THE KNIFE THROWERS

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

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CHAPTER II.

AN AFFAIR OF HONOR.

WHEN the carriage in which Burr Pendleton was a prisoner arrived at its destination, the lasso was removed, but the serape which so effectually hoodwinked him was not disturbed. One of his captors took him by the arm, and he was informed that if he would walk along quietly no harm would befall him. He complied without deigning to speak.

He was conscious that his feet crunched upon gravel paths which wound in and out among shrubbery, for the branches frequently brushed against him, and once he thought it probable that he was again within the secluded garden of the Tacubaya gambling house. This illusion was soon dispelled, however, for after passing across an extended court that was flagged with stone and thence into a second shrubbed and graveled inclosure he was directed to mount a flight of three steps, and he knew that he entered an apartment of some kind. There was the yielding touch of soft carpeting under his tread, and the warm air was quite in contrast with the chill without. He was bidden courteously to wait one moment and was left standing in the middle of the floor. He heard the sound made by a closing door, and after what seemed an interminable period, although it could not have been more than a minute or two, he attempted to relieve himself of the blinding serape.

There was no resistance, and upon casting it aside he discovered that he was alone. His conductor had disappeared.

For a moment he stared around him in amazement. This was certainly not the sort of treatment he had expected. He began to think that perhaps they were not bandits after all; the surroundings of that moment did not suggest such an explanation. The room was richly, even luxuriously, furnished, and his first quick glance told him that it was the favorite living room of a lady; the pictures on the walls, the chairs, the piano and the books that littered the table all assured him of that much. The wide, low window, through which he believed he had entered the room, was open. Not so the iron bars that protected it, but they told him nothing, since every house in Mexico has its windows so furnished. He peered out through the grating, but he could see nothing except the outlines of tall trees showing against the sky. There was nothing by which he could determine his locality, so he turned back into the room again and crossed to the table, where one of the lamps with which the apartment was supplied was burning. His glance rested upon a slip of paper with writing upon it, and he read these words:

Senor Pendleton—If you are mystified concerning the events of this evening, read the letter that last came into your possession.

There was no signature, but he recognized the chirography as the same as that he had received early in the day calling him to Tacubaya, and he added mentally, "Where I was fool enough to go to be trapped by a woman."

His cigars were intact, and he lighted one. Then, after arranging the lamp more to his purposes, he dropped into an easy chair near the table, produced the letter which had been given to him by his companion in the summer house, broke the seal and began:

I crave your pardon, Senor Pendleton, for the indignity that I am forced to thrust upon you. I have determined to prevent the meeting between you and Captain Romero, and as I have no hope that you will consent to abandon all thought of it I have prepared this in anticipation of your refusal. You will not be detained longer than is necessary—that is, only a little longer, for it will not be possible to liberate you during the hours of daylight. Twenty-four hours will be the duration of your imprisonment. In the meantime you will be left entirely alone. Your room is supplied with every necessity you will require during that time, and when it expires, as soon as you have placed the serape over your head so that you can see nothing, you will be taken back to the city, or at least as far as El Cabillito. I am informed that it is your intention to return to New York tomorrow night. I regret that I will not be able to liberate you soon enough for you to carry out your plan. The train leaves three hours too early for that. But you need not be prevented from taking the early morning train on the other road. If you will leave your New York address on the table, I will communicate with you again; also, should you care to communicate with your servant, if you will write the message and throw it through the grating at your window, it will be delivered at once. If I have placed you in a false position concerning the duel and your masculine conception of honor, I can assure you that the day will come when you will thank me for what I have done, if the opportunity occurs. I will sign this letter as I did the one that brought you to Tacubaya. One who prefers, for the present, to be known to you only as

CARMEN.

Pendleton folded the letter and returned it to his pocket. Then he looked at his watch and discovered that it was not yet midnight. After that he paced moodily up and down the room many times.

"Of course she means to read whatever I write to James," he mused, "and if I say anything in explanation of my absence the message will not go. The only thing I can do is to tell him to let things stand as they are until later, and I must do that; otherwise he will be out of the city before I am out of here unless"—

There were writing materials on the table, and he indited the following message to his valet:

You will extend the time of waiting for me twenty-four hours. Do nothing whatever until that time. If there should be callers, tell them all that I will be prepared to receive everybody at midnight tomorrow night—tonight of the day you receive this. B. P.

He thrust the message through the grating, extinguished the lights in the room and stood on guard to see the person who should come to take it, and when that person appeared he recognized in the graceful walk and carriage the lady of his interview in the gambling house. She kept her face turned away notwithstanding the fact that it was concealed by the lace mantilla. But he had already seen it twice since he came to Mexico, and he understood the act to mean that she did not wish him to address her, so he permitted her to depart in silence.

Burr Pendleton by reason of his fatalistic propensities might have been a good Mohammedan, and he accepted his enforced leisure with entire calmness. He knew that he could not break through the bars at the window, and even if he might have done so he would doubtless be recaptured. He had thought out the predicament in which he found himself while he was pacing up and down the room before he wrote the message to James, and he had arrived at the Zenoesque decision that what could not be cured must be endured. Intensely annoyed and deep down in his heart intensely angry, he only shrugged his shoulders, smiled cynically and wondered, not without amusement, what Captain Agramonte, Romero and others would think and say of him when he should fail to appear on the dueling ground at the appointed time.

Then, still standing at the window in the dark and puffing leisurely at his cigar, he began to plan his conduct after his liberation. It was not an easy thing to do, for he realized that even Agramonte, his friend, would find it hard to believe that he had been forcibly detained from keeping his engagement. He knew that Romero and his second would lose no time in branding the American as a coward and that, according to the code duello, Captain Romero would have the undisputed right to refuse another appointment. In concentrating his mind upon these perplexities he also unconsciously concentrated his gaze upon a given point among the shrubbery at a spot where two paths parted at an acute angle, both to disappear in the darkness, and suddenly at the apex of the two paths he discerned motion.

At first he believed it to be an animal of some kind, but it seemed larger, and presently he decided that it was a human figure stretched at full length upon the ground and slowly, but surely, approaching the window where he stood. Instantly his perplexities were forgotten, and he watched the approaching figure curiously. It was a man clad in the charro costume of home tanned leather affected by rurales, indescribable in color and almost invisible at night. Pendleton realized that he would never have discovered the figure had it not happened that his gaze was concentrated upon it at the very instant it appeared. Two men at the same window engaged in conversation and not intent upon anything in particular might have looked upon it a dozen times without seeing it once.

Quite naturally he asked himself the reason of the mysterious visit. He thought of an attempt at assassination, but dismissed the idea at once, and after conjecturing upon many possibilities, all of which were improbable, he gave it up and waited. The true reason did not once occur to him. The Mexican nature is naturally chivalrous, all critics to the contrary notwithstanding, and Pendleton was soon to have ocular proof of it.

The stranger glided up the steps with the silence and grace of a serpent, and when at last he had disposed his full length laterally against the building, with his face close to the grating, he hissed very much like one. Pendleton in the meantime had remained motionless and silent, but when the man hissed he replied in his natural tones by asking in Spanish what was wanted.

"Silence!" commanded the man in a sharp whisper. "It was I who brought you here tonight, senor. I have returned for the purpose of serving you. If you will take the trouble to get down on the floor as close to me as possible, there will be no danger of being overheard. If it should be discovered that I am here, my power to serve you will be past, and I will be in grave trouble. Que la gusta, senor."

Pendleton was amused. He was also interested, and he did as the man directed.

"Say on," he said then, and the stranger continued:

"You have an appointment with Captain Romero near the Passeo at 5 in the morning. Is that true?"

"Quite true, unfortunately, for I cannot keep it. If you have come here to offer yourself as a messenger, I will be most grateful and, with your permission, will reward you to almost any extent," replied Pendleton.

"I will do better than that, senor, if you will agree to the conditions I will make."

"What will you do and what are the conditions?"

"I will enable you to keep the appointment yourself, senor?"

"I cannot imagine conditions that would make me hesitate upon the acceptance of such an offer, my friend. What are they? I agree to them in advance."

"I have the key that unlocks this grating—that is, I have a duplicate which is as well. I have horses saddled and waiting, and there is still time for all that is required even if you should wish to send me to the city before the hour for the meeting. If you agree to the conditions, I will accept your word, and we will start at once."

"I have already agreed to them without hearing them. Let me know them quickly, since you insist upon it."

"As soon as we are under the shelter of the trees I will blindfold you. You are not to attempt to see anything, nor can you remove the bandage from your eyes until I grant permission. You must promise not to go to the city and to make no attempt to see or to speak to any person except those who are engaged in this affair, and to them you must not explain any of the circumstances. If it is necessary to send me to the city to communicate with your second or another, you will wait at our place of parting until I return. After the duello there will still be time to return here without discovery, and you must submit to the bandage again, do exactly as I direct and resume your place in this room as if you had not been absent. And there is one other point where I depend entirely upon your honor, senor. It may be that we will meet people on the road on our return. You must remember that it will then be daylight. In such a case I would be obliged to remove the bandage from your eyes until we have passed, but I hope such an event may be avoided, but if it should occur we will remain motionless until I can replace the bandage. One more thing and the last—you will promise never to recognize me after tonight either by name or by sight, and that you will never attempt through me to seek out the identity of the lady who has caused you to be imprisoned. If you agree to all these conditions, senor, we need not delay."

"I can think of only one reservation, my friend, and that concerns the return here. If I am alive and able to sit on a horse, I will do as you say, but it is quite likely that I may not be able to return with you at all. In that case you will be in trouble."

"I have considered that, senor, and I will take the risk. I do not think you

The stranger glided up the steps with the grace of a serpent.

were intended for a bullet fired by Captain Romero. Now a word or two of instruction: I will open the grating just sufficient for you to pass out. I will then close it and relock it. The window you will leave as it is. You cannot crawl on the ground as I can do, nor do I think it necessary now. Once outside the window you will go to the bottom of the steps, and from there two quick leaps will take you into the shadow of the shrubbery, where you will await me. Leave your hat and coat where they are. I have provided a serape and a sombrero for you."

It is not necessary to describe the escape from the house and grounds more than to add that it was accomplished without incident. By half after 1 o'clock the two men were on the road together, each astride a horse, though Pendleton's eyes were tightly bandaged. It was only human nature for him to endeavor through his knowledge of the topography of the country to locate himself, and his companion seemed to realize this, for he talked constantly so that the American would have no opportunity for logical conjecture. The horses were soon put to a canter also, which rendered the task still more difficult.

"I wish you would tell me why you were so good as to do all this for me?" Pendleton said as soon as an opportunity offered.

"I will tell you the truth, senor," was the calm reply. "There are several reasons. I might have decided to act because of any one of them, but because of all of them I could not hesitate. First, then, I know about you and your mission in this country. I realized fully the unfortunate circumstances in which you were placed, and I know that you would have not one but a dozen duels on your hands in less than two days if you could find anybody who would fight you after failure to meet Romero. From such dishonor I desired to save you, because if the positions were reversed I would be glad to have somebody do the same for me. In the shooting gallery on San Felipe Neri I have seen you at practice, and I believe you to be as good a shot as Romero. With a word of instruction that I can give you I believe you will be victorious in this affair. That word is this: It is Romero's practice to fire one fractional part of an instant before the word 'tres.' The second will cry, 'Attencion, uno, dos, tres!' Romero's practice is to touch the trigger when the 't' is sounded; he does not wait for the end of the word. If you will do the same, bueno! There is one more reason, which you may not approve. It is that I hate Romero and would rejoice to see him killed. I also believe that you will kill him. He once committed a great wrong against a member of my family. My social position will not permit me to challenge him. I might assassinate him, but I do not wish to do that. That is all, senor. I am in the employ of the senorita. I am the administrator of an estate that belongs to her. I am her servant and therefore yours also. Que mas, senor?"

"May I not reward you for your service?"

"If you are killed, you cannot do so; if you kill him, that will be sufficient reward," was the calm reply. "We are now on the Passeo, not far from the place of meeting. Do you wish me to go to the city?"

"Yes; to the Concordia. Captain Agramonte is supping there. Tell him to meet me at the appointed time or a little before it if possible and whatever else you choose to add. Ah, and say to him that I wish him to make arrangements with Romero's second to permit you to be present. That may be accomplished if they will add one witness."

"I had thought of that, senor. If you will pull in your horse a moment, I will remove the bandage from your eyes. Will you await me here or do you prefer to go nearer to the city?"

"I will ride slowly up and down between this spot and the Indian statue until you return. How may I address you? It will be necessary to introduce you to Senor Agramonte."

"I will introduce myself to him at the Concordia. You may call me Pancho, without prefix. I will pass as a servant. Hasta luego, senor. I will return in an hour."

"One thing more, Pancho. We forgot my case of pistols."

"It is better so, senor. You will use Romero's without tossing for choice. You will be given the selection. It would be natural for you to take the one nearest to you in the case when his second places it before you. That is what you will be expected to do. Select the other one, and you will win. Do it carelessly. Adios!"

The charro put spurs to his horse and rode away. While he was gone Pendleton rode up and down the Passeo between the points named, and he was soon gratified to see the charro return much sooner than he expected.

"Everything is arranged," the charro announced. "I found Senor Agramonte without difficulty. He was much disturbed because he had not seen you, but is all right now. The place of meeting is changed. There is a small cypress grove under Chapultepec opposite the park. It is to be there. If you are ready, we will go at once."

With the rising of the sun, a half hour before the appointed time, Agramonte appeared, and promptly on the minute came Romero with his seconds and the surgeon.

The principals bowed courteously to each other, and the seconds began immediately to arrange the ground. When it was paced off, Agramonte won the choice of position, and, although the location was such that it offered little or no advantage, it was regarded by Pancho as a good omen.

"You will kill him, senor," he said in a confidential aside. He seemed to regard Pendleton as quite as bloodthirsty as himself. "Is it your first duel?" he added presently.

"Yes."

"Your nerves are like steel. You will triumph. I know it. Cara, but I will be glad!"

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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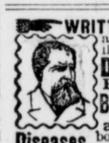

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