



THE BLUE  
BIRD'S-EYE

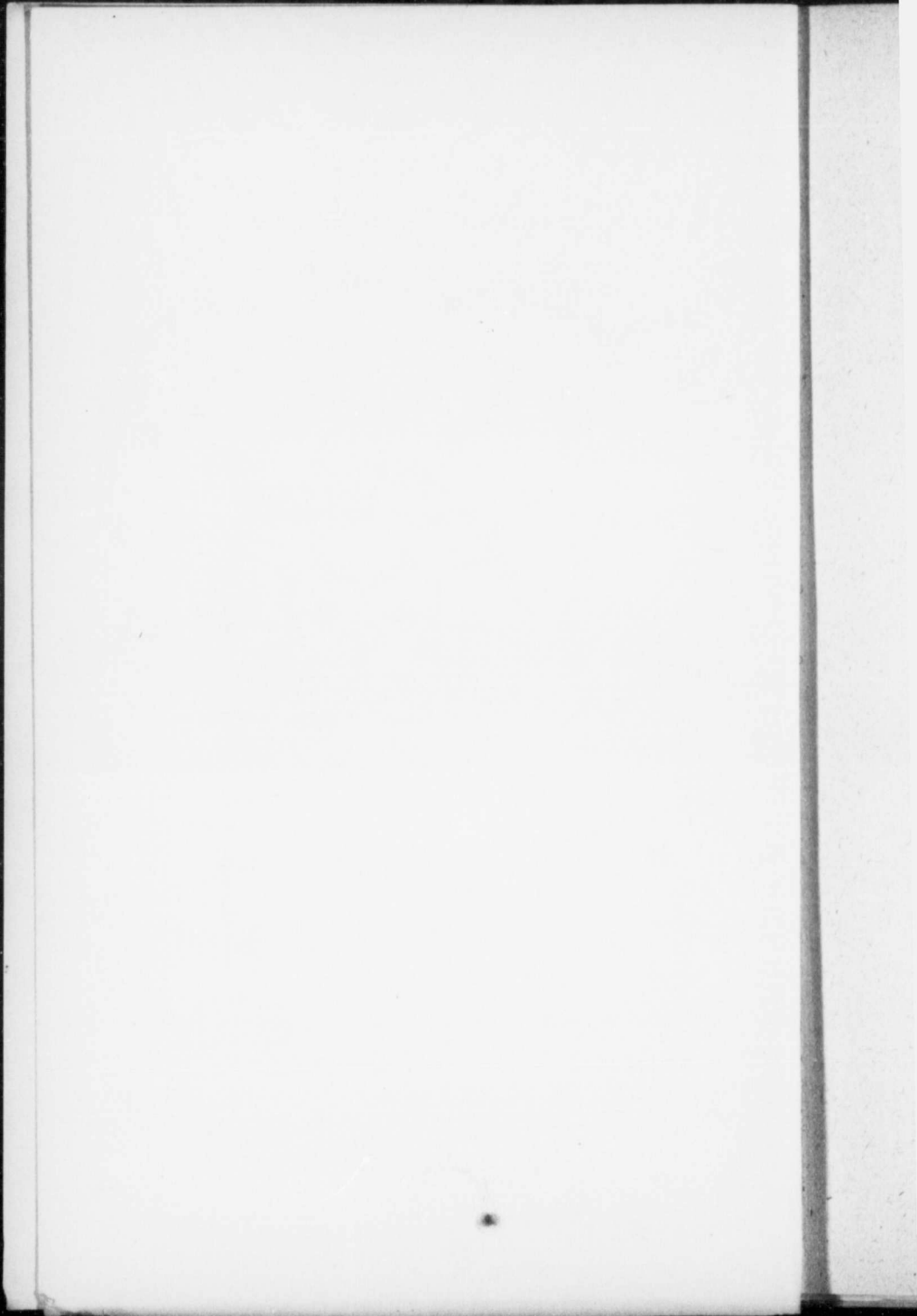


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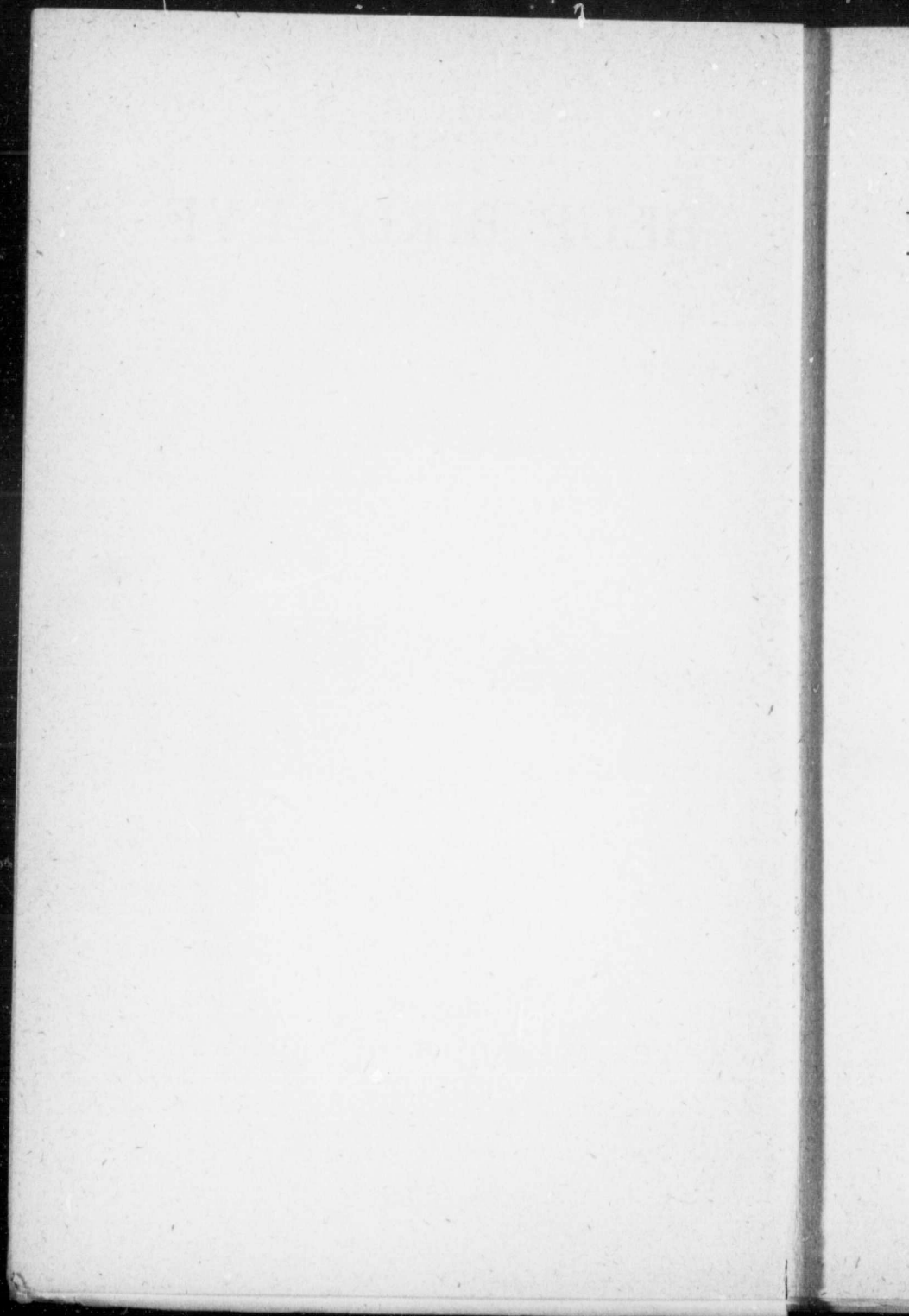
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THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE



