

THE HEAD OF MY PROFESSION.

IN TWO CHAPTERS.

CHAPTER II.

AT Brussels, the game began. There were hundreds of wealthy Englishmen there, and there were the usual number of sharks of all nations assembled to prey upon them. I was well received, and was, I believe, set down in many a private memorandum as a pigeon easy to be plucked. Crannel managed his affairs with consummate address. He gave the signal for me to lose almost constantly, day after day, even when I knew that he had heavy bets depending on my play, and though he had to pay my own losses as well as his. I could not understand it, and one night, after a repetition of the enigma, begged an explanation. He then informed me that the supposed losses he had endured were to confederates—the real ones being my own small stakes—and that I should see the result of this policy very soon. He was right in his prophecy. The confederates, who seemed to have won so much, excited the cupidity of others, and they having staked large sums, the signals suddenly changed, and I had to win. By what appeared the wildest and most furious play, I won game after game, which the most suspicious could only attribute to accident or the most unheard-of luck. The losers doubled their stakes, and lost again—and now, in lieu of the feigned thousands lost, the solid thousands poured in. So artfully did my patron control his greed, resigning even large sums when it was policy to do so, that no symptom of mistrust appeared; and for several weeks he went on reaping the golden harvest.

Suddenly, he announced his intention of starting for Berlin, and requested me to give my valet the necessary orders, to call in my accounts and settle them, for we should depart in twenty-four hours. I could not understand the reason, as he had certainly netted some thousands where we were, and might easily have doubled his gains. I was unwilling to move further, for I had formed some most agreeable acquaintances, and was already beginning to feel so much at home in the character I personated, as to forget the realities of my lot. I told him what were my feelings. 'That,' said he coolly, 'is the reason why we quit. Had you kept yourself more aloof, and formed no such close intimacies, we might have done well here for another month; but you have forgotten yourself, and imagine that you are something besides my servant.'

It was true—I had forgotten, and the reproof was just; but I hated him for making it, and was profoundly indignant at seeing that, spite of the gains I had brought him, he regarded me as a mere tool. I held my peace, however, complied with his orders, and the next day was on the road to Berlin, whither he followed me in a few days.

At Berlin, my valet, who was a creature of Crannel's, engaged a suite of apartments under the Lindens, where we awaited his coming. He came in due course, and the game was renewed under similar circumstances, and resulting in similar gains to my proprietor. We stayed in the Prussian capital over two months, during which time I was received in the best society, where, however, I could no longer feel at home, from the consciousness that I was debarr'd from private friendships. Here my first quarter's salary became due, and Crannel paid me the L.75, in terms of the contract, taking a receipt for the same. It may seem odd to the reader, who knows that a few months before I was contentedly working for journeyman's wages, that I felt intensely dissatisfied with my pay; but he who knows anything of the phenomena of a gambler's mind will readily believe that such was the case. In truth, I looked upon Crannel as a plundering scoundrel who had entrapped me in his meshes, and was robbing me wholesale of the fruits of my own talents. I conceived that I had at least an equal right with himself to my winnings—and I began daily to hate the sight of his long, stolid visage, and the piercing eye, from whose glance I could never be rid.

I need not recount the history of our wanderings and our well-timed visits to the various gambling centres of the European kingdoms. Be it enough to say that I was the tool of this Old Man of the Mountain for two years, during which time he had made large periodical remittances to his London banker. At the end of that period we sailed from Naples for Marseilles, and entered France.

Though Crannel must, almost from the commencement of our connection, have been quite aware of my feelings regarding him, he had never thought fit to manifest any consciousness that such was the case. He had scrupulously performed his part of the contract—paying my salary to the day, and defraying all the expenses of the expedition. On my part, I had given him no cause of complaint, feeling too well that I was in his power; but that I thoroughly hated and detested him, he knew as well as possible. Perhaps it was with some idea of appeasing my hatred that he informed me, as we were approaching the French capital, that it was his intention to double my salary this third year, if I answered his expectations.

'And what are they?' I asked curtly. 'Increased caution and self-restraint,' he said. 'Paris is the grand field of operations.

