

A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT



Chapter 24: A Rival Magician

My influence in the Valley of Holiness was something prodigious now. It seemed worth while to try to turn it to some valuable account. The thought came to me the next morning, and was suggested by my seeing one of my knights who was in the soap line come riding in. According to history, the monks of this place two centuries before had been worldly minded enough to want to wash. It might be that there was a leaven of this unrighteousness still remaining. So I sounded a Brother:

“Wouldn’t you like a bath?”

He shuddered at the thought—the thought of the peril of it to the well—but he said with feeling:

“One needs not to ask that of a poor body who has not known that blessed refreshment sith that he was a boy. Would God I might wash me! but it may not be, fair sir, tempt me not; it is forbidden.”

And then he sighed in such a sorrowful way that I was resolved he should have at least one layer of his real estate removed, if it sized up my whole influence and bankrupted the pile. So I went to the abbot and asked for a permit for this Brother. He blenched at the idea—I don’t mean that you could see him blench, for of course you couldn’t see it without you scraped him, and I didn’t care enough about it to scrape him, but I knew the blench was there, just the same, and within a book-cover’s thickness of the surface, too—blenched, and trembled. He said:

“Ah, son, ask aught else thou wilt, and it is thine, and freely granted out of a grateful heart—but this, oh, this! Would you drive away the blessed water again?”

“No, Father, I will not drive it away. I have mysterious knowledge which teaches me that there was an error that other time when it was thought the institution of the bath banished the fountain.” A large interest began to show up in the old man’s face. “My knowledge informs me that the bath was innocent of that misfortune, which was caused by quite another sort of sin.”

“These are brave words—but—but right welcome, if they be true.”

“They are true, indeed. Let me build the bath again, Father. Let me build it again, and the

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fountain shall flow forever.”

“You promise this?—You promise it? Say the word—say you promise it!”

“I do promise it.”

“Then will I have the first bath myself! Go—get ye to your work. Tarry not, tarry not, but go.”

I and my boys were at work, straight off. The ruins of the old bath were there yet in the basement of the monastery, not a stone missing. They had been left just so, all these lifetimes, and avoided with a pious fear, as things accursed. In two days we had it all done and the water in—a spacious pool of clear pure water that a body could swim in. It was running water, too. It came in, and went out, through the ancient pipes. The old abbot kept his word, and was the first to try it. He went down black and shaky, leaving the whole black community above troubled and worried and full of bodings; but he came back white and joyful, and the game was made! another triumph scored.

It was a good campaign that we made in that Valley of Holiness, and I was very well satisfied, and ready to move on now, but I struck a disappointment. I caught a heavy cold, and it started up an old lurking rheumatism of mine. Of course the rheumatism hunted up my weakest place and located itself there. This was the place where the abbot put his arms about me and mashed me, what time he was moved to testify his gratitude to me with an embrace.

When at last I got out, I was a shadow. But everybody was full of attentions and kindnesses, and these brought cheer back into my life, and were the right medicine to help a convalescent swiftly up toward health and strength again; so I gained fast.

Sandy was worn out with nursing; so I made up my mind to turn out and go a cruise alone, leaving her at the nunnery to rest up. My idea was to disguise myself as a freeman of peasant degree and wander through the country a week or two on foot. This would give me a chance to eat and lodge with the lowliest and poorest class of free citizens on equal terms. There was no other way to inform myself perfectly of their everyday life and the operation of the laws upon it. If I went among them as a gentleman, there would be restraints and conventionalities which would shut me out from their private joys and troubles, and I should get no further than the outside shell.

One morning I was out on a long walk to get up muscle for my trip, and had climbed the ridge which bordered the northern extremity of the valley, when I came upon an artificial opening in the face of a low precipice, and recognized it by its location as a hermitage

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which had often been pointed out to me from a distance as the den of a hermit of high renown for dirt and austerity. I knew he had lately been offered a situation in the Great Sahara, where lions and sandflies made the hermit-life peculiarly attractive and difficult, and had gone to Africa to take possession, so I thought I would look in and see how the atmosphere of this den agreed with its reputation.