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BLUE BIRD'S-EYE**

BY  
**GEORGE EDGAR**

TORONTO  
**THE MUSSON BOOK COMPANY  
LIMITED**

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# THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE

## CHAPTER I

IF you had stepped into the One Tun Inn, on the 5th of April, 1803, you would have found that hostelry seething with great excitement. The One Tun Inn itself has long ceased to serve as a London landmark, or as a rendezvous for the sports and bloods who ruffled it with the best of them in the Haymarket. The old house stood on the site which the Criterion now occupies, and was not quite so handsome a place as the restaurant which decorates our Piccadilly Circus of to-day. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, our forefathers had not found the need of restaurants with pink lampshades, velvet pile carpets, French cuisine and foreign waiters. They did not dine off many courses to the music of a band of hired musicians. Your man of fashion got along in a far simpler manner. As a matter of fact, he did himself passing well, in a dingy coffee-room, taking his cut from the joint, dissecting a porter-house steak or toying with grilled or devilled bones; nor was he above washing his plain fare down with a pint or two of beer. In the evening, he did not need a padded arm-chair in a reposeful modern club. He sat in the smoke-rooms of the West End licensed houses with his boon com-



panions about him, and drank his brandy cold in summer, hot in winter, or mixed up favourite toddies with the cunning of an artist at the punch-bowl. Truth to tell, the man of fashion was not quite so refined or polished as is the wearer of his mantle to-day; not nearly so aloof from the common interests in life; not half so prone to pretty speeches or ways, and rather given to the simpler delights of loving his pipe and glass, his friends of the same kidney, his horses, pet fighting-men and dogs. He was a different man of a tougher fibre; he lived a harder life, and took fiercer hazards almost every hour of his day. Best of all, he loved a fight, whether he took part in it with the rabble of the streets, at midnight, or looked on, as a polished Corinthian sportsman and backer, the while his nominee whipped his adversary to a standstill within the ropes of a crowded arena.

The One Tun Inn was a small, rambling tavern, dimly lit with candles and lamps. Its rooms were irregular and low, and the old house rambled in a perfectly hopeless manner. Stumbling from the darkness outside into the feeble light within, one found an entrance-hall leading to a square bar, fenced in by the old-fashioned glass partitions. Through the bar was a snuggerly; on the right of the passage was a tap-room; to the rear was a bigger room used for dining purposes. The public rooms were plainly furnished, with oaken seats running round each apartment; there were a few plain tables and chairs and a rack or two for pipes, while a liberal supply of sawdust and spittoons covered the bare boards of the floor.

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On this particular night, old Will Warr, the landlord, stood in the passage for a moment and rubbed his hands. A crony who passed into his smoke-room stopped to greet the old hero of the prize ring, now turned into a plump and prosperous Boniface. He wanted to talk of a nobby dog he had just seen killing rats at Westminster.

Warr waved his hand to check the flow of talk.

"Later on," he said; "later on. The 'One Tun' is busy to-night." He rubbed his red face with his apron. "The 'One Tun' is dining the finest collection of sporting swells in England, and it's all hands to the pump."

With a twinkle in his eye, the old landlord, his battered face red with exertion, bustled amongst the waiters in the passage, and egged them on to efforts of quicker attention. As they rushed in and out of the public rooms at the end of the passage, from the open door came the sound of men talking loudly, the clatter of plates, the smell of cooking, and now and again a burst of strident laughter. Occasionally there was to be heard the crash of a falling mug, while ever there mingled with the noise the voice of a half-drunken man trolling one of the street catches of the year.

The curious feature about the house was that amid all the noise and revelry each room seemed preoccupied with a common subject. Every voice that spoke scarcely used half a dozen words without introducing the word "fight." The word was mumbled, shouted, or whispered, but it was always there. It seemed to linger in the very air. The lights, catching the prints of battered old-time

bruisers, hung upon the walls, winked out the word fight; the tradesmen, nodding meaningly over their gin, in the snugger, repeated the word; the noisier men of the streets, in the tap-room, shouted the word "fight" aloud; the potmen and waiters, scurrying along the passages, stopped, until Will Warr caught them lingering, to whisper of the fight to each other, and to the shabbier loungers in the hall.

In the dining-room, behind the closed doors, a party of forty men were finishing dinner. The cloths were being removed: candles, pipe-lights, and churchwardens were placed on the tables; wine was passing round freely, and the waiters were bringing in spirits and fresh bottles. All were talking loudly, and the word that dominated the meeting was the stormy one used so frequently in the turbulent conversation outside.

A strange company, you would say—and so it was. Through the haze of tobacco an observer might have noted that of the forty or more faces more than half of them were distinctly aristocratic, long lean faces, clean-shaven, with imperious noses and bold, challenging eyes. They were the faces of men of the world; men who were expensively dressed and groomed and quaint perhaps to our eyes in their spotlessly white cravats and coats of many colours, some of these last having gilt or jewelled buttons, and all being elaborately turned back at the collar and lapels, as was the sartorial habit of the period. But a smaller proportion of the men were of a different type. Making some pretence to fashion, they were dressed in a flashier, rougher

mode. Their heads were round and close-cropped. Their noses showed a tendency to depart from the lines along which Nature had moulded them. Some had puffed ears, others had the marks of old scars, showing vividly against the dull red of their inflamed faces. There was a bull-dog look about the set of their eyes and mouths, and they carried the expression of that animal to the point of seeming to convey, even under restraint, a lust for battle which was only curbed by the leash.

Imagine these men: gentlemen, many slightly discovering signs of indulgence, but preserving the effects of breeding in the manner of their address; pugilists, some sullenly ill at ease, and others genial and inclined to make too free with the guests at the table—all boisterous, a few a trifle tipsy and tending to the uproarious, noisily calling to each other across the table.

"Some of the best in London—the real thing," old Will Warr kept whispering to his intimates, as he passed in and out of the room to the bar to keep an eye on his waiters and serving wenches. And so they were.