I should have taken you there at once, had you been seven years older; the two years' experience you have had elsewhere should have taught you the value of reserve. If you have learned that we shall do well; if not, we shall be soon blown, and success will be doubtful.'

I knew what he meant, and for my own sake, I treasured the hint, though I made some ungracious reply.

At Paris, my valet, according to his instructions, took apartments in the Champs Elysées, and hired me a handsome brougham. Instead of first frequenting the gambling-rooms, I allowed myself to be enticed thither by others. I pretended to know only the English game, and for some time would play no other. Then I grew fanatic for the French game, and learned that, and played it with all the airs of a novice, losing generally, and winning by accident when my patron gave the signal. He had now several confederates, his creatures, who played into his hands, and shared his gains, which at times were beyond all former precedent. When my salary became due, he doubled it according to his promise, without any expression of gratitude on my part, and the absence of which did not appear to surprise him in the least.

The position I had assumed in Paris enabled me to keep aloof from the gambling crowd, and materially helped him in carrying out his plans. An act of imprudence of mine, however, at this time, almost defeated them, and altered the complexion of his schemes.

One morning, while lounging along the Boulevards, and peering into the shops for some new fashions—I had become an arrant fop by this time—I stumbled suddenly upon my old Bath friend and quondam schoolfellow, Ned B—. He was overjoyed beyond expression to see me, and, as it very soon appeared, not without reason. I saw, the moment our greeting was over, that he was striving with the blue-devils, and getting the worst of the strife, and I naturally inquired what was the nature of his grievance.

He replied with a groan and an ejaculation of thankfulness at having fallen in with me. Then seizing me by the arm, he lugged me off into a private room of a neighbouring *estaminet*, and, bolting the door, began his tale of woe. The burden of the whole was, that he had fallen into the hands of a cunning professor of our common craft, whom he had mistaken for a pigeon, and who, according to the stereotyped system, had led him on by first allowing him to win—had turned the tables on him at the critical moment, and had on the night last past plundered him to the tune of four hundred sterling, promising him his revenge at the next meeting. B—'s eyes were opened now that it was too late, and his money nearly all gone. He saw his master in the wily Austrian, and was convinced that if he played again, it would be but to increase his losses. He was at his wits' end when he met me. I was the only man who could help him. Would I take his place that night—engage the Austrian, and win back the money?

I professed my readiness to do what I could, but I doubted whether his antagonist would be willing to play with a stranger for such sums as B— had lost.

'There is no fear of that,' said B—; 'we can lead him into it easy enough. Will you come?'

I could not refuse, and therefore I despatched a note to Crannel, informing him that I had met an old friend, and should not be home till late. Early in the evening, B— drove me across the water to an establishment near the Palais du Luxembourg, where we were admitted to a private room, and commenced playing together. At the hour appointed, the Austrian came in and took his seat. He was a young fellow about my own age, and not likely soon to penetrate the artifices in which I was now such an adept. Having lost a couple of games to B—, I handed him a note in payment, and declined playing again, on the ground that he was too strong for me; adding, that I would try a game or two with the stranger, if agreeable. The Austrian rose and expressed his willingness, if B— would defer their engagement for a while. This was, of course, arranged, and we began to play. We began at eight in the evening, and left off about dawn: we began playing the silliest game imaginable on both sides, and left off like finished masters of the science, skilled in all the difficult refinements of which it is susceptible. I knew, before I had played an hour, the whole strength of my adversary, while he remained ignorant of mine almost to the close of the match. It was not till my friend had won back all his money, that I began to throw off my disguise. I then piqued my adversary by criticising his play, and so soured his temper, that he played worse. When all was over, he was cleaned out to the last franc, and B— and I had a thousand francs each of clear gain. We parted in the glimmer of the morning, B— giving him his card, and offering him his revenge whenever he chose to claim it.

When I reached home, I found Crannel there awaiting me. I saw that he was in a savage mood; and to irritate him still further, I made a boast of what I had been about. His mortification was evidently extreme; but he only bit his lips, and said little. As he

doubtless foresaw, my exploit got wind, and the result was, that ere long my assumed disguise peeled off of itself, and I was known, in the gaming circles at least, for what I was. Crannel, of course, had to alter his policy, and content himself with the new state of things. Still, as his fiat determined every game I played, his gains were very considerable. For my part, I liked my new position far better; and for the first time, really enjoyed the excitements of a gambler's life. I was now backed against the first players in Paris; and when the signal was to win, I did so in such brilliant style, that my renown soon spread abroad, and I became the wonder of the gambling circles.

