells the tale of the April joke and of what came of it. There is generally conceded to be something very artistic in the way in which he breaks off suddenly at the close of his narrative by waving his bumper in the air, with "An' here's to Mr. and Mrs. Bones. God bless 'em!" a sentiment in which the stranger, if he be a prudent man, will cordially acquiesce.

THE END.

WIZARD OF THE SWORD

Don Arturo Pacheco, the Cyrano of Mexico.

A SCHOLAR AND SWASHBUCKLER

Considered the Flower of Mexican Chivalry During Regime of the Viceroys—He Was as Ready of Wit as He Was Skillful with Sword—Held Tournament at Milan and Defeated All Comers—His Death Was Shrouded in Mystery.

"When Cyrano de Bergerac was the rage last winter, a good many people were of the opinion that such a character as his was impossible. Yet we do not have to go to France to find one that was his counterpart in almost every respect. I do not refer to a mere swashbuckler. I mean a man who had a learning, culture, and refinement, and who was as skillful with the sword as he was ready of intellect."

The speaker was William Morancy, of New Orleans, who is making a brief stay in the city. Mr. Morancy has been a most confirmed globe trotter, and his narratives of adventure and fund of reminisence make him one of the most entertaining of men.

"You have, perhaps, never heard of Don Arturo Pacheco, the d'Artagnan, or the Admirable Crichton of Mexico," continued Mr. Morancy. "He existed, nevertheless, although his adventures have never been printed in full, and in spite of the fact that his fame has been kept alive mainly by word of mouth. The younger generation ignores him, but it takes an old-timer to tell about this last of the swashbucklers.

"Don Arturo was one of the principal henchmen of Augustin Iturbide. He was his comrade in the camp and in the court, and when his beloved chief was torn from his throne and hurled into exile, the faithful Don Arturo followed him soon after, refusing to remain in the country which had been so ungrateful to his friend and patron.

"The antecedents of Don Arturo were excellent. His father was Don Eusebio Pacheco, a needy Spanish gentleman of a good Pampeluna family, who had arrived in Mexico, about 1788, in search of a betterment of fortune. After a hard struggle, the Spaniard got into the good graces of the viceroy, and was appointed to a good post in the directorate of mines. Shortly afterward, he married Dona Elena Valdes, a lady of Oaxaca, who brought him ample influence and affluence. The couple had two children, a son and a daughter. Young Arturo grew up to be the most brilliant young man in Mexico, while his sister, Leonor, who was that fairest of God's creatures—a Spanish blonde—was called the 'Lily' of Valladolid, as Morelia, the city of their residence, was then named.

Handsome and Talented.

"Don Arturo seems to have been well-nigh as accomplished as the "Admirable Crichton," of Scotland. He was tall and supple; his great muscular strength being veiled by the beautiful medeling of his form. A superb complexion, with large dark blue eyes, and curling chestnut hair, were among the physical attractions which distinguished him. In character, he was a subtle melange of warrior, artist, and student. He was said to have but one equal at chess, few in love, and none in swordplay. Great skill in music, horsemanship, and horticulture, showed the diversity of his other talents. Upon his father's side of the house he inherited the blood of that strange people, the Basques, and from the mother, it was hinted that he had more than a few drops of the blood of the Mayas, that equally weird race of Yucatan.

"Don Arturo's talents, and the extravagant exploits along the line of fighting, love-making, and drinking, which he began to perform as soon as he emerged from college, even reached the ears of the viceroy, who requested that the youth should be presented at court. The viceroy, like all others, was charmed. His vanity was immensely tickled by the fact that Arturo had artfully permitted him to beat him at chess.

"The young cavalier was speedily made a captain in the army, and was then detached on special court service. His favor with the viceroy waxed hugely, who showered benefits upon him. When the old viceroy went out, and a new one came in, Don Arturo's favor did not wane, but kept on the increase. It is right here that the most striking period of his life begins. He was finally appointed to perform a certain mission to the King of Spain. While abroad he passed through many brilliant adventures, and made the grand tour of Europe. At Milan, he posted a challenge in all the principal places, agreeing to meet all comers in friendly or mortal combat, with foil, rapier, saber, or pistol. There was no lack of adversaries.

Vanquished All Comers.

"In spite of Don Arturo's reputation, which had preceded him, his challenge might have been regarded as a presumptuous boast, had he not placed the sum of 5,000 pesos in the hands of a prominent Milanese noble, as a forfeit in case he did not justify his challenge. The goodly sum attracted swarms of skillful, but impecunious swordsmen from all North Italy, and even from the neighboring parts of France and Austria. Don Arturo held the lists for the better part of a week, and was victorious in every instance. He utterly discomfited no less than nineteen masters of the shining steel; many men of wide reputation being among the number. He also demonstrated his peerless skill in the handling of firearms, and in the management of horse and lance. From Milan he went to Florence, where he devoted himself to gambling in terrific style. His luck was tremendous, and it is said that he beggared no less than a half dozen of the Florentine gentry.