In the chair was Mr. Fletcher Reid, a man of means, a stout, ruddy-faced gentleman, a brewer, and host of the evening. He had that afternoon wagered two hundred guineas that Bill Richmond, the black pugilist, would run from St. James's market to Chalk Farm in an hour, and had won. Richmond, with forty guineas in his pocket, and looking as pleased as his ugly face would permit him, sat low down at the table, and had evidently eaten and drunk as determinedly as he had run during the

afternoon. Next to the chairman, on the right, was Sir John Dering, a well-known gentleman of fashion. He was a well-preserved man of forty-five, or even more, who filled the eye of the popular imagination. He wore exquisite clothes, rode the best of horses seen in the park, drove his coach regularly to the races, would gamble on anything that lived and showed sport, and was reputed to have almost scattered his ample possessions at the card-table. Opposite to him was Colonel Darleigh, a retired army officer of a different type. He was a dark man of somewhat forbidding habit of mind. He played the game of life cautiously, and rumour had it was devilishly lucky at cards. He made his bets carefully, and more often won than lost. While ostensibly friends, Sir John and Colonel Darleigh were rivals in almost everything. They had been rivals at school, and Dering had won. They were rivals in social life, and again Dering won almost all along the line. They were rivals in sport, betting their horses and fighting-men against each other, and sitting long nights at cards, playing out the old duel, while other men looked on and gasped at the sums changing hands. The difference between the two was that Sir John Dering's breezy, buoyant personality made him popular wherever he went. On the contrary, Colonel Darleigh was not quite so popular; some men disliked him, a few whispered ugly things, and he had more than once defended his honour at the point of the sword when these sinister things had been spoken aloud.

Of the company of Corinthian sportsmen assembled, one might have also recognised the Honour-

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able Lumley Savage, who had just paid Mr. Johnson one thousand guineas for Solomon, and was the talk of the racing world; the Hon. Cavendish Bragshaw, a rattle of a sportsman, a notoriously fine swordsman, and a source of gossip in the boudoirs of the West End; Sir Harry Fane Tempest, a man of fashion, a friend of princes, a wonderful judge of a horse or a pretty face. There might have been a dozen more, men of the town and the sporting world, including perhaps the most notorious hero of the ring, Gentleman Jackson, who was negotiator-in-chief for both sides concerned with the sport of pugilism, the nobility who supported the ring with their money, and the men who fought for it. Starting life as a fighter, after beating the Jew, Mendoza, he had become first a tutor of boxing and then finally mentor and arbiter of the sport, and the confidential henchman of its most influential supporters.

Of the fighting-men present, little need now be said—many have their parts in this story. There was Paddington Jones, who lost to Belcher, a fine, upstanding man with a frank and open face and a jovial disposition. Next to him was Bill Richmond, the black, an astounding figure, in a purple coat and a waistcoat of yellow and black stripes. His ugly black face looked evil in the flickering lights; he was much the worse for drink, and was talking fiercely and noisily of his walking triumphs during the afternoon. Near the black sat the bishop of the ring, corpulent Bill Gibbons, a droll figure with a heavy jowl and a series of double chins, about which hovered a perpetual smile. Bill was the spoilt child of the fancy, and an audience was ever ready

to wait on his drolleries. He pitched the rings when his fighting days were over, and advised the nobility on all their sports, racing, fighting and cocking. He was talking to one other, a good-humoured fighting-man named Firby. Known as the Young Ruffian, the winner of many matches, Colonel Darleigh, his patron, made no secret of the fact that he believed his man improved enough to beat Belcher himself.

The cloth had long been removed. The air in the room was thick with tobacco smoke and the fumes of drink. Song followed song, and the company roared the choruses. Bill Gibbons told tales of the lights of other days. Outside, the company in the "One Tun" talked on and on, and always in their speech was the sinister word "fight." The atmosphere grew more electric as the night progressed: Richmond became more quarrelsome in his cups, and had to be repeatedly thrust back in his seat by Bill Warr and Paddington Jones; there were other signs of disorder in the room. Fletcher Reid, looking at his watch almost impatiently, stood up in the hubbub as the clock in the hall pointed to twelve o'clock.

At once there was silence.

"Gentlemen," he said, "we've had a merry evening, and some of us will be better for taking the air. One or two of our Corinthian guests have other engagements and desire to get on, but before they go Colonel Darleigh wishes to make an announcement."

Anyone hearing the noise and uproar of the minutes before would have been surprised at the tense silence which fell upon the company. Even

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Bill Richmond, who had been screaming aloud his desire to fight anyone in the room, and "Jem Belcher himself, if he was here," sullenly pulled himself together and sat, a figure of motionless ebony, his dull, intoxicated eyes fixed upon the chair. The moment of the meeting had come for which all the men seated round that table were waiting—for which the rougher, noisier company in the rooms outside were waiting too.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman, breaking the tense silence, "I give you the last toast. It is the good old toast—to the next fight—and may the best man win."

"And may the best man win." In a sudden gust of noisy merriment the toast was honoured and the ruling spirit of the ring, embodied in the phrase, passed from mouth to mouth.

"Who's the next bit of stuff?" roared Richmond, his voice sounding above the cheers that greeted the toast. "Am I'm it—eh? And, if I'm not, I'll fight either one of 'em, or both, here and now."

The chairman looked at him angrily.

Jackson caught the big black by the collar.

"Sit down, you dog, and hold your trap," he shouted, an ugly glint in his fearless blue eyes. "Remember where you are."

For the moment, Richmond was cowed into silence.

"Colonel Darleigh will make a statement which should interest us all," said the chairman, knocking on the table with a candle-trimmer.

Colonel Darleigh slowly rose from his seat. As he did so, his dour glance swept round the room—



one might have thought uneasily. It lingered on his man, Firby, for an instant, wavered for a moment as it met the steady gaze of Sir John Dering, and then came to a stop as he fronted the chairman.

"I have an old-standing promise from Sir John Dering that he will match Jem Belcher, or another, with any man I can find for two hundred guineas a side."

Colonel Darleigh looked with a questioning eye towards Sir John Dering, who bit his lip as if momentarily embarrassed, but gravely inclined his head in assent.

"I desire to take advantage of that promise now," Colonel Darleigh went on, speaking slowly. "I am prepared to stand on Firby as my man, and he is willing."

Firby grinned appreciatively.

"The terms of the match are that it shall be for two hundred a side within one month from now. The man who does not put his nominee in the ring by twelve noon, forfeits the stake. If Sir John Dering does not put up Belcher, the name of the second man must be declared within seven days. I am open to back Firby, taking slight odds, to any amount Sir John may choose to name, on the terms governing the stake as to forfeit. I trust I make my offer clear," he added, with a calmness somewhat over-accentuated.

Colonel Darleigh dropped quietly into his chair.

Immediately a roar of talk burst like a pent-up torrent, and every man seemed desirous of speaking at once. To all in that room the challenge was extraordinary. Eyes turned to Firby. First-class

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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.

As if his thoughts were in the minds of half the men in the room, Cavendish Bragshaw and Savage shouted almost simultaneously, "Where is Belcher?"

The question brought an answering roar of approval.

The chairman looked at Sir John Dering, and a dead silence once again fell upon the sportsmen and fighters. They looked from Sir John Dering to Colonel Darleigh, full well knowing the drama of personal antipathy in which these two men were playing. Sir John rose from his seat almost reluctantly. There was no laughter lurking in his expression. For more reasons than one the position was serious. Yet, as he looked upon the sour, triumphant smile of his rival, every instinct in his being bade him accept the challenge.

"Colonel Darleigh has my old-standing promise," he said, making a stern effort after self-control. "The promise of a Dering in a matter of honour is never broken. I would have preferred a little more time, as this has been sprung upon me so suddenly. Even now, I do not know whether my man will act."

