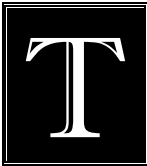


CHAPTER ONE



his is insubordination, Dick!" the man in the tall top hat and cravat hissed.

"Well then, Abby," Burton growled back at him, "you have something to write in your little notebook for today."

"You may address me as *Ambassador*," the younger, paler man whined, and removed his hat for a moment to mop sweat from his brow with a white silk handkerchief. The ceiling of the *Jim Smiley's* engine room was high enough for the two men to stand in comfortably but the heat that its boiler gave off, even on a low idle, made the chamber feel smaller and infernal, like a smithy with the windows all shut.

The heat might make Absalom Fearnley-Standish wilt, but it wasn't any kind of serious bother to Burton.

"If we are to stand on rules of address," he snarled, "you may call me *Captain Burton*." He picked up a heavy tool, spanner at one end and spike at the other, from a steel crate of similar implements and hefted it. He leered at the diplomat, knowing that the red light coming through the furnace's grate would give the scars on both sides of his face a devilish cast. "This will do well enough."

"Again, I protest," Fearnley-Standish said, eyes darting around in the Vulcan gloom. "My commission letter says nothing of sabotage."

"Well then," Burton answered in as reasonable a voice as he could muster, examining the three brass pipes that rose from the iron furnace to the enormous boiler, "you should have exercised a little more imagination when you wrote the damned thing."

With a grunt and a swing of his powerful shoulders, he slammed the spike end of the tool into one of the pipes.

Clang!

Fearnley-Standish jumped. Hot air rushed from the hole Burton had made; the room becoming perceptibly more stifling.

“Egad, stop that!” he spat out, and Burton grinned.

“I find that your inexperience in the dark art of sabotage comforts me,” he told the younger man. “It restores my faith in the moral rectitude of Her Majesty’s Foreign Service. Moral rectitude, if not effectiveness.” He swung again. *Clang!* “Still, must do the job right.”

The second pipe was well-holed, and Burton looked at the boiler’s pressure gauge. Its needle, already low as the boiler idled, steadily dropped now toward zero. Burton was no mechanic but he thought that meant he had done the job. For good measure, he smashed the gauge as well.

“That’s enough! The Americans will hear us!” Fearnley-Standish wiped sweat from his face again. He was trembling.

“I forget,” Burton mused, “how young you are. You’ve never cut through impenetrable jungle, never traveled in a foreign country in disguise, never taken a spear to the face.” He raised his weapon a final time. “Great Kali’s hips, you’ve probably never even sailed the Nile.”

“Blowhard!” Fearnley-Standish squealed.

“Coward!” Burton retorted. “Stuffed shirt!” *Clang!* He smashed a hole in the third pipe. “That should hold them for a day or two, especially,” he gestured at the crate of spanners and other implements, “if we take their tools with us.”

Fearnley-Standish stepped away and crossed his arms. “I’m not carrying those.”

Burton grunted. “Say something that surprises me, *Ambassador*.” He stuffed the spanner back among its fellows and then picked up the box. “You might, for starters, explain why you bothered to accompany me on this little sortie. If you’re so convinced the Americans are not our enemies, or at least our rivals, you might have saved yourself a little hysterical panting and remained on the *Liabona*.”

“Did you hear that?” the diplomat hunched his shoulders and twisted his neck, cupping a hand to one ear while he craned to look up the stairs that led to the *Jim Smiley*’s deck.

“Pshaw!” Burton dismissed his fears and pushed past, slipping effortlessly up the iron-grilled steps. He was nearly forty, he thought proudly, but he was as muscled as he’d ever been; as strong as he’d been when soldiering in India in his twenties.

Fearnley-Standish hesitated, and then tapped up the stairs in Burton’s wake.

“I am Her Majesty’s representative,” he buzzed in Burton’s ear, “responsible for whatever happens on this expedition. I couldn’t risk that

you might run off alone and do something foolish.”

Burton laughed harshly. “Instead, you witnessed the foolishness!” The deck of the *Jim Smiley* was reminiscent of a sailing ship, a flat space with a railing around it and cabins fore and aft. Everything was iron and India rubber. “I hope you’re taking detailed notes in your little memorandum-book.”

“Yes, well,” Fearnley-Standish harrumphed.

Something flickered in the corner of Burton’s vision and he snapped his head around to look at it. Nothing. Just a shadow, a well of darkness thrown into the lee of the *Jim Smiley*’s wheelhouse by the Franklin Poles, the great crackling blue electric globes standing guard in front of Bridger’s Saloon. But was there a darker shadow within the shadow, a slight stirring?

He stared.

Nothing.

He listened, and heard the raucous, muffled sounds drifting through the plascrete walls of the saloon but nothing more, nothing that indicated any danger. The shadow was too small to hide a man in any case, Burton reassured himself, and he turned and headed for the rail. The grated iron floor, the *deck*, since these truck-men all insisted on talking about their vehicles as if they were sailing ships, jutted out a few extra feet to the ladder, to get over the strangely rounded and rubber-cloaked hull of the vessel.

“What is it?” the diplomat asked him.

“Nothing,” Burton dismissed both the other man and his own fears with one word. He dropped the crate of tools to the ground with a rattling *crash!* and slid effortlessly down the ladder after it.

Fearnley-Standish descended more awkwardly. Halfway down, the starchy young man missed a rung. He dangled by his hands for long and flailing seconds before he managed to reattach himself.

“What are you going to do with those?” he demanded shrilly.

