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again on equal terms, only with this to it with considerable expectation.

difference, that the best man wins. Sercombe arrived punctual to the hour,

"I am here, Mr. Greatorex, to the

a graven image, and I signed my as-

"This is entirely your affair, Captain

what you like with your own proper-

With his gliding, serpentine tread,

Hood made a motion of respect and

vanished. Sercombe stared after him,

meditating, and gnawed his mustache

with a frown, which seemed to me to

indicate a certa'n touch of perplexity.

very freely and in his old manner till

dinner was served. The interior sig-

the main part, that preliminary skir-

mish was occupied by conversation the

most distant from the subject we all

had at heart. It was Sercombe himself

who set the example of reserve, and

we followed meekly enough. When I

say reserve I am thinking only of one

was by nature framed for a good talk-

a sort of good fellowship and the even-

ing was far spent that anything hap-

It fell out thus: Sercombe himself

had just concluded an amusing narra-

tive of his experiences among the brig-

ands of Calabria, and Sheppard re-

sumed the conversation with an ad-

venture of his own. The evening

had fallen dark and cloudy, and amid

the starlike candles that illumined the

room the dark figure of Hood moved

noiselessly and constantly. I had

heard this story of Sheppard's, which,

indeed, was not very exciting, and my

mind, swaying from its polite duty,

ested unconsciously upon the new inc.

keeper. As I watched him I saw the

wo men exchange glances-an inter-

rogating look upon Sercombe's part, a

baffling and inscrutable look from

Hood. There followed an instant's

pause, and then the man approached

the master with the pretext of a dish.

shoulder, nervously exploring the con-

tents of the dish with a spoon. Hood

said nothing and, raising his eyes, soft-

ly fixed them upon me at the other end

of the table. For a moment we regard-

ed each other luminously, and then his

glance fell politely away. Sercombe

still whispered and, I thought, with a

growing anxiety. It was time for me

Sercombe looked at me with some

"You are right, Captain Sercombe,"

I answered, being in my turn in com-

mand of myself, "and I offer you my

apology for the rudeness, but I am at

least the master of my own servants,

and Hood shall keep his distance and

not hang about annoying my guests."

With which I ordered him forthwith to

tened to obey almost by anticipation.

the window, a command which he has-

I must say that this unpleasant epi-

sode at once changed the atmosphere

of the room. On the whole, I did not

to interfere.

cool hand.

am your guest."

ding his head.

included in the compact."

combe spoke low and across his

pened to mar our growing harmony.

But he brightened at once and talked

"I will bring Hood," said the captain win you be more explicit? said 1. "I thought you took me," said he. gravely and, taking up his hat, made "It's plain enough. Let us piece the to go. The dinner was set for 7 o'clock, and document together, read it and start fair on the knowledge. That places us I fancy that all three looked forward

himself and fail till the crack of room to meet him. He sat in a chair, Sheppard threw an eager glance at covering his evening dress, and by his me, and I read assent in it. Nor was I side stood Hood, also in the orthodox indisposed to agree to the proposal, odd | costume and looking, as I could not and unexpected as it came and involve help noticing, uncommonly spruce and ing us, as I foresaw, in all the out- servant-like. rages of actual warfare. Yet upon so pregnant a proposition I dared not moment," said Sercombe in his leisuremake up my mind on the instant, and ly voice, "and I go bail that I have I suppose the man saw this, for, turn- brought you an invaluable ally. With ing, he moved to the windows again your permission, Hood will now retire and looked out upon the lawns, hum- to the kitchen." ming to himself. Ere he had turned | The innkeeper insensibly straightagain and faced me with his question ened himself, standing to attention like

in his eyes I had made up my mind. "I agree," I said. Sheppard whistled softly and, as if imitating the captain, leaned forth up- Sercombe," said I, "and you may do on the window. A light of satisfaction played in Sercombe's gray-green eyes ty." I turned to Hood. "You will find for an instant. As for Montgomery, I Mrs. Main in the servants' hall," I said. do not suppose that he had any clear notion of what it was all about. "Then," said Sercombe, "the sooner the better, and what time better than

today?" "I agree to today," I replical. the place and time," said he. "I have no wish to have my head broken," said I bluffly, "or to be mis- nificance of our dinner party would not taken for a hare, and so I say the cas have been visible to a stranger. For tle. If you grant that, you may fix

your own time." "I was in hopes," he said, smiling, for he took no offense at my plainness of speech, "that we might have settled the matter over a little dinner. Hood, an excellent host, I find, is anxious to show you what the Woodman can do when he spreads himself. And a full stomach, warmed with wine, is better for business, as my young friend here knows. But you shall have it your

"By all means let it be a dinner," said Sheppard, suddenly springing up from his seat. "Mr. Greatorex, I am sure, would be loath to rob you of your pleasure, Captain Sercombe, and in his name I make bold to offer you the hospitality of the castle."