Colonel Darleigh's thin lips crinkled into a mocking smile—a challenge of a type Sir John could not resist.

"Perhaps Sir John is afraid he cannot find a man good enough for the Young Ruffian. I should remind him that the terms of our understanding, if it is carried out, mean that Sir John, as a man of honour, must go on whether Belcher consents or not."

Dering's face paled in the flickering light of the

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smoky room. Then Darleigh was speculating on the possibility of Belcher not fighting. Without an instant's hesitation, he countered the suggestion that had stung him like the lash of a whip.

"I accept Colonel Darleigh's challenge. My man is, of course, Belcher, and if not Belcher—" He stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

"I take my chance," he added.

A grin of triumph appeared for a moment on Darleigh's sinister face, and just as quickly vanished.

"Belcher must be favourite," he said. "I'll take two thousand five hundred pounds to two thousand pounds my man wins," he added, challenging Sir John with his eyes.

Sir John Dering accepted with a curt nod.

"Again?" Darleigh asked with a sneer.

His manner was a taunt, and stung Dering beyond endurance.

"Yes, again and again," he said almost angrily.

The lookers-on watched the battle, fascinated. This was madness—madness on both sides. They were betting on unknown men, and if Belcher took the field, what was even more astounding, Colonel Darleigh, astute gambler, was betting against an absolute certainty. The next words spoken fell on the ears of the audience like a thunderbolt.

"I will give the odds to ten thousand pounds if Colonel Darleigh will accept," Sir John said sternly, his face slightly pale.

For a moment Darleigh, challenged at his own game, wavered.

"As you please," he said after a second or two of painful silence. "Let it be twelve thousand five

hundred pounds to ten thousand pounds. I am at your service, Sir John."

The company gasped in astonishment—they were even too surprised to become immediately articulate.

"Holy smoke," said Bill Richmond, relieving the tension, and bringing the house down with a roar of laughter. "Why, it's fifty to one Belcher, and I wouldn't take the odds to my waistcoat and stand on Firby."

The two antagonists and the chairman were standing—their faces slightly pale. After Richmond's sally, a roar of laughter rippled round the table. As it ascended to a roar, Will Warr, red, sweating, short of breath, his sleeves turned up, just as he had rushed from the bar, swung open the door and entered the room, clamouring for attention.

"Mr. Chairman. Gentlemen," he shouted above the rising babel, alarm plainly written on his homely, battered face.

Mr. Fletcher Reid rapped on the table. His nerves were irritable.

"Well—what is it, Warr—what is it? Have you seen the ghost of Piccadilly or the Black Death?" he asked testily.

"There is a young man outside," old Warr said. "He says he must come in; he says he has a message—and by God he has a message, too. He says it may affect any match-making that may take place to-night."

Darleigh turned slightly more pallid in the heated air of the room, charged with this new excitement.

"What does he want?" asked Mr. Reid, looking doubtfully over the drink-inflamed faces of his com-

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pany, on which passion was beginning to show itself after the long and extravagant sitting.

"He says he comes from Belcher," Warr shouted, "and that his message is for everyone in the room."

The eyes of Sir John Dering and Colonel Darleigh's met with a steely challenge—they felt their minds clash just as duellists feel the touch of the rapier blades.

Sir John Dering turned to the chairman.

"Let us have him in," he said. "Let us have him in at once."

## CHAPTER II

THEY had not long to wait. The messenger stood outside the door. At a sign from Warr, he strode into the room, and curious loungers in the passage edged in behind him.

The crowded room became silent again. The gathering had forgotten the old in the new interest, and looked eagerly at the man who stood up, towering above the puzzled face of old Will Warr.

He was a young man of twenty-six. There were signs, chiefly about his clothes, that he came from the country, for he was tanned and freckled too. He carried in his hand a soft white hat almost shapeless and very much soiled. He wore a coat that might have been a coachman's, reaching down to his heels, but following the lines of his figure. He stood there erect and confident; his was a quiet, mettlesome confidence distinctly pleasing. His face, round and ruddy, was wonderfully good-humoured—almost merry; but the lines of his mouth were for the moment set and stern. Withal there was the mark over him recognised by every man in the room. It was in his face, in his clothes, in his carriage, and in the big, blue, bird's-eye handkerchief knotted round his throat. The stamp they recognised was that elusive quality seen in all game animals or men—the spirit of the fighter. He stood something like three inches short of six feet; his

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head towered erect on powerful shoulders; his neck full and round, was almost brick-red; his clothes, from the way they sat on his body, indicated a torso, like the trunk of a young tree, hard and muscular, firmly planted on clean, straight loins.

In the dead silence his appearance caused, four men looked him up and down—the chairman, Sir John Dering, Colonel Darleigh, and John Jackson. These men knew the fighting spirit at a glance.

“Who are you?” the chairman asked curtly, “and what do you want?”

“I know him,” yelled Bill Richmond, with the insolence of the half-drunk man. “I know the lad—I do. He’s the turnip-headed chawbacon hanging about Belcher’s, and Jem thinks he is a coming champion. Perhaps the lad wants to fight the real champion, Bill Richmond. If he does, by God, I’ll give him all he wants!”

“Silence!” thundered Jackson. “Silence, you big drunken bully.”

The young man’s face flushed angrily, and he half turned to the black.

Sir John Dering caught his glance.

“Control—self-control, for the fighter—you ought to know that. Keep your temper, and take no notice of the black fool. Answer the chairman.”

“Which gentleman is Sir John Dering?” he asked, and turned to the gentleman who had addressed him, instinctively.

“Right, boy—go on,” Sir John said.

“My name is Henry Pearce,” the new-comer said; “they call me Hen Pearce. I’m from Bristol, same as Jem Belcher, and I’ve just come from Jem’s



house, the 'Two Brewers,' in Wardour Street. I have news for his backer which might be important. At five o'clock this afternoon, Jem was playing racquets in a court in Little St. Martin's Lane. The marker, sending a ball back carelessly, caught poor Jem one in the right eye and cut it almost out of the socket. Belcher's stone blind in that eye for ever, the surgeon says."

A gasp of astonishment shuddered in the air from all assembled. Jem Belcher, the pride of the ring, struck down—it was unthinkable. Almost by instinct, gentlemen and fighter turned to Sir John Dering.

"Tell me—Pearce," he said coolly, "who was Belcher with at the time of the accident?"

"Captain Stuart, sir," he answered.

The faces in the crowded room turned on Darleigh. Stuart, a notorious man about town, had been known to go about with Darleigh, and rumour, which whispered some of Colonel Darleigh's doings were not creditable, had pointed to Stuart as a partner in them.

Sir John Dering looked at Colonel Darleigh. A grim smile played about his firm mouth. His white teeth showed as he smiled.

"I begin to understand," he said slowly.

"What do you mean?" Darleigh shouted hoarsely.

Sir John Dering laughed.

"Not the unspoken thought—not yet. I mean I begin to understand Belcher will not fight. Poor Belcher." For a moment his fine eyes softened, and then he drew himself together and stood there inflexible. "The fight arranged will go on, Colonel

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Darleigh. Your challenge holds good, and when the time comes my man will be there."

A cheer followed the announcement.