"At Rome he appeared in a new role. His command of the principal languages of Europe, including Arabic, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Persian, attracted the attention of the master linguist, the great Cardinal Mezzofanti, who introduced him to all the learned of Rome. He also lectured on archeology, history, and metaphysics, and held disputations on theology in some of the colleges. His wonderful oratory, his wide learning, and his sound catholicity provoked the awe and admiration of all. He was presented to the Pope, and made a great impression upon him. The Holy Father is reported to have beseeched Don Arturo to forsake the world for the priesthood, adding that such talents and principles were fit for a cardinalate.

Disastrous Love Affair.

"At Naples, he devoted himself to love-making and politics. At first he was brilliantly successful, but disaster overtook him in the practice of both these pursuits. A beautiful young matron of the high nobility, with whom he had a tender affair, was so indiscreet in her passion for Don Arturo, who was the pink of outward propriety where woman's reputation was concerned; that her husband, who was a man of furious temper, resolved on vengeance. The fair but frail dame was forcibly conveyed to a lonely castle of her husband's situated in Calabria, and was there immured from all human society save that of her keeper, an old and ruffianly servitor of her lord. This might have appeared a humdrum and respectable vengeance, but for the fact that the castle, which had long been regarded as scarce habitable for wild beasts, was a veritable death-trap of pestilence. It was situated in the midst of a frightful marsh, whose malarial emanations poisoned all the air about it for miles. The old keeper who had dwelt here since infancy was the only human who had ever been immune from its terrors.

"In a few months time the health and the beauty of the lady were forever ruined. She had become loathsome to the sight. Then it was that the husband capped his devilish vengeance by bringing her back to his palace in Naples. The grief and mortification of the lady at the ruin of her beauty, broke her heart, and she died shortly after.

"When the truth of this story leaked out, chiefly through the grim mutterings of the noble while in his cups, Naples became too hot for the villain, and he concluded to clear out for his estates in Sicily. Just at the time when the story reached the ears of Don Arturo, he was arrested on the charge of conspiracy against the government. It was proved that he had been more or less mixed up with a secret revolutionary club, and he was forthwith committed to prison. After about six months of durance, friends in Spain succeeded in procuring his pardon. After being liberated, his first act was to take ship for Sicily. He found his quarry at Palermo. A duel ensued. At the third pass, the rapier of Don Arturo passed through the Neapolitan's throat. The Mexican had killed his man by his famous high thrust in tierce.

Loaded with Honors.

"Returning to Mexico, Don Arturo received a high court appointment. His distinction was singular, considering the fact that he was not of pure Spanish birth, and this and his former honors made him hosts of enemies among the Spanish element, who hated and despised anything and everything connected with the soil, save the gold it yielded. Ere long, Don Arturo was sent on a second and more important mission to the court of Spain. He returned with a decoration from the hands of the besotted Charles IV. He had been offered a patent of nobility and a rich grant of crown lands, if he would stay in Spain, but he refused all such offers through love of his native land.

"In 1815, during the civil war between the patriots and the royalists, Don Arturo went into active military service for the government, having wearied of the luxurious court, where his life had been that of a gay gallant of Boccaccio's 'Decameron.' In the course of the long and desperate strife, he distinguished himself still further, and rose to a colonelcy of dragoons in a short while. He served under the immediate command of Iturbide, who was then a shining star in the cause of the royalists. It is at this period that the intimacy of Don Arturo with Iturbide began, although he had known him before, both of them being from the same city of Morelia.

"Don Arturo was present at the desperate siege of Cuautla, which was so heroically defended for sixty-two days against overwhelming forces, by the patriot, Morelos. Upon one occasion during the siege, Don Arturo, with ten men at his back, fought his way over a weak spot in the fortifications, and penetrated half way into the heart of the town. The little party was then compelled to retreat, and the valiant colonel made his escape covered with wounds, with not a man left of the ten. While in the mountains of Michoacan, being detailed with fifty cavalrymen, the largest force which could be spared, for the purpose of escorting a treasure train, the party were suddenly attacked by a guerrilla band of over three times their number. The combat was long and terrific, and the royalists were about wiped out.

Recovered the Gold.