My surprise was great: the place was newly swept and scoured. Then there was another surprise. Back in the gloom of the cavern I heard the clink of a little bell, and then this exclamation:

“Hello Central! Is this you, Camelot?—Behold, thou mayst glad thy heart an thou hast faith to believe the wonderful when that it cometh in unexpected guise and maketh itself manifest in impossible places—here standeth in the flesh his mightiness The Boss, and with thine own ears shall ye hear him speak!”

Now what a radical reversal of things this was; what a jumbling together of extravagant incongruities; what a fantastic conjunction of opposites and irreconcilables—the home of the bogus miracle become the home of a real one, the den of a mediaeval hermit turned into a telephone office!

The telephone clerk stepped into the light, and I recognized one of my young fellows. I said:

“How long has this office been established here, Ulfius?”

“But since midnight, fair Sir Boss, an it please you. We saw many lights in the valley, and so judged it well to make a station, for that where so many lights be needs must they indicate a town of goodly size.”

“Quite right. It isn’t a town in the customary sense, but it’s a good stand, anyway. Do you know where you are?”

“Of that I have had no time to make inquiry; for whenas my comradeship moved hence upon their labors, leaving me in charge, I got me to needed rest, purposing to inquire when I waked, and report the place’s name to Camelot for record.”

“Well, this is the Valley of Holiness.”

It didn’t take; I mean, he didn’t start at the name, as I had supposed he would. He merely said:

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“I will so report it.”

“Why, the surrounding regions are filled with the noise of late wonders that have happened here! You didn’t hear of them?”

“Ah, ye will remember we move by night, and avoid speech with all. We learn naught but that we get by the telephone from Camelot.”

“Why they know all about this thing. Haven’t they told you anything about the great miracle of the restoration of a holy fountain?”

“Oh, that? Indeed yes. But the name of this valley doth wondrously differ from the name of that one; indeed to differ wider were not possible—”

“What was that name, then?”

“The Valley of Hellishness.”

“That explains it. Confound a telephone, anyway. It is the very demon for conveying similarities of sound that are miracles of divergence from similarity of sense. But no matter, you know the name of the place now. Call up Camelot.”

He did it, and had Clarence sent for. It was good to hear my boy’s voice again. It was like being home. After some affectionate interchanges, and some account of my late illness, I said:

“What is new?”

“The king and queen and many of the court do start even in this hour, to go to your valley to pay pious homage to the waters ye have restored, and cleanse themselves of sin, and see the place where the infernal spirit spouted true hell-flames to the clouds—an ye listen sharply ye may hear me wink and hear me likewise smile a smile, sith ‘twas I that made selection of those flames from out our stock and sent them by your order.”

“Does the king know the way to this place?”

“The king?—no, nor to any other in his realms, mayhap; but the lads that help you with your miracle will be his guide and lead the way, and appoint the places for rests at noons and sleeps at night.”

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“This will bring them here—when?”

“Mid-afternoon, or later, the third day.”

“Anything else in the way of news?”

“The king hath begun the raising of the standing army ye suggested to him; one regiment is complete and officered.”

“The mischief! I wanted a main hand in that myself. There is only one body of men in the kingdom that are fitted to officer a regular army.”

“Yes—and now ye will marvel to know there’s not so much as one West Pointer in that regiment.”

“What are you talking about? Are you in earnest?”

“It is truly as I have said.”

“Why, this makes me uneasy. Who were chosen, and what was the method? Competitive examination?”

“Indeed, I know naught of the method. I but know this—these officers be all of noble family, and are born—what is it you call it?—chuckleheads.”

“There’s something wrong, Clarence.”

“Comfort yourself, then; for two candidates for a lieutenancy do travel hence with the king—young nobles both—and if you but wait where you are you will hear them questioned.”

“That is news to the purpose. I will get one West Pointer in, anyway. Mount a man and send him to that school with a message; let him kill horses, if necessary, but he must be there before sunset to-night and say—”

“There is no need. I have laid a ground wire to the school. Prithee let me connect you with it.”

It sounded good! In this atmosphere of telephones and lightning communication with distant regions, I was breathing the breath of life again after long suffocation. I realized,

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then, what a creepy, dull, inanimate horror this land had been to me all these years, and how I had been in such a stifled condition of mind as to have grown used to it almost beyond the power to notice it.