"Name, name, name," shouted Lumley Savage, a cry that was taken up by everyone.

"In good time," he answered, "in good time. You forget I have still seven days before I need declare."

The young man in the coachman's coat pulled himself up.

"If I'm not too bold, may I take a liberty?"

Without waiting for a reply, he went on, the men around him listening eagerly to every word.

"Belcher told me to say to the distinguished company that if anyone had challenged him, I was to beg for the honour of taking his place. I come from Bristol, and Belcher says all the champions come from Bristol. Belcher says I'm fit to wear his shoes, and some day shall."

At this bold challenge the whole room rocked with laughter. The young man winced under the ridicule, but held his ground and stood to his purpose. He threw his battered white hat to the floor.

"Gentlemen—I have delivered my message." He looked almost pleadingly at Sir John Dering. "I'm a willing lad from Bristol," he said humbly. "I'm a very willing lad from Bristol, sir. I would consider myself honoured to be allowed to fight any man in this room—now."

"The right stuff, lad; the right stuff," Gentleman Jackson said.

Richmond, stupidly listening, heard the words of the challenge. They acted as if he were a bull

and someone had waved a red rag before him. With a bound, he sprang into the centre of the room, the wild light of the unleashed fighting animal gleaming in his eyes. He leaped at the stranger and grabbed him by the blue bird's-eye handkerchief, and in his frenzy pulled him to and fro, amid loud cries of "Order" from the startled crowd.

"You—you—you chawbacon!" he yelled, almost foaming at the mouth. "You come among your betters and talk fight. I'll fight you—by God, I will! I'll whip you to a jelly; I'll make holes in you; I'll send you yelping back to Bristol like a beaten mongrel dog! Bristol—by God, Bristol!"

Before they could stop him the black man had spoken.

Pearce turned white with passion and then flushed red.

"Take your black hands off me," he said, and then raising his big clenched fist drove it clean into Richmond's frenzied face.

Stunned for a moment, the black man lay where he dropped. Then, stupidly, he rolled over and sat up, almost comical in his wrath. When the full measure of his humiliation dawned on his scattered senses, rage boiled within him, and he leaped to his feet.

"Damn you—you young whelp; I'll trim you for that. Gentlemen all—gentlemen, leave him to me," he screamed, as they tried to drag him back. "He's mine by the blow, and curse the ugly face on him, he'll have to take it back. Leave him to me; stand away—for God's sake, give me a ring!"

Gentleman Jackson thrust himself amongst the swaying figures.

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"Is this a bear garden, gentlemen?" he asked sternly, "or a convivial party of sportsmen? Silence, you, Richmond—silence—you'll get your ring, if you stop howling. We follow the game, and it has rules. The game now is fight. Let's try the new blood at once, and give Bill Richmond his ring. Someone hold the black, and I'll arrange the preliminaries. Who says a purse?"

As he spoke he held out a hat.

"Five guineas," Sir John said at once, and dropped the coins in the hat.

"Five here." "Three from me." "Here's a couple," they began to cry, and a stream of golden coin fell into the receptacle which Jackson held.

"Gentlemen," he shouted, hastily counting. "The purse is thirty-five guineas—enough for a merry mill. The hour is twelve-thirty. The fight begins at day-break, and the winner takes all. Bill Gibbons will make a ring at Hyde Park; Paddington Jones will second Hen Pearce; Firby will second Richmond. I will act as referee. Do you all agree?"

"Agree." They nearly raised the roof with their wild cheering.

"Henry Pearce, Bill Richmond—shake hands. This isn't a beerhouse quarrel—it's a fight before noble sportsmen."

Pearce held out his hand in obedience to Gentleman Jackson's command, and Richmond sulkily took it.

With the making of the impromptu match all the devils were let loose at the "One Tun." The house seemed to boil over. Corinthians, pugilists, tradesmen from the bar, and hangers-on danced with half-

drunken, crazy glee, through the rooms and in the passages. The outer doors were closed, and the crowd clamoured to the bar, singing and capering as they wildly ordered drinks. The fighting spirit, the unleashed devil in the men of that day, was abroad, ravening in the "One Tun." The sporting men began to call the odds, and their chattering became an unceasing babel, rising higher than the mad riot of sounds coming from the half-crazed crowd, clamouring at the bar and in the passages.

In all this welter of madness, this inferno of sound, two men, unobserved, confronted each other in a quieter corner of the house, for a few moments.

They were Colonel Darleigh and Sir John Dering.

"Passion is running high," Sir John said, as they met. "I prefer to consider what I say. I do not speak the thought that is in my mind before these men."

Sir John spoke slowly and deliberately.

"When this fight is over, at the end of the month, I shall challenge you with knowing that Belcher had been blinded."

"I shall call you a liar," Colonel Darleigh answered, with rising passion. "If you will say what you think now, I'll call you a liar as soon as you speak the words."

Sir John Dering shrugged his shoulders.

"Time enough," he said. "Time enough. With this fight we play the last round. It shall settle our accounts in full."

Colonel Darleigh laughed harshly.

"As you please, Sir John," he said.

At that moment Gentleman Jackson hustled into the room.

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"Gentlemen—sportsmen all. The game's afoot," he yelled. "Principals and seconds have gone on. It is just four o'clock, and if we start now we shall be in good time. All out for the fight—all out."

In the old "One Tun" there rose a mighty cheer. The company, baying like hounds about to be blooded, half-mad with joy over the impending, unexpected fight, trooped out of the house in noisy groups, and assembled in the deserted Piccadilly Circus. In the grey light of the very early morning, some horribly flushed, others pallid and exhausted, or hectic and feverish after the night's orgie, they walked or staggered down Piccadilly.

The increasing light caught them unsparingly, and outlined their wild, mad faces, their dishevelled finery, and their faded clothes. In a straggling crowd, picking up revellers as they passed, they marched on Hyde Park, making the peaceful morning hideous with their discordant progress. And in Hyde Park Bill Gibbons and his assistant had driven the last stake into the ground and knotted the last rope. The bishop of the ring, leaning against his beloved posts, waited the coming of his Corinthian patrons. An early morning sunbeam, catching his round and ruddy face, discovered him for a moment asleep where he stood. As he slept, Bill Gibbons' head drooped forward into his ample bosom, while his hat fell to the ground and rolled in the cool grass, where the overnight dew sparkled like diamonds set in a great green carpet.

### CHAPTER III

In the late afternoon preceding the evening on which happened the gathering at the "One Tun," Sir John Dering paced up and down the great drawing-room of his house in Bloomsbury Square.

He walked slowly backwards and forwards, a man evidently deep in thought with many undesirable preoccupations on his mind. Occasionally he paused in his restless tramp along the carpeted room to gaze through the windows upon the square outside. A prospect, wholly desirable, met his eyes. The trees in Bloomsbury Square were bursting into life, and, swayed by the fresh breeze, their waving branches, shot with tender young green, seemed to dance with joy at the coming of summer. The late gleams of the sun lit the western sky, turning it into a golden dream, gilding the tops of grim Georgian houses, reflecting its own glory in their burnished-glass windows, lighting the few early spring flowers which bloomed in the gardens of the Square, or wasted their fragrance in fading bunches in the street-sellers' baskets.