"The fight took place in a rocky pass, which wound along the edge of a precipice sixty feet deep. Foreseeing at the start that the fight would probably go against him, the colonel had the mules unhitched, and caused the wagons with their freight of yellow coin to be pushed over the precipice. The whole outfit went thundering down the steep barranca with an awful crash, and then the colonel and his men turned to and fought like demons. Escaping with a few men, the colonel made with headlong speed for the valley below, which was about ten miles away by the only possible route. The enemy dared not follow. They had lost two-thirds of their men, and the valley was just on the edge of the royalist country. The gold was found intact by the colonel and his followers. A messenger was sent to camp for means of transportation, and it finally arrived safely.

"Not long afterward, Don Arturo was required to go into garrison at the capital with his regiment. It was now that the star of his fortunes began to grow dim. The colonel was soon destined to meet with an adventure, which ruined his favor at court. It should be stated right here that there had been several changes in the viceroyalty, and the colonel had no particular hold beyond his military record on the ruler of that day. Calleja was then viceroy, and was a cruel, licentious, and unjust man. He was execrated by the people in general. He had a nephew, Don Esteban Callejo, who was even worse hated than himself. This young blade, who was rich, elegant, and handsome, was one of the most crafty and heartless libertines to be found in the metropolis. He was dearly loved by his uncle, who protected him in his many deeds of scoundrelism.

Nephew of the Viceroy.

"At this time he was in hot pursuit of a beautiful young noblewoman, who had just come over from Seville. She had been married on her arrival to a court functionary. The high society of the capital simply raved over her charms. The wiles of the viceroy's nephew were all in vain, however. The lady had the virtue of a Roman woman ere the period of decay, and the gallants, who had been the bane of half the husbands of Mexico City, tasted the bitterness of his premier defeat. He swore revenge upon the husband, who was his only successful rival.

"It chanced that Don Arturo had also become one of the admirers of the lady. He first saw her in a carriage on the Paseo one day. Her eyes, like star-lit pools, rested on his for a moment, and he became their slave. It is said that the lady nearly succumbed to the peerless Arturo, but wifely honor at length triumphed. Like the noble man he was at heart, the colonel bowed with respect before such rare virtue, and withdrew from the field.

"One night, being out on a serenading expedition, in a lonely part of the city, Don Arturo suddenly came upon a band of ruffians, who were trying to murder a solitary pedestrian. The gentleman had against their five stilettoes only his walking stick and his scrape bound about his left arm for a shield. Don Arturo cast down his guitar, drew his sword, and leaped like a lion upon the scene. As he did so, he recognized the gentleman. It was the husband of his divinity. Nothing loath, the colonel proceeded to run two of the ruffians through the heart, to disable a third, and to put the other two to flight.

"The lady and her husband chanted the praises of Arturo everwhere. The viceroy's nephew had no trouble in learning who had spoilt his little game. He was half insane with fury. He had been foiled in all his former schemes in this affair, including an attempt at the abduction of the beauty. The failure of this last coup was a drop too much.

Plan for Revenge.

"The nephew was not long in getting his revenge. He persuaded the viceroy to deprive the colonel of his command upon some trifling pretext. The colonel was wild at the injustice. He was refused audience with the viceroy, and was ordered to the command of some obscure fortress in the far north. In a fit of rage he refused to obey orders, and was jailed for insubordination. The nephew of the viceroy continued to plot against him. Base and unfounded charges were preferred against him, and upon getting out of prison he was degraded from his military rank and heavily fined.

"The colonel swore that his turn at revenge would came next. He had barely emerged from prison when he heard that the author of his disgrace was at Vera Cruz preparing to leave for Europe. The colonel lost no time in setting out for the port. He is said to have killed two horses in getting there on time. He arrived just an hour ere the vessel was to set out with his enemy. He hurried on board and came face to face with Don Esteban, who was strolling up and down the deck, cigar in mouth. With a roar like that of a wild beast, Don Arturo sprang at his enemy and smote him in the face. There was no time to be lost in going ashore, and a duel took place then and there upon the hurricane deck. The preliminaries were hastily arranged by certain gentlemen among the passengers, who volunteered to act as seconds upon one side or the other, and the fray began.

"The duelists were nearly well matched. Their styles of sword-play, however, were totally in contrast. The Spaniard made all his play with his wrist, his arm held straight before him without any bending at the elbow. He kept himself in a rather crouching position. His lunges were short and quick, and his parries exact, without much brilliance or scope. His sword moved forward and backward in a rigidly straight line. Don Arturo, on the contrary, fought in a bold and flowery style, which would have seemed to a tyro to have been imprudent. It was observed, however, that just at the moment when Don Esteban had begun to wear a smile upon his visage, the colonel abruptly changed his mode of fence. With subtle ease, he glided into the very method employed by Don Esteban, and soon proved his superiority by making him retreat repeatedly.

"Suddenly the colonel adopted new tactics, as if to prove his wonderful versatility. A series of eccentric movements, too swift for the eye of his enemy to follow and fathom, culminated in a half-circular sweep of his we