FORTUNE'S FOOL

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Illustrated by R.W. SATTERFIELD

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BEGIN HERE TODAY

Colonel Holles, soldier and adventurer, returns to England, his native land, when war with Holland is declared. It is dangerous for Holles to secure a commission in the English army because the name of Randal Holles, father of the colonel, is on the warrant for the execution of the late king.

The dreaded plague is spreading rapidly in London. A friend of the colonel, named Tucker, is arrested for plotting against the government. Because Holles has been seen in Tucker's company, a warrant is out for his arrest.

His Grace of Buckingham rents a house in Knight Ryder St. and plots to have Sylvia Farquharson, actress, abducted and carried there. Bucknigham asks Colonel Holles to abduct Sylvia and take her to this house for him. At first the colonel refuses.

NOW GO ON WITH THE STORY

"PERHAPS not. But a man standing in the shadow of the gallows should not be over-fastidious."

The flush perished in the Colonel's face; the haunting fear returned to his eyes. The Duke, seeing him thus suddenly stricken by that grim reminder, was moved to sudden laughter.

"It seems you have to realize, Colonel Holles, that there is no music without frets. You resent that I should ask a trifling service of you when in return I am offering to make your fortune. For that is what I am offering. You come as opportunely to my need as to your own. Serve me as I require, and I pledge my word that I shall not neglect you."

"But this . . . this . . ." faltered Holles, protesting. "It is a task for bullies, for jackals."

The Duke shrugged. "Damme! Why trouble to define it?" Then he changed his tone again. "The choice is yours. Fortune makes the offer: gold on the one hand: hemp on the other. I do not press either upon you."

Holles was torn between fear and honor.

"I'll go my ways, I think," he said heavily, and half turned as if to depart.

"You know whither it leads?" came the Duke's warning voice.

In silence Holles bowed, and made his way to the door with dragging feet, hope's last bubble pricked.

And then the Duke's voice arrested him again.

"Holles, you are a fool."

"I have long known it. I was a fool when I saved your life, and you pay me as a fool be paid."

"You pay yourself. And of your own choice you do so in fool's coin."

Seeing him standing arrested there, still hesitating, the Duke approached him. His grace's need, as you know, was very urgent. It was no overstatement that Holles coming had been opportune. Unless he could make of Holles the tool that he required so sorely, where should he find another? He set a friendly hand upon the Colonel's shoulder.

And whilst the Duke now talked persuasively, tempting him with promises on the one hand and intimidating him with a picture of what must otherwise happen on the other, the Colonel's own tormented mind was reconsidering.

Were his hands really so clean, his life so blameless, his honor so untarnished, that he must boggle at this vileness, and boggle at it to the extent of allowing them to stretch his neck and disembowel him sooner than perform it? And what was this vileness when all was said? A baggage of the theater, a trull of an actress, had played upon the Duke that she might make the greater profit out of him in the end. The Duke, wearied of her tricks and wiles, desired to cut the game short. Thus the Duke represented the situation. And what

WITH ARMS LINKED, THE THREE SET A COURSE FOR THE ALEHOUSE.

cause had Holles to assume that it was other than a true representation? The girl was an actress and therefore, it followed, wanton. The Puritanical contempt of the playhouse and its denizens—heritage of his Commonwealth days—left him no doubt upon that score. If she were a lady of quality, a woman of virtue, the thing would be different. Then, indeed, to be a party to such an act were a wickedness unthinkable, a thing sooner than which he would, indeed, suffer death. But where was the vileness here, since the object itself was vile? Against what, then, really, did this thing offend? Against himself; against his soldier's dignity. The act required of him was one proper to a hored bully. It was ignoble. But was hanging less ignoble? Was he to let them put a rope about his neck and the brand of the gallows on his name out of tenderness for a baggage of the theater whom he did not even know?

Buckingham was right. He was a fool. All his life he had been a fool, scrupulous in trifles, negligent in the greater things. And now upon the most trifling scruple of all he would fitly sacrifice his life.

"Your grace," he said hoarsely, "I am your man."

CHAPTER XVI

The Sedan-Chair

His grace behaved generously, and at the same time with a prudence which reveals the alert and calculating mind of this gifted man, who might have been great had he been less of a voluptuary.

He attended with Holles before the justices early on the morrow, announcing himself able to confirm out of his own knowledge the truth of the account which the colonel gave of his relations with the attainted Tucker. More was not needed. The sycophantic court bent the knee before this great gentleman who enjoyed the close friendship of the king.

Thus at the outset was Holles delivered from his worst peril. Next he was informed that, since service of any distinction in England was almost out of the question for his father's son, Buckingham would supply him with letters to several high-placed friends of his own in France, where a capable soldier well recommended need never lack employment.

From attendance before the Justices, Colonel Holles repaired straight to Fenchurch Street to conclude arrangements with the owner of the house in Knight Ryder Street. Of this he now acquired the tenancy in his own name for the term of one year. The merchant did not trouble to conceal the fact that he regarded Colonel Holles as crazy to desire to take up his residence in an infected city from which all who were able were making haste to remove themselves. Had the Colonel needed a reminder of it, he had it in the fact that he was constrained to go on foot, not only because hackney-coaches were now rare, but because the use of them was considered highly imprudent, since so many had been used by infected persons. Doors smeared with the red cross and guarded by watchmen were becoming commonplaces, and the comparatively few people met in the streets who still sought to maintain the normal tenor and business of their lives moved with the listlessnes of despendency or else with the watchfulness of hunted creatures. The pungent smell of electauraies, and particularly of camphor, was wafted to the Colonel's nostrils from the person of almost every human he met.