Burton laughed again at the pusillanimity of the other man. “I’ll put them in the one place where Clemens and his goon won’t be able to find them in the morning!” he cried over his shoulder.

Bending at the knees to pick up the crate again, he headed across the yard towards the great shadowy hulk that was the *Liabona*.

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“Your road ahead is shadowed and perilous,” muttered the gypsy. He held Sam Clemens’s right hand clutched in his own, which were armored in fingerless black kidskin gloves, and peered closely at the creases in Sam’s flesh.

Close enough, Sam thought, *that the man could just as easily be smelling his future as seeing it*. The man's hair was long and greasy, as befitted a gypsy, and his coat and vest were threadbare.

"Your future is one of failure, disaster, and great sorrow. You should reconsider your course, sir. You should turn back."

The gypsy fell silent and arched an eyebrow at Sam, as if underscoring the fearfulness of his message. The silence between the two men was filled with the babble of the saloon around them.

"That's refreshing," Sam quipped, chomping fiercely on his Cuban cigar.

The air inside Bridger's was heavy with smoke but it was the smoke of cheap American tobacco rolled into cheap cigarettes, mixed with gas lamp emanations and the occasional ozone crackle of electricity. Sam filtered the stink, as well as the rancid smell of sour, sweaty human bodies and the drifting odors of horse and coal-fire, through a sweet, expensive Partagás. *Nothing*, he thought, *beats a government expense account*.

The gypsy stared at him. His gray-streaked black mustache hung asymmetrically under his bulbous nose, and was no match for Sam's fine, manly soup-strainer. His jaw looked misshapen, too, sort of hunched sideways into the thick, mostly gray, beard that veiled it. Above all the facial hair and the badly-cast features, though, the man had dark, intense eyes, with baggy pouches under them, and those eyes stared at Sam in surprise.

"Did you hear me right, sir? I told you that your future is bleak."

"Yes," Sam acknowledged. "Your honesty is marvelous. Most fortune-tellers would take my two bits and tell me what they thought I wanted to hear. *Beautiful willing women, rivers of smooth whiskey, and horses that run faster than the sun itself are in your future, sir! Come again soon.*" He grinned, took another suck at the cigar and winked. "I respect your integrity." *And besides*, he thought, *you're most likely right, anyway. If the Indians don't kill me, the Mormons will, and that wily codger Robert Lee must have agents out there somewhere as well*. Failure, disaster, and sorrow, indeed.

Sam heard a clatter from the corner of the common room. A squad of Shoshone braves, proud and alien, with their beaded vests and fringed leggings, their strange hair, clumpy on top and then falling long about their shoulders, and their long magnet-powered Brunel rifles, had shoved aside several tables and were beginning some sort of coordinated movement that looked like it might be competitive interactive hopscotch. They tossed flat disks across the floor and then raced in hopping motions, each to another man's disk and then back to his starting position. They looked like big, hairy, dangerous, possibly slightly inebriated, versions of little girls. Sam forced himself to take a second look at their guns and suppressed an urge to laugh.

Those Brunel rifles hurled bullets faster and farther than any gunpowder-driven weapon yet made, and punched awful holes right

through a man's body. They were English in design and manufacture, portable railguns, and Sam wondered how the Shoshone found themselves so well armed. He sobered up quickly at the thought. For that matter, as he looked closer, he spotted electro-knives and vibro-blades here and there. Somehow, though it was in a picaresque and highly individualized, even chaotic, fashion, the Shoshone had gotten themselves serious hand-to-hand weapons. Might they have larger armaments, too?

At this rate, he began to think all the wild talk about phlogiston guns being tested out in the Rocky Mountains might not be so wild after all. Maybe he ought to consider his mission objectives broader than dealing with Deseret alone, or at least get that recommendation back to Washington. It was bad enough that Deseret had airships, and might have ray guns that rained fiery death on their targets. Once such things got into the hands of the natives, there might be no end of mischief.

Two of the saloon's bouncers, heavy men in buckskins with knives and guns, didn't look like they wanted to laugh at all; they moved a little closer with expressions on their faces that were downright grim.

The gypsy shook his head, perplexed. What had he said his name was ...? Archer? He wore a tall boxy beaver hat, a long duster, brown corduroy pants, and a shirt that was striped vertically in purple and gold. Round smoked glasses that might have hidden his burning eyes rode low on the onion-like bulge of his nose. He didn't really look out of place here, Sam reflected, surrounded by New Russia Trail pioneers, steam-truck mechanics, black Stridermen from President Tubman's Mexico, cowboys, and the usual clutter of low-life entertainers that filled any bar west of the Mississippi.

Sam knew that he looked much more at odds with the environment in his self-consciously modern attire. He wore a jacket, without tails, because tails were inconvenient, and white because Sam liked to think of himself as the hero of the story, even though, if pressed, he wouldn't admit to believing in heroes. He wore Levi-Strauss denim pants, brand new and shipped straight from the factory to the U.S. Army at Sam's request. They were comfortable and rugged, and they snapped up the front with a row of metal buttons for convenience as well as for a certain masculine flair that shouted *mechanick*. At least, that's what they would have shouted to Sam if he ever took occasion to look at another man's crotch and saw it protected by a row of steel snaps.

"You don't understand," the gypsy said. "You take me for a huckster."

"I take every man for a huckster," Sam agreed. "I find it saves time."

"You're on an errand," the palm reader pressed, looking down again into Sam's close-held hand. "You are a knight, and your quest is of supreme importance to your people ... your family, perhaps ... but your