I started in amazement and opened my mouth to refuse, but was saved the trouble by the captain's answer. He was a good deal disconcerted. "I fear," said he, "that the hospitali-

ty would be reluctant on Mr. Greatorex's part." "Not at all." said I graciously. "A distinguished soldier like Captain Sercombe is always welcome to my house.' He hesitated, and then, coloring slight

ly, "I am not alone," said he. Sheppard shot me a glance of triumph, as who would say, "I thought we should corner him." "No doubt Mr. Greatorex would

gladly entertain the other gentleman," The captain looked at him, and a



By his side stood Hood. "No," he said; "but, with Mr. Greatoshall entertain us." "I fancy," he continued, smiling,

"that Hood is not a stranger to the castle ways, and he makes a good wait-The idea tickled me. "Let us have Hood by all means," I said. "I had an excellent character for him from

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black solution and ble demourns carefully under restraint. The situation became a little disagreeable, and I thought the time had arrived to end it "Captain Sercombe," I said, quite

am at your service." I looked at Hood. "It is time now."

more wine perhaps we had better get

said I, "that we were alone." And I waited to see the man move. place between them, and then the jan-keeper turned his back on us and bus-

ied himself with the plates upon the sideboard. Sercombe colored angrily and was don, sir," said he, with a slight stam-

Whereas now a man may be Satan and a little later I entered the morning of informing you that I am not alone in this matter." lounging very cozily, a light overcoat "Really," said Sheppard gently, "I do discuss this matter with us." Sercombe bit his lip, and after a

> tude, "I understand your feeling, gentlemen," he replied, "and, in fact, I sympathize with it. But"-He hesitated, and I began to perceive for the first time how far he was involved with the other and to what extent he was under his control. It was

"Leave the room, Hood," said I, not that I had any certain intention that to my wearing it. It isn't a pretty he should quit us, but rather out of weapon, sir, exactly, but I have found curiosity as to what would ensue. The it useful, sir. I thought there would issue surprised me. Hood turned obediently on his heel and made for the door. As it closed upon him Sercombe | carries a revolver." He indicated

turned to us and broke out with em-"You are right, gentlemen. I agree managed between gentlemen. But"- from under his waistcoat he threw exities struggled in evidence upon his face, yet he had an uncommon gift of recovering himself, which I had had occasion already to admire, and I was to admire him still more at this moment. "You will perceive, Mr. Greatorex," he said abruptly, but with a sudden suavity of voice, "that, as you have just pronounced, we have concluded our friendly dinner, and it is to business that we turn. I take it, therefore, that we are no longer here in the capacity of hosts and guests."

particular point, for heaven knows that "True," said I. his talk was sufficiently frank upon "Then," he exclaimed triumphantly, other topics. As I had occasion to take "Hood. I take it, is no longer a servnote now and subsequently, the man ant?"

"Captain Sercombe is right," said er, and, although he had every preju-Sheppard promptly, turning to me, dice against him, and started, so to "and, by your leave, Ned, I will ring speak, with a great handicap, he soon and have him up.' wore down the feelings with which we embarked upon the entertainment. "Let us have him up, certainly." And it was not until we had broached

"I accept your theory," I answered. Sheppard rose and when the man returned ushered him with some ceremony to the table. "A chair for Mr. Hood," he said. "Where will you sit, Mr. Hood-by the captain? That's right. Please make yourself comfortable. We have just enjoyed an excellent dinner very well served, Mr. Hood, but I fear you are too late. Montgomery, a glass of wine for Mr. Hood. Business is business, and I never conduct a piece without the usual sherry." If this elaborate irony disturbed Ser-

combe, as it seemed to do, it had no effect upon Hood. "Thank you, sir. I will stand, sir. No wine, thank you, sir." Such was his brief reception of the courtesies.

He assumed a place at the back of the captain, commanding a view of the Sercombe spread his hands uptable. "Gentlemen, let us show our cards,"

There was a momentary silence, and then I was conscious of a slight bustle of excitement that stirred the room into sound. Sheppard looked at me, and Montgomery's gaze was riveted upon the captain. Sheppard coughed gently and sipped his wine.

"That is a very proper demand, Captain Sercombe," I said, "seeing that it is what we are here for, but I hardly yet see my way clear to table all my tricks. Let us understand one another

"Captain Sercombe," I cried sharply, breaking upon the tail of Sheppard's The captain did not color, as he yarn, "these communications are not might well have colored under this implicit distrust. As I have said, he was The captain started, and his face redsingular in the partial hold he kept dened deeper, but he was always a upon his gentility. Instead he laughed, but somewhat awkwardly.