I gave my order to the superintendent of the Academy personally. I also asked him to bring me some paper and a fountain pen and a box or so of safety matches. I was getting tired of doing without these conveniences. I could have them now, as I wasn't going to wear armor any more at present, and therefore could get at my pockets.

When I got back to the monastery, I found a thing of interest going on. The abbot and his monks were assembled in the great hall, observing with childish wonder and faith the performances of a new magician, a fresh arrival. His dress was the extreme of the fantastic; as showy and foolish as the sort of thing an Indian medicine-man wears. He was mowing, and mumbling, and gesticulating, and drawing mystical figures in the air and on the floor,—the regular thing, you know. He was a celebrity from Asia—so he said, and that was enough. That sort of evidence was as good as gold, and passed current everywhere.

How easy and cheap it was to be a great magician on this fellow's terms. His specialty was to tell you what any individual on the face of the globe was doing at the moment; and what he had done at any time in the past, and what he would do at any time in the future. He asked if any would like to know what the Emperor of the East was doing now? The sparkling eyes and the delighted rubbing of hands made eloquent answer—this reverend crowd would like to know what that monarch was at, just as this moment. The fraud went through some more mummerly, and then made grave announcement:

“The high and mighty Emperor of the East doth at this moment put money in the palm of a holy begging friar—one, two, three pieces, and they be all of silver.”

A buzz of admiring exclamations broke out, all around:

“It is marvelous!” “Wonderful!” “What study, what labor, to have acquired a so amazing power as this!”

Would they like to know what the Supreme Lord of Inde was doing? Yes. He told them what the Supreme Lord of Inde was doing. Then he told them what the Sultan of Egypt was at; also what the King of the Remote Seas was about. And so on and so on; and with each new marvel the astonishment at his accuracy rose higher and higher. They thought he must surely strike an uncertain place some time; but no, he never had to hesitate, he always knew, and always with unerring precision. I saw that if this thing went on I should lose my supremacy, this fellow would capture my following, I should be left out in the

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cold. I must put a cog in his wheel, and do it right away, too. I said:

“If I might ask, I should very greatly like to know what a certain person is doing.”

“Speak, and freely. I will tell you.”

“It will be difficult—perhaps impossible.”

“My art knoweth not that word. The more difficult it is, the more certainly will I reveal it to you.”

You see, I was working up the interest. It was getting pretty high, too; you could see that by the craning necks all around, and the half-suspended breathing. So now I climaxed it:

“If you make no mistake—if you tell me truly what I want to know—I will give you two hundred silver pennies.”

“The fortune is mine! I will tell you what you would know.”

“Then tell me what I am doing with my right hand.”

“Ah-h!” There was a general gasp of surprise. It had not occurred to anybody in the crowd—that simple trick of inquiring about somebody who wasn’t ten thousand miles away. The magician was hit hard; it was an emergency that had never happened in his experience before, and it corked him; he didn’t know how to meet it. He looked stunned, confused; he couldn’t say a word. “Come,” I said, “what are you waiting for? Is it possible you can answer up, right off, and tell what anybody on the other side of the earth is doing, and yet can’t tell what a person is doing who isn’t three yards from you? Persons behind me know what I am doing with my right hand—they will indorse you if you tell correctly.” He was still dumb. “Very well, I’ll tell you why you don’t speak up and tell; it is because you don’t know. You a magician! Good friends, this tramp is a mere fraud and liar.”

This distressed the monks and terrified them. They were not used to hearing these awful beings called names, and they did not know what might be the consequence. There was a dead silence now; superstitious bodings were in every mind. The magician began to pull his wits together, and when he presently smiled an easy, nonchalant smile, it spread a mighty relief around; for it indicated that his mood was not destructive. He said:

“It hath struck me speechless, the frivolity of this person’s speech. Let all know, if perchance there be any who know it not, that enchanter’s of my degree deign not to concern

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themselves with the doings of any but kings, princes, emperors, them that be born in the purple and them only. Had ye asked me what Arthur the great king is doing, it were another matter, and I had told ye; but the doings of a subject interest me not.”