About the middle of August, there arose a rumour of a new star in the billiard world. This was a young Russian, who was said to have reaped the highest honours in St. Petersburg, and to have beaten every opponent who had ventured to meet him. As usual, the most exaggerated reports were circulated regarding him; and he must have been a magician, working by enchantments, if half that was said were true. It was inevitable that I should be pitted against him. Everybody talked of this consummation, and was eager to bring it about. Crannel did not start any objection; and my admirers making up a considerable purse, the affair was decided on. The match was to come off in the Palais Royal by daylight, on the Sunday. I had never seen my opponent up to the hour of our meeting; and when, with Crannel, who had betted literally on my side, I repaired to the spot, what was my astonishment in recognising in the renowned Russian my once shirtless antagonist, Pat Meagher, whom, as a lad, I had defeated at Bath. It is true he looked the Russian well in a pair of dark whiskers, and a Cossack moustache; and he talked Russ most glibly with a friend who accompanied him. Still, there was the unmistakable Irish face, and the undeniable brogue flavoured his Slavonic speech. I was glad to see that he did not recognise me; but I was determined to seek him out and have a private conference, if possible. In stripping for the match, after we had shaken hands, he dropped a card from his vest-pocket; in a moment, I had secreted it unobserved, and the contest began.

But for my previous knowledge of Meagher's play, and the points in which his strength lay, I might probably have been beaten, and that summarily. As it was, the contest was a succession of wary sparrings, in which nothing brilliant was either done or attempted. Had a drawn match been possible in billiards, this would have been drawn. It ended in my winning, through the failure of an almost impossible stroke which, at the last crisis, my adversary was compelled to attempt, and which left the game in my hands.

I was immensely pleased with this victory, on more accounts than one. I had not only gained reputation, but I had convinced myself that the quasi Russian was incapable, in the long-run, of holding his own against me. I had drawn him out, and taken his measure, and felt myself his master. Crannel, who never missed anything, had seen as much, and would doubtless make good capital of his discernment; while, on the other hand, the partisans of the Russian were confident in his superior play, which, they swore, an accident only had defeated.

The morning after the match, I rose early, and drove in a *fiacre* to the address on Meagher's card, which bore the inscription, 'Ivan Mearovitz, Hôtel de la Paix, Rue Richelieu.' It was one of those grim old hotels where you knock, and are let in by an invisible porter. A voice directed me to the second door 'au quatrième'; and on sounding it with my knuckles, Pat, who was in bed, bawled out 'Entrez,' and I walked in. He was flustered at seeing me, and began stuttering apologies in three languages at once.

'Is it possible,' I said, 'that you did not know me yesterday, Pat?'

'Bedad,' said he, 'it must be possible, I reckon, for I don't know you now for anything but the man that bate me yesterday.'

'Don't you recollect me at Bath five years ago?'

'Whew! botheration—if I hadn't a pre-squintment of something of the kind, I'm a Dutchman. That accounts for the milk in the cocoa-nuts. Oh, be the Vargin, but it's meself that's glad to see ye anyhow.'

'Well, and what have you been doing these years?'

'Och! won't I tell you all about it? But not here, not here, my friend. Faith, the divole incarnate 'll be here in a jiffy, and he mustn't see you. Do ye see that windy yander wid the green venaytians?' and Pat, rising from his bed, pointed across the court.

'I see it—what then?'

'Cross the court, mount the tother stairs, and go into No. 15 on the third floor. I'll be wid ye in a twinklin.'

