

fighter though he had proved himself, no one believed he could measure himself against the incomparable Belcher. To nominate and back him were frank audacities. The company knew their fighting-men to an ounce. Bill Richmond in a fit of drunken frenzy laughed aloud, while Gibbons, suddenly grave, looked at Sir John. Yet every man there also knew Colonel Darleigh. He was no madman; he did not make rash bets, and when he gambled, he played to win. Absurd as his challenge sounded, he was not fool enough to risk his money on sentimental matches, or to waste it on financing forlorn hopes.

Eyes turned from Firby, somewhat conscious, to Sir John Dering. He sat gravely employed in twisting a sheet of paper into a pipe-light, and now and again his fine white fingers drummed on the table. He was thinking rapidly and coolly, though the wine was in his blood. The mocking face of Darleigh challenged him across the table. There was something uncanny about the wild proposal. Belcher could eat Firby, and was at that moment fit to fight for his life and his patron's fortune. Yet, the very audacity of the challenge thrown out by a veiled enemy made him hesitate. If Belcher had been there, he would have decided in a fraction of a second. That Belcher was not there, though he had been asked and expected, was not surprising, but, in view of the development of events, suspicious. Was Darleigh counting on Belcher refusing to fight? If he took up his opponent's challenge, he relied absolutely on Belcher taking his corner. He knew no other man good enough for Firby, nor did he feel capable of finding one in a month.