“Oh, I misunderstood you. I thought you said ‘anybody,’ and so I supposed ‘anybody’ included—well, anybody; that is, everybody.”

“It doth—anybody that is of lofty birth; and the better if he be royal.”

“That, it meseemeth, might well be,” said the abbot, who saw his opportunity to smooth things and avert disaster, “for it were not likely that so wonderful a gift as this would be conferred for the revelation of the concerns of lesser beings than such as be born near to the summits of greatness. Our Arthur the king—”

“Would you know of him?” broke in the enchanter.

“Most gladly, yea, and gratefully.”

Everybody was full of awe and interest again right away, the incorrigible idiots. They watched the incantations absorbingly, and looked at me with a “There, now, what can you say to that?” air, when the announcement came:

“The king is weary with the chase, and lieth in his palace these two hours sleeping a dreamless sleep.”

“God’s benison upon him!” said the abbot, and crossed himself; “may that sleep be to the refreshment of his body and his soul.”

“And so it might be, if he were sleeping,” I said, “but the king is not sleeping, the king rides.”

Here was trouble again—a conflict of authority. Nobody knew which of us to believe; I still had some reputation left. The magician’s scorn was stirred, and he said:

“Lo, I have seen many wonderful soothsayers and prophets and magicians in my life days, but none before that could sit idle and see to the heart of things with never an incantation to help.”

“You have lived in the woods, and lost much by it. I use incantations myself, as this good brotherhood are aware—but only on occasions of moment.”

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When it comes to sarcasming, I reckon I know how to keep my end up. That jab made this fellow squirm. The abbot inquired after the queen and the court, and got this information:

“They be all on sleep, being overcome by fatigue, like as to the king.”

I said:

“That is merely another lie. Half of them are about their amusements, the queen and the other half are not sleeping, they ride. Now perhaps you can spread yourself a little, and tell us where the king and queen and all that are this moment riding with them are going?”

“They sleep now, as I said; but on the morrow they will ride, for they go a journey toward the sea.”

“And where will they be the day after to-morrow at vespers?”

“Far to the north of Camelot, and half their journey will be done.”

“That is another lie, by the space of a hundred and fifty miles. Their journey will not be merely half done, it will be all done, and they will be here, in this valley.”

That was a noble shot! It set the abbot and the monks in a whirl of excitement, and it rocked the enchanter to his base. I followed the thing right up:

“If the king does not arrive, I will have myself ridden on a rail: if he does I will ride you on a rail instead.”

Next day I went up to the telephone office and found that the king had passed through two towns that were on the line. I spotted his progress on the succeeding day in the same way. I kept these matters to myself. The third day's reports showed that if he kept up his gait he would arrive by four in the afternoon. There was still no sign anywhere of interest in his coming; there seemed to be no preparations making to receive him in state; a strange thing, truly. Only one thing could explain this: that other magician had been cutting under me, sure. This was true. I asked a friend of mine, a monk, about it, and he said, yes, the magician had tried some further enchantments and found out that the court had concluded to make no journey at all, but stay at home. Think of that! Observe how much a reputation was worth in such a country. These people had seen me do the very showiest bit of magic in history, and the only one within their memory that had a positive value, and yet here they were, ready to take up with an adventurer who could offer no evidence of his powers but his mere unproven word.

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However, it was not good politics to let the king come without any fuss and feathers at all, so I went down and drummed up a procession of pilgrims and smoked out a batch of hermits and started them out at two o'clock to meet him. And that was the sort of state he arrived in. The abbot was helpless with rage and humiliation when I brought him out on a balcony and showed him the head of the state marching in and never a monk on hand to offer him welcome, and no stir of life or clang of joy-bell to glad his spirit. He took one look and then flew to rouse out his forces. The next minute the bells were dinning furiously, and the various buildings were vomiting monks and nuns, who went swarming in a rush toward the coming procession; and with them went that magician—and he was on a rail, too, by the abbot's order; and his reputation was in the mud, and mine was in the sky again. Yes, a man can keep his trademark current in such a country, but he can't sit around and do it; he has got to be on deck and attending to business right along.