For the charming indications outside of the coming of summer heralded by the early spring, Sir John Dering had no thought. Fair as was the prospect, dark shadows were hanging over his mind. Resuming his restless promenade, he stopped at the end of a minute or two and turned slowly on his

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heel. A door had opened, and he had heard the sound; indeed, had turned so promptly that he had evidently expected it. A tempestuous rustle of skirts followed the sound, and at that moment Rosa Dering, his only daughter, entered the room.

"Ah! there you are," she said with a light gaiety that almost made him groan. "You see I am back again," she continued, as one assured of welcome.

Sir John Dering took his daughter in his arms and kissed her.

"I am back again—yes," she went on hastily, "and, do you know, I am ever so glad. Trying as you are as a papa, I miss you. I wonder what you are doing without me, and begin to think you can scarcely get on at all. And so I come back, yet you sigh as if you were sorry." She pouted adorably at him. "Are you sorry," she asked; "and if not, why do you sigh?"

A smile on his pale face answered her gaiety.

"I miss my little one," he said, playfully pinching her ear. "Now you are back again, everything will go right."

She pounced on the phrase.

"Everything?" she asked. "Has anything been going wrong?"

Sir John slowly paced the room again.

"I have been foolish," he said at length.

She looked her quick alarm.

"Don't say foolish," she returned; "rather call it indiscreet. At least, it sounds better. Is it cards, or horses, this time?"

"Cards," he answered.



Something like a wave of great regret was in her voice and manner.

"Papa—and you promised. Since mother died you have refused me nothing, and you promised never again to turn up a card, only three weeks ago, before I went to Shropshire. It is so little I asked you, and yet you have broken your word already."

He faced his daughter's accusing eyes with a haunting thought of the sweet woman whose passing was such a bitter wrench—whose memory ever held a place in his mind. The girl before him was her mother over again, vividly reminding him of the distant past. She had the same beautiful oval face; the same clean-cut features; the same still, but watchful, kindly flame in her slumbering grey eyes, behind which lurked depths of passion unplumbed; the same proud poise of the exquisite head set gracefully on pretty shoulders; and the same deep sincerity in her round voice. Standing there at the open window in the mellow sunlight, her coiled hair, so deeply brown that in some lights it looked almost black, shone with a subtle glistening charm, a glorious setting for the eager young face strong with the pride of her race. She was dressed in lavender silk, with many flounces, and some rare point lace at her white round throat, which he had seen worn by another woman, heightened the persistent appeal she made to his memory.

"I am deeply sorry, Rosa," he said; "but there is some kink in all the Derings. A pack of cards sets our brains dancing. I am fearfully embarrassed, and at Crockford's the cards tempted me. At first I had luck in a small way, and the fever of play

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made me forget. I thought of you and the debts, and the game went on, the stakes mounting higher as the hour grew later. When we drew the curtains and snuffed the candles, the light of morning was streaming in from the courtyard outside. In the end I was owing——”

He stopped a moment.

“Yes, dear, go on,” she said.

“Five thousand pounds,” he answered grimly.

For a moment her mind reeled.

“And have you paid?” she asked.

“At present I cannot.” Sir John set his white teeth together firmly. “I cannot raise five thousand pounds—things are so tight. Everyone is pressing. My lawyers say there is nothing we can mortgage safely, and the only way out is to sell.”

“To sell what?” she asked, a new alarm in her grey eyes.

“I am sorry,” he answered slowly, “but we must sell Tracy Court.”

It was as if he had struck her a blow and inflicted physical pain. Sell Tracy Court! Why it was part of her whole life. It had been the home of the Derings for more than five centuries. To this house Sir John had taken her mother. Before her eyes danced one of her earliest, tenderest memories—her mother, bending over her needlework, as she sat in a sheltered corner of the noble terrace. There she had been born, an only child, slightly spoilt by the figure who filled her mind. Her old nurse lived at Tracy Court, even now, a link between the present and the past. Every room, every piece of furniture, every flag in the courtyard and the terrace was part

of her life, and recalled some memory of her race. To sell Tracy Court, their stately home in Buckinghamshire, was unthinkable.

"To whom do we owe this heavy debt?" she asked.

"Does it matter very much whether you know?" Sir John returned.

"Yes—yes. It is almost ruin," she answered.

"The five thousand pounds was lost to Captain Harry Trevelyan."

"Harry!" For a moment the shock nearly stunned her. Of all men in the world, this one, Harry Trevelyan. She spoke the name as if its repetition hurt her. Sir John, looking at her, first curiously and then with sudden comprehension, understood the great blow that had fallen on his daughter. The flush on her face, the tell-tale glance of her eyes, the trembling lips were enough for him.

His manner altered. The cynical, worldly man revealed a quick understanding and a new tenderness.

"Ah! Rosa, my little one, I did not know," he said.

"Know what, papa?" she asked, bravely smiling through her tears.

"What I have seen in your eyes and in your troubled face," he answered gently.

She stood there drooping like a flower.

"It is true," Rosa said very slowly; "it is true. I was coming home so happy—happy in the knowledge of what I had to tell you. A fortnight before

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I left Bath for Shropshire Harry told me—that is he asked me—I mean, he wanted——”

She stumbled over her disjointed sentences, and blushed with girlish confusion.

Sir John stood for a moment looking at her pretty embarrassment.

“I know,” he said very quietly. “I might have known before, if I had looked. Your story is written in every line of your dear face, and now I think of it, in his. It was because of that Trevelyan was so pleased to see me; it was out of deference that he played so long; it is this embarrassment which has made it so painful for us to meet since that foolish night. But there! there! Harry is a good fellow.”

She looked the trouble in her heart.

“But don’t you see this makes a difference, and is impossible? Harry is coming to-day; is even now on his way. I have his letter saying he will be here. This debt of honour makes a difference. It taints our love. He is coming to ask you to-day for me.”

He looked at her, almost sternly for a moment.

“The debt of honour shall be paid,” he said. “The Derings, however foolish they may be, cling to their honour to the end.”

“Oh yes! I know,” Rosa answered. “Paid in full, and every penny of it—paid at the price of Tracy Court.” Her voice rang with scorn. “And if it is not paid that way, then I become part of the bargain. The great love I had to give—have already given—part of myself, and indeed all of me that is not bound up in love for you, is thrown into the scale to balance a deal at cards, to readjust a

debt of honour between two men who are my all in all. Don't you see—won't you see—the bitterness of my humiliation?"

"Indeed I do," he said slowly. "But the die is cast—the debt is there, and must be paid."

"Yes; and until it is, I must not see Harry as a lover, and we can be no more than friends." She paced the room restlessly. "In a way, I am glad it has happened now. The thought of leaving you has troubled me exceedingly—has been the one flaw in my happiness. I seem to feel you need my help. This curse of the Derings seems to be eating your life away, and, even now, it threatens mine. My dear papa, whom so many love and admire, why should there be this ghastly blot on your life and reflected on mine? As long as it is a Dering weakness, I ought to be at your side. I loathe the prospect of leaving you more at this minute because I now know my lover is tainted with the same mad curse. I am a gambler's daughter by the accident of birth, but I should hesitate to be a gambler's bride by deliberate choice."