I did as he requested, feeling assured, from his eagerness and excitement, that some interesting revelation awaited me. In less than ten minutes he made his appearance in an old dressing-gown, and having bolted the door of the closet, which was but a receptacle for lumber, seated himself on a box, and commenced a rather remarkable monologue. I shall not give it in detail, out of consideration

for the reader's patience. The gist of it may be briefly extracted, and was to the following effect: Like myself, Pat Meagher had been picked up by a speculating patron, and carried off to St. Petersburg, where, according to his own account, he had won a mint of money for his owner, receiving but a miserable stipend for himself, and ungentlemanly treatment into the bargain. His tyrant was one Mortier, a cashiered French officer. Meagher assured me that he had won for him a hundred thousand rubles in St. Petersburg, and as much more at Moscow—the villain coolly bagging the whole. Pat's hatred to the man was almost demoniac; and he seemed possessed with the idea that he should be driven to murder him before their contract was expired, and which had yet two years to run. My affection for Crannel, as the reader knows, was somewhat of the same stamp; and by way of consoling each other, we mutually anathematised the villains who had us in their grasp.

But Meagher was not content with cursing his enemy; he had a plan which he had long been revolving in his mind, and which his encounter with me would enable him to carry out; he proposed at once, and with an almost savage vehemence, that we should turn the tables upon our tyrants, and, as they had so long done by us, enrich ourselves at their expense. The thing could be easily done; we had only to get a clever confederate of our own, and then, disregarding the private signals of our patrons, sell them at the best price we could, by winning or losing to suit our own interests. The scheme struck me as excellent, as well from its simplicity as from the retributive justice it involved, and I agreed to it eagerly and at once.

'Then be here to-morrow,' said Pat, 'by seven in the morning; by that time, I shall have seen the right man, and, bedad, we'll work the oracle in future on our own account.'

Soon after seven next morning, Meagher and I were fleeing along the road to St. Cloud, to the residence of M. Florian, who had entered into the scheme, and with whom we were to concert measures for putting it into execution. M. Florian was a model dandy of that era—of graceful figure, exquisite manners, and fine accomplishments—musician, artist, linguist, and gambler, the idol of the sex, and the most careless, agreeable, and good-humoured rattle-brain in the world. He received us in an elegant saloon, hung with the masterly productions of his own pencil, sang us an operatic air to his own accompaniment, arranged our little plan on the simplest grounds and the most liberal terms, gave us his note of hand for a round sum to fall due in a few weeks, ordered up a grand *déjeuner*, and, that discussed, drove us as far back as Autheil in his own carriage.

The reader may perhaps suspect that M. Florian was little to be relied on; if so, he is mistaken. The honour that exists among them!—among gentlemen of certain pursuits, is as spotless as the snow, and is rarely violated. Pending the whole duration of our threefold contract, Florian behaved with the rectitude of a judge in ermine, and the precision of a banker.

Affairs now began to take a different course. The great billiard contest between the Russian and the Englishman was renewed almost nightly in the presence of the first amateurs of the capital. Agreeably to our plan, we both of us ignored the signals of our patrons whenever Florian gave any signal of his own, and thus turned the whole current of success into his treasury. Meanwhile, Florian played his game so adroitly, that he was rarely seen to win more than a trifle, and was seen as often to lose. This state of affairs had not continued long before Crannel began to look daggers at me whenever we met in private; and at length, not being able to refrain any longer, taxed me with treachery. I denied the charge, and insisted that he should pit me against some other antagonist; I could not be sure of the Russian, who was always developing new strength. My patron was evidently perplexed, and for a time he refrained from betting, but watched me, as I was well aware, all the closer. I had reason to suspect, moreover, that he had set spies upon my path when I went abroad, though what was the extent of his discoveries I never knew.

I saw Meagher but rarely in private, and then only at the hours before the dawn, when I could steal away from the observation of my prying valet, whose grog I had to dose more than once in order to prevent his watchfulness. Our schemes answered famously. We had divided five thousand pounds with Florian in three months, and vastly to the delight of Pat, most of it had come out of Mortier's pocket—and we were at last on the road to fortune. I am of opinion that if Crannel had not by this time some certain knowledge of our secret confederacy, he had at least so far verified his suspicions as to feel conscious that the contract by which he nominally retained my services was no longer of any advantage to him. But this double game was fast approaching to its end.

One night, Meagher's patron, Mortier, who came to the café where we played with the scowl of a fiend on his brow, and in a state of furious excitement, as was always the case