"I must ask you to remember, Mr. "I see," he answered and looked Greatorex," said he suavely, "that I down at his hands, appearing to consider. He lifted a big and somewhat "That is true," said Sheppard, nodclumsy hand and scratched his swollen cheek, smoothing a long wisp of red hair across his naked crown. "I cannot pretend to misunderstand you," he "I think, sir," said he, "that in the declared at last and shot a glance circumstances you will see that you aside at Hood, who had fallen slightly have overstepped the privileges of genaway from the table and stood intently watching the scene. "But I "The word is hardly in the case. I think it 's somewhat unnecessary, Mr. think we are agreed that it is as thieves Greatores,' he said, again very awkwe meet," interjected Sheppard smoothwardly, and he laughed shortly, and again his eyes flew to Hood, directing at him, as it seemed to me in that

> light, a glance of warning, of appeal, "No doubt," said I in return, "but you must remember that I have already had experience of your possibilities. But come; we shall get no further unless we can strike a compro mise. If you will produce your frag-

> ment of the document"-"You assume that I have it," he broke in, with his discordant laugh, "You are taking a good deal for granted." "I assume nothing," said I. "Do not let us bandy words.'

regret this, as I conceived that we had perhaps reached the proper term of our familiarity with Sercombe. It was Sercombe lifted the decanter which strange to see the instant revolution in stood at his elbow and filled his glass our mutual attitudes. Whether Serwith a hand that shook. He drained combe himself had been as easy as he | it at a draft and turned to Hood. The not say, but it is certain that now he | Sercombe put the torn fragment upon was charged with anxiety. Now and | the table before him. He looked at again his eyes, puffed and bloodshot, me, as if inviting me to a similar demflickered uneasily on Hood, where the onstration. We were to proceed by man stood in his corner, a memorial of

"I have no evidence that this is the document," I objected. "Nor I, in your case," he retorted.

"Very well," I assented. "We will

formally, "I fancy our dinner, such as take it point by point, but I fear we it is, is over, and if you will take no shall find it a tedious job." I drew the paper from my pocket and laid it before me. At the other end of "Certainly, sir," said the captain the table I could see Sercombe's green cheerfully and draining his glass. "I. eyes bulging in his head as they fastened upon the white thing under my hand. His mouth dropped, and a portion of the glow receded from his face. Montgomery stared. A tense feeling A quick exchange of glances took stiffened the attention of all. I felt my heart throb in the silence, and then suddenly there was a sharp exclamation from Sheppard, and the next moment I was conscious of a clatter and two figures struggling beside me. The visibly disconcerted. "I beg your par- affair lasted but a few seconds, and then Hood was hurled deftly back mer, "but I have already had the honor against the window, and Sheppard

flung upon the floor with a crash a long Spanish dagger. A hush fell on the room. Sercombe not think we can invite our servants to turned pale, and his eyes shifted uneasily. Had it been murder that was intended? If so, I could have sworn glance at Hood, who still kept his attithat Sercombe was no party to it. "It appears that we can't do quite without the law," said Sheppard, placing his heel upon the weapon. Hood,

breathing deeply, remained in the shadows of the window. "What does this mean?" I asked. Hood, black and lean, but immovable evident that he was chagrined by his as to feature, stepped from his corner. "I beg your pardon, sir," he explained, "but I suppose the gentleman objects be no objection. Mr. Greatorex, sir, more especially as the gentleman here Montgomery, who grew red and stam-

"I beg your pardon. Awfully sorry. with you. These things are better I-I-here it is," and extracting a Colt

Sheppard and I exchanged glances. "Come, sir," said Sercombe's voice, rising in an imperative key, "but this remarkable scene requires an explanation. Why may not Mr. what weapon he likes?"

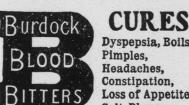
"Was there anything?" I asked of Sheppard in a whisper. He frowned in embarrassment. "To have waited for anything would have been too late," he answered in the same tone. "I had to forestall. I guessed, but I'll swear I guessed right. I can't prove it. I caught the gleam." Then he turned quickly, from me and picking up the dagger offered it to Hood. "I am sorry for this misunderstanding, Mr. Hood," he said sweetly. "If I had stopped to think I should have known that a man like yourself would only carry a weapon for some good purpose. But I am a creature of impulse, full of mistakes, but of a warm heart below all, and I offer you the dagger back in token of my trust in you," with which he sat himself down in his seat and ostentatiously

played with Montgomery's revolver for the rest of the interview. "Come, come. That is well said and well ended," said the captain genially, and he was evidently very much relieved at the conclusion of this scene. 'And now, Mr. Greatorex, and to show that it is not both sides that are so unnecessarily suspicious, if you will be so good as to take this paper from me I will trust you to read out the whole

document." This proposal, coming on the top of what had happened between us, astounded us all, as you may suppose. But Sercombe was rarely at a loss for some amazing movement, and he knew well enough that he was perfectly safe with me, whereas he was also aware that I knew I was absolutely unsafe with him. Therefore he assumed a golden air of courtesy and lofty faith, as between gentlemen. But these reflections are not to the point, for there was I, with the two parts of the precious document in my hands and four pairs of bright eyes burning upon my face with their eager interrogation. You may conjecture my emotions and the way my pulse ran. I spread the paper I had received from Sercombe apon the other, smoothed it with the back of a knife and, forthwith deciphering the following composition, read it slowly aloud to the company:

(To be continued.)

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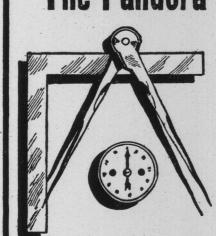
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