Sir John watched her speaking rebelliously from her eager young heart. He saw his instincts in the light of her still grey eyes. As he looked, something vital in his life, which he had wasted, stirred his very soul—a message from the youth he had lost. Taking her hand, and holding it between his own fine, nervous fingers, he saw again a woman he had learnt to love and sworn to respect—a woman whose last words breathed his name; a woman whose every day had been spent in the shadow of his protection, and whose trust in him had never been betrayed.

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This had been the shadow she had feared, a little shadow in their lives, and she had died—almost happily, he thought—before it had grown into a cloud sinister and engulfing. Holding his daughter's hand, Sir John looked into her eyes, but it was the other woman he saw.

"The Derings," he said very slowly, almost painfully, "have gone to the death cheerfully and even gaily in the defence of their honour. In this sad transaction the die is cast, but, as God is my judge, never again will I risk a moment of your life's happiness, or the honour of our name, on the turn of a card."

Her face lit up with a great joy.

"My mother knew what the honour of a Dering meant," Rosa said. "It sufficed her as a religion. I do not ask for more than your promise. That you have given it, makes me happier than I can tell. When Harry calls me to him—when this little cloud has passed away—I should hesitate to go if I knew the one vice of the Derings held my father in danger. I shall go with a lighter heart now I know I have his word."

She had barely finished speaking when a servant entered the room.

"Captain Trevelyan," he said, standing to attention like a Grenadier.

"Show Captain Trevelyan up at once," Sir John directed, looking keenly at his daughter. Her manner had strangely altered. The expression of tender solicitude gave place to a cold, almost harsh, look of pride. Hastily she gathered her shawl, fan, and a handful of flowers with which she had entered the room.

"I do not care to see him now," Rosa said. "Speak to him, and hear what he says. While this shadow lies between us, we must not meet. It taints our love, and it hurts my pride."

Rosa, without a glance at the other door, left the room. She had not been gone more than a few seconds when Captain Harry Trevelyan entered. He was a young man of thirty, tanned with the exposure only service on the sea demands. He wore a brown, close-fitting coat, very high in the neck and long in the tails; breeches of the same material, and black silk stockings, ending in neatly polished shoes. He had evidently taken some pains with his personal appearance, and the bluff, sailor-like qualities of his character contrasted oddly with the calculated note of dandyism he was affecting. His hair was brushed and curled; at his neck a snow-white cravat made it almost impossible for him to move his head; he held an eye-glass in his hand as he advanced to the centre of the room. His disappointment was obvious when he found the room occupied only by Sir John Dering. It was evident from his manner that he had expected a much more interesting greeting.

The two men bowed to each other with stately courtesy, but Captain Trevelyan was obviously ill at ease. Before they ended the exaggerated greetings of the day, Sir John decided on the attitude he should take up.

"My dear Harry," he began, "I am sure you will accept my apologies. At the moment, only one course of action is open to me—to ask you to wait for payment of our debt of honour until such

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time as I can sell Tracy Court. I am hard hit, Trevelyan—very hard hit."

Trevelyan blushed to the roots of his hair.

"Good Lord, Sir John," he answered, "I had entirely forgotten. One does not worry over a Dering's debt of honour. In faith, my time is yours, and if accommodation serves your purpose, I'm very happy to be of use. But, for Heaven's sake, dear Sir John, don't imagine I came to dun you. God's luck! if you did, I should not be able to come to your house again. Besides, a turn of the cards, and I shall probably be your debtor. I had the honour of the luck. But I did not come to talk about so small a matter, and now my errand becomes doubly difficult."

Sir John looked at his caller questioningly.

"What is this errand, may I ask?" he said.

For a moment the sailor looked very much more like a guilty schoolboy than a fashionable man about town.

"It is about Rosa. Miss Dering has honoured me above all men. I have reason to believe in promoting my own happiness, I should be enhancing hers. I have her consent to approach you and ask you to do me the honour of permitting our early marriage."

"Since when have you held her consent?" Sir John asked.

"It was a memorable night, five weeks ago, in the Assembly Rooms at Bath.

Sir John hesitated for a moment.

"I am deeply sorry, Harry," he said slowly.

"That she loves you, I know; that union with you



would make her happy, I am certain. Unfortunately, our game of cards stands in the way. I was obliged to tell her of the debt, and named you, not knowing how matters stood, though I might have guessed. I was compelled to tell her, because the only way out is the sale of Tracy Court. Unfortunately, she takes the woman's view."

"I do not quite follow," Captain Trevelyan answered. "Surely that is a matter between us. It need not go further. Indeed, if it would help, I'd write you a receipt in full."

Sir John checked his impetuous friend with some slight display of hauteur.

"No—no—a thousand times no. The debt is incurred, and will be paid in full. I am not in the habit of asking, or accepting, forgiveness for my indiscretions at the gaming-table. But in the meantime Rosa believes the debt makes her part of any settlement we may reach."

"The deuce she does," Captain Trevelyan ejaculated. "I suppose we should not love them half so much, these dear women, if they were entirely reasonable."

In his breezy, buoyant manner he began to pour out reasons for the absurdity of the situation—reasons which followed each other like waves in a rushing torrent.

"Let me see Rosa; let me state my case," he said. "I am sure a moment or two would set matters right. After all, this is a little thing in the scale of her life's happiness."

"I am sorry, Harry," Sir John replied. "I cannot compel her. When you were announced, she

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left the room. She expressed a definite opinion that she did not desire to see you."

Captain Trevelyan stared at the speaker as if he had been struck.

"It's devilishly unlucky this thing has happened," he said, something of the buoyancy of his spirits evaporating. "It tempts me to say that never again will I play a hand at cards. Still, I must see Miss Dering. With your consent, I'll try to speak with her to-night. I know she is to be at Lady Huntley's. In the meantime, Sir John, I have your goodwill?"

"Always, my dear Harry, and with all my heart."

Sir John accompanied his visitor to the door.

At night, Captain Trevelyan haunted the corridors of Lady Huntley's magnificent rooms in her house at Piccadilly. One of the most influential hostesses in London, Lady Huntley's dance was amongst the social events of the year. The great town house was crowded almost to suffocation, and in the rooms, thronged with a stately gathering of brave men and fair women, it was difficult to get near any particular guest one wanted to address. Harry twice caught glimpses of Rosa Dering holding a little court under the watchful eyes of her chaperon, Lady Digby, but on each occasion when their eyes met she deliberately avoided his greeting. When he pressed for the privilege of taking her into supper, she pleaded a prior engagement.

His chance came some time after midnight. The ballroom was crowded with dancers, who were merrily taking part in the quadrilles. In the card-room the older guests were busily engaged at their

favourite hazards. Captain Trevelyan, standing in a recess in the corridor which looked out on the park, was practically alone. A quick step arrested his attention, and, turning, he stood face to face with Rosa. She, with a little startled cry, drew back, and would have vanished in the direction of the ballroom, but he held her with a gesture and a greeting which made retreat impossible.

"Rosa—Rosa," he said, calling her name loudly in his eagerness. "I have seen Sir John to-day. He has told me what you are thinking, and I do not desire to press my attentions on you against your will. But I think our love, only recently confessed, at least justifies me in asking the right to put two questions."