He may have thought again that—as he had already admirably expressed it—Buckingham was led by his passion like a blind man by his dog, to come thrusting himself at such a time into the City, and he may have taken satisfaction in the thought that he, himself, so soon as thsi business should be accomplished, was to shake the poisonous dust of London from his feet.

Matters concluded with the merchant, the Colonel went to take possession of the houses, and he installed there two of the four French lackeys the Duke had lent him for myrmidons.

After that there was little to do but wait until Saturday. That evening, however, and the next, the Colonel repaired to Lincoln's Inn to watch from a safe distance Miss Farquharson's departure from the theater, and so inform himself precisely of her habits in the matter. On both occasions she came forth at the same time—a few minutes after seven, and entered her waiting sedan-chair, in which she was borne away.

On Friday evening Holles went again, at 6 o'clock, and he had been waiting half an hour before the chair that was to convey her home made its appearanace. It was the same chair as before and borne by the same men.

Holles lounged forward to engage them in talk. Of set purpose and despite the warm weather, he had donned a well-worn leather jerkin to cover and conceal his fairly presentable coat.

He slouched toward the chairmen, pulling at a clay pipe, a man with time on his hande. And they, sitting on the shafts of the chair—one on each side, so as to balance each other—were nothing loath to have the tedium of their waiting beguiled by the thrasonical garrulousness his appearance led them to expect.

He did not disappoint them. He talked of the pestilence and of the war, and of the favoritism practiced at Court, which bestowed commands upon all manner of incompetent fops and kept a hardened and stout old soldier like himself cooling his heels in London's plague-ridden streets.

On the following evening—which was that of Saturday—you behold him there again, at about the same hour, joyously hailed by Miss Farquharson's chairmen in a manner impudently blending greeting with derision.

They took the Colonel between them, and with arms linked the three set a course for the little alehouse at the corner of Portugal Row. The Colonel was more garrulous than ever, and very confidential. He had met a friend, he insisted upon informing them—an old brother-in-arms who had come upon fortunate days, from whom he had succeeded in borrowing a good round sum.

Into the alehouse they rolled, to be skilfully piloted by the Colonel into a quiet corner well away from the windows and the light. He called noisily, tipsily, for the landlady, banging the table with the hilt of his sword. And when she made her appearance, he silenced her protests by his order.

"Three pints of Canary stiffly laced with brandy."

The wine was brought, and the facetious pair swilled it greedily, whereafter they praised it, with rolling of eyes and resounding lip-smackings, they even subdued their raillery of the provider of this nectar.

(Continued in Our Next Issue)

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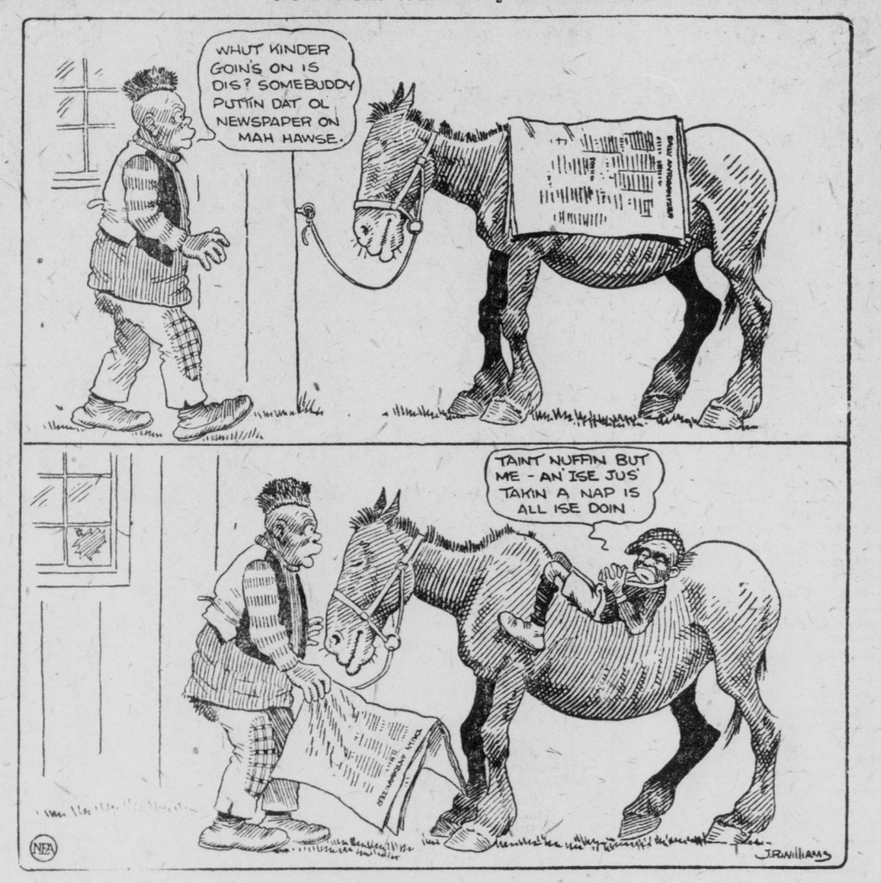

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