THE KNIFE THROWERS

By FREDERIC VAN RENSSELAER DEY,
Author of "Not Like Other Men," Etc.

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CHAPTER I.

PREPARING FOR THE DUEL.

BURR PENDLETON shoved his arms through the sleeve holes of his fur coat, accepted the lighted wax match his valet offered him, applied it to the end of his cigar, looked again into the mirror that extended from floor to ceiling and began leisurely to draw on his gloves.

Beneath the coat he had so carefully buttoned across his ample chest he was faultlessly attired. Faultlessness in all things was Burr Pendleton's chiefest hobby among many, and on this particular occasion he had been more importunate than usual. The reason was obvious to the man who waited upon him and whose attentions, always strictly correct, were on this occasion imbued with a touch of indescribable tenderness.

"Is there anything more, sir?" he inquired, stepping backward two or three paces and regarding his employer—master would be a more appropriate term in this case—with a glance that was almost reverential.

"Nothing, James—ah, yes, the case of pistols," was the indifferent reply.

"Will you not permit me to take them to you, sir?" asked the valet eagerly.

"No. I will take the case with me. You are to remain here, James, and on no account leave these rooms until I return or until some accommodating friend calls to tell you that I am not likely to do so."

"If the matter were to be settled at fence, sir, instead of with pistols, I should feel better, but"—

An imperious gesture interrupted further remark by the servant, and a moment later Burr Pendleton said quietly:

"Perhaps you had better fill my cigar case, James. I may not have enough with me. On the table in my dressing room you will find several letters that I have written during the day. If I do not return—that is, if I am not here by noon tomorrow—you will see that they are delivered. I refer, of course, to such of them as can be delivered. The others you will post. Among them is one for yourself, but on no account are you to open it before 12 o'clock tomorrow, or we will say a quarter past 12. How much ready money have you at hand, James?"

"Something over $2,000 in American money, sir. It is in the secretary. Shall I get it for you?"

"No, no. I do not want it. In the event of your reading the letter to which I have referred it will tell you just what to do. The amount you have will be sufficient for your expenses, I think. That is all, I believe. No; there is one thing more."

"Yes, sir."

"Among the letters you will find one addressed to Mr. Craig Wyndham. I think I would prefer that you should deliver that in person, James. I have remembered everything else in the letter to you. What time is it? Half past 8? I will be late at the opera."

"And you will not return here after the opera, sir?"

"No; at least not before tomorrow. The meeting is to be at 5 in the morning. I am booked for supper at the Concordia at 1, and it will be 4 or thereabouts before we break up. Captain Agramonte is to be one of the party, and doubtless we will go to the shooting gallery in San Felipe Neri afterward if there is any time to spare. After that"—

The abrupt pause was suggestive, and tears gathered in the eyes of the valet. For a moment he remained irresolute; then he stepped suddenly forward and extended his right hand toward his master.

"You will forgive me, sir," he said tremulously, "but things would be easier for me during the next few hours if you would shake hands with old James. Begging your pardon for the impertinence, Mr. Burr, you could not be dearer to me if you were my own son. Will you shake hands with me, sir, before you go out."

Burr Pendleton grasped the valet's hand firmly in his own.

"Dear old Jimmy," he said, "did you think I would go away without doing that? You are not about to flunk, are you, Jim? Just feel how steady my nerve is, eh? Not a tremor, James. There really isn't anything about this matter to give you the doldrums, you know. It is true that Romero is a noted duelist and that he numbers some very good men among his victims, but I don't think I am billed for eternity just yet. You may expect me here a little before noon tomorrow, but if I do not come you must make the best of it and see that my instructions are carried out to the letter."

"You may trust me to do that, sir."

"I know it, James. If things end happily—for me—we will leave Mexico for home tomorrow night. Good night, Jimmy."

"God bless you, sir."

The door opened and closed, and James was alone, but a long time passed before he moved from his position in the middle of the floor, and only God and himself knew what words he whispered during those moments of silent agony.

It was true that Burr Pendleton had an engagement at the opera that evening, but it is also true that he had no intention of going directly from his rooms in the Hotel Gilo to the theater. The idea of being late in keeping his engagement to hear the divine Patti did not appall him, and instead of walking the short distance along the Cinco de Mayo to the Teatro Nacional he signaled to a blue flag carriage, gave a hurried direction to the driver, sprang inside and was carried toward San Francisco street, thence through the Avenida Jaarez past the Alameda and El Caballito and out upon the famous Passeo de la Reforma. There the driver lashed the horses into a run so that the four miles to Chapultepec were quickly covered, and ten minutes later the vehicle came to a stop in front of the great gambling resort in the village of Tacubaya.

The hour was rather early for the frequenters of the place, and only

Just one aspirated breath of surprise escaped him.

three of the tables were in operation. Pendleton did not bestow so much as a glance upon any of them, but strode the length of the salon, passed out again upon the piazza and down among the network of graveled paths which dissected into every conceivable design the luxuriant vegetation of the garden. He followed one of these paths until it ended abruptly at a rustic summer house.

December nights, even in and near the City of Mexico, are chilly if not cold, and the fur lined coat that Pendleton wore was by no means a burden. As he approached the summer house he drew the collar around his ears and passed inside. Perceiving that he was the sole occupant, he lighted a cigar and stood with his back against a section of the framework while he awaited the absent party to the tryst. Ten minutes later his patience was rewarded.

Pendleton could hear the sound of approaching footsteps on the gravel, and presently the vine shrouded doorway was darkened by the figure of a woman closely veiled. Behind her, six feet away, was another, but instead of the lace mantilla which decorated the head while it concealed the features of her companion she was covered by a dark colored serape, and even in that dim light which was almost darkness it was easily perceivable that she filled the capacity of duenna.

Pendleton cast his cigar aside and, lifting his hat, bowed low.

"I am glad, senorita, that I arrived before you did, since it has spared you the unpleasantness of waiting," he said. "Your message assured me that you speak English and that your servant does not, from which I decided that you preferred me to use that tongue. Will you be seated, senorita?"

She was silent a moment before replying, as if she lacked the courage to speak, but at last, in a low voice that was indescribably sweet, she said slowly:

"I thank you a thousand times, senor, not only for your kindness in coming to me here, but also for the secrecy that I feel assured you have imposed upon yourself at my request."

"You may be assured of that much, senorita."

"If you will indulge me still further, I will remain in the doorway as I am now. My position serves two purposes, since I remain in full view of the servant and at the same time screen you from observation. I asked you to meet me here, senor, because I knew that I was less likely to be recognized in this place and also because the grand opera in the city has attracted nearly if not quite all of those who might identify me."

Pendleton bowed, but made no reply. Presently she continued:

"You are to engage in a duel in the morning, Senor Pendleton. I have been so informed."

"Your information is correct."

"I commit an impertinence, but may I inquire the cause?"

"It grieves me, senorita, that it is out of my power to enlighten you."

"Do you mean that you cannot or that you will not?"

"Possibly both, senorita. It would scarcely accord with my idea of ethics to do so in any case, but happily I am spared the necessity for discrimination, for I do not know the reason myself, at least not the real cause. Of course the gentleman who compelled me to challenge him insulted me grossly before I did so, but I am utterly unaware of his reason for seeking the quarrel."

"And he is"—she whispered the name evidently to prevent the duenna from hearing it—"Captain Ignacio Romero."

Pendleton bowed again.

"You fight with pistols?"

"We are expected to do so."

"May I ask the name of your second in this affair?"

"Captain Agramonte."

She took one impulsive step forward and then, as if remembering that the eyes of the other woman were upon her, as hastily withdrew to her former position, but her voice was keyed a tone lower, and it was plethoric with intensity when she spoke again.

"I am the cause of your duel, Senor Pendleton," she said.

"You?" he responded incredulously. "I have not even the honor of knowing your name, senorita. I am quite sure that I have never heard your voice before, because it is one that I could not forget. I do not know if I have ever seen your face, since I cannot see it now, and I am very sure that I have given no man cause for such a meeting on account of any woman since I have been in Mexico."

Again she was silent for a moment. Presently, in a tone so lowered that it barely reached his sense of hearing, she murmured:

"If you will step to one side so that Maria cannot see you and will strike a cerillo under the pretense of lighting your cigar, I will draw aside my mantilla. I think that will help you to understand."

Pendleton obeyed the suggestion with such promptness that she was not fully prepared for it, and the conscious flush that suffused her face at her own temerity was there still when the light of the wax match was reflected back upon him from her dark but brilliant eyes. Just one aspirated breath of surprise escaped him; then he turned away and leisurely lighted his cigar.

"Thank you," he said, resuming his former position against the framework of the summer house.

"Do you understand now, Senor Pendleton?" she asked.

"I think so—in part, not wholly."

"The duel must not take place."

"It cannot be avoided, senorita."

"You are the challenging party; you can withdraw."

"Impossible."

"Captain Romero is the best shot in Mexico. He will kill you."

"Quite likely," with an expressive shrug of his shoulders.

"There must be no duel! It shall not take place!" she said vehemently.

"Unless Senor Romero elects to apologize to me and withdraw, which is extremely unlikely, it must take place, senorita."

"If I will tell you my name and explain all that you do not know of this affair"—

"Pardon me, senorita, but you are wasting words. You should understand that even better than I. If Romero kills me, you will have nothing to regret; if I kill Romero, I should prefer to remain in ignorance of your name. I think, therefore, it is better to leave things as they are. I perceive also that Maria, as you called her, is becoming impatient or anxious."

She understood perfectly well his meaning, but she remained motionless and silent several moments, drumming one of her little feet impatiently upon the earthen floor. Finally she took one step nearer to him and extended one hand, in which was a letter.

"Will you take this?" she asked. "It contains something that I wrote this afternoon, and it is for you. I ask only that you will read it; not now, not here," she added hastily when she saw that he was producing his case of cerillos; "later, at your leisure, before you meet Captain Romero. Good night, senor." She turned away the instant his fingers closed upon the letter, passed through the doorway and, followed by her servant, disappeared along the winding pathway.

Pendleton smoked on leisurely for some time; then he lighted another cerillo and looked at his watch. The hour was nearly 10, and he hastened from

A serape was thrown over his head.

the place, entered his carriage and, telling the driver to return even faster than he came out, started toward the city, six miles distant.

From Tacubaya to Chapultepec the highway is particularly desolate, and at night it is shrouded in impenetrable gloom. Formerly the locality was a favorite resort for bandits, and until recently the night tramcars were escorted by mounted soldiery. Even now they go in pairs and trios for the sake of additional safety. Now occurrences when travelers along that thoroughfare are molested are very rare indeed, but such incidents do happen once or twice in the course of a year.

Midway between the village and the castle Pendleton heard a sharp command to halt. At the same instant the carriage stopped suddenly, and a moment later several faces appeared at the windows on either side, and the passenger was requested firmly, but politely, to alight. He had not a weapon of any sort except the case of unloaded dueling pistols, and there was nothing for him to do but obey. Then, almost as soon as his feet were on the ground, a serape was thrown over his head, a lasso was wound several times around his body, and he was led away through the darkness. He heard his own carriage start rapidly down the road just as his abductors thrust him into another one, and then he could not tell in which direction he was taken, for the vehicle made several turns before it adopted a direct course.

"I will miss all my engagements for tonight and the one in the morning, too, unless I can bribe these fellows to help me out," was his mental comment. "My friend the senorita may have her way after all."

It did not occur to him that "the senorita" might have taken forcible measures to prevent the duel in the event of his refusal to accede to her wishes regarding it, but he did remember the letter and thought, with a grim smile, that he was more than likely to have ample time to read it, as she had suggested, at his "leisure."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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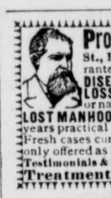

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