"I shall be pleased to answer them," she said frigidly.

"Do you think this debt of honour between Sir John and myself need come between us?" he asked.

"I do," she answered. "How can I look on our love, and know that it is tainted by a gambling transaction, and feel as proud of it as I did but a few weeks ago?"

He did not press his point.

"Sir John informed me to-day of your altered attitude. I do not complain, and at the moment I do not question your belief. But suppose in a few weeks this debt is paid—would your attitude be the same as it is to-night, if the shadow between us is removed?"

She looked into his eyes for the first time, and there was something enigmatical in her strange smile.

"What I may think to-morrow and to-morrow I cannot tell. And if I could, I would not. But my thoughts would not be quite the same," she answered lightly, as if she had discovered a new point of view.

"Just one more question," he pleaded, for she had turned as if to go back to the ballroom. "I have Sir John's consent to our marriage, and I had yours. Will you think again as you did about my proposal five short weeks ago? Is our love always to be tainted?"

She started as she heard her own words quoted.

Her smile vanished for a moment. Something of her girlish charm slipped away from her, and for the first time Trevelyan looked upon the woman he loved and saw behind the girlish attractions he had admired the still quiet pools beneath the limpid surface—a woman's purpose.

She laid her pretty hand upon his shoulder, and there was just a hint of a caress in her action.

"Darling," she whispered, "the taint can be wiped away by expiation. When the time comes, I will make terms."

"And what will those terms be?" he asked, and for a moment he embraced her—held her closely to him.

She made a pretty *moue*.

"The time is not yet, and besides it would be telling." The cold reserve had melted, as if it had been snow upon the mountain-top. She laughed slowly, and in her notes there rang a vibrant melody. With a hasty movement she freed herself.

"Good night, Captain Harry," she said gaily.

"When the time is ripe I will come aboard with a statement from the enemy. Until then—why, wait."

"And if I wait?" he asked earnestly.

"You will hear—and see," she said gaily.

She waved her round, dimpled hand at him; there was a sudden *frou-frou* of rustling skirts; two feet in blue silk stockings twinkled; and, almost dazed, Captain Harry Trevelyan, thwarted of the chance he had sought to bring her nearer to him, stood alone in the lighted corridor.

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## CHAPTER IV

IN the sylvan scene which Hyde Park presented—the sun, slowly rising out of the East, touching the dark trees to a living green, and lighting the dew on the grass until it seemed studded with diamonds—Bill Gibbons did not sleep very long. He looked a grotesque figure nodding there over his forty winks—a figure in a sleeved waistcoat and knee-breeches, with a white hat of battered appearance lying on the ground at his feet. He was suddenly awakened by the noise of approaching men coming rapidly nearer to him and shouting and laughing as they came. A rare rattle they made as they walked, staggered, or straggled across the grass.

The crowd had increased in dimensions as it had swept up Piccadilly. The company from the "One Tun" no longer marched alone. They had attracted in their passing the revellers who were homeward bound with the light—pale or flushed young pigeons from the night-houses or gaming-hells; elderly, well-preserved, suave men, with grim iron jaws—the rooks who are always about when pigeons fly; and ghostly shadows of things that once were men, the pitifully horrible wanderers, pariahs, Ishmaels of the street. The Corinthian crowd, walking urgently down Piccadilly with a train of fighting-men and hangers-on, fired the imagination of all who saw them. The magic word "fight" clung about

them, and the atmosphere drew into the wake of the passing crowd all whom they passed. In the early morning the company of the "One Tun" had collected, by a special law of gravitation which governed the progress of a fighting crowd, at least another five hundred of the children of the night. Even the ghostly shapes of things that once were men walked with brighter eyes and stronger gait on the heels of the gathering crowd. For them a fight was afoot, entertainment in itself, and was there not always a pocket to be picked or a purse to be snatched in such a crowd?

The party strode rapidly towards the ring. Burly John Jackson, with a crop in his hand, wearing a plum-coloured coat and a hat like a modern bishop's, walked forward at the head of an assembly he mastered by his personality. The Corinthians, with their necks and mouths swathed in handkerchiefs and their exaggerated collars turned up to break the keen air of the spring morning, walked, some arm-in-arm, in groups of twos and threes. Notorious dandies, some of them; all scrupulously dressed men of fashion, they were odd figures to be seen abroad in such company at such an hour. In many cases they were accompanied by their servants or "minders," the last gentry being pugilists or ex-pugilists who found the duty of acting as bodyguards to gentlemen liable to get into hot corners more or less profitable. The fighting-men kept together to a great degree, imitating their masters, the Corinthians. They walked in two groups. Of one, Bill Richmond, the black pugilist, was the centre. Hen Pearce, the new-comer, with Paddington Jones on

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one hand and Jack Humphries on the other, had also attracted a group of admirers, who were chiefly drawn to him by sheer curiosity. The men rapidly journeying across the park found Bill Gibbons waiting by the ring, and took possession of it. No attempt was made to separate the classes. Noble, pugilist, night-bird, and creature of the street stood side by side and cheek by jowl eagerly canvassing the chances of the coming fight. Apart from the crowd were two little groups of men which marked where the principals were performing their ring toilets. In their direction the eagerly expectant company at the ringside cast impatient glances.

A change had come over the company from the "One Tun." The early morning walk had sobered and quietened them, and now, pale and blasé, they looked somewhat languid in their excitement. They stood about in groups, and the more excitable bystanders kept passing quickly from one to the other gleaning opinion on the coming fight and the state of the odds.

"I like this youngster," Sir Henry Tempest said to Sir John Dering.

Sir John, looking more handsome and dignified in a caped coat and fawn-coloured hat as he stood in the clean morning sunlight, awakened from a reverie which had but little in common with the rabid scene in which he played his part. He nodded his head slowly.

"He is the right stuff, this Johnny Raw—a good plucked 'un. But after all, age and experience count against green youth. The odds are on the black, who is a punishing fighter and a proved game man."



Cavendish Bragshaw pushed his way into the little group of which the two gentlemen formed the centre, and poked a jewelled snuff-box towards his friends.

The ceremony of snuffing having been completed with elaborate ritual he said eagerly, "Let's put some go into this little impromptu. I'll back the ebony for a hundred," he added, glancing round and pulling out a betting-book.

"I should think so, too," Sir Harry Tempest laughed. "The odds are easily three to one."

"I'll take the black and lay them," cried Fletcher Reid.

"So will I," shouted Bragshaw.

Sir John Dering smiled.

"I'll take you, Bragshaw, in hundreds."

Sir Harry Tempest also took the price offered by Fletcher Reid. The betting was somewhat perfunctory. The sporting contingent went from group to group, and the two bets set the tone of a dull market. For the most part the sportsmen fancied the black, whom they knew, to beat a man whose strangeness to them was proof of his inexperience. A babel of conversation rose round the ring; the chances of the men were eagerly considered, and above the noise the odds of three to one were roared out, but not frequently accepted. As the noise rose higher there was a movement in one of the little groups near the ring. The black man, in his eagerness to get on with the fight, had finished his toilet rapidly, and, half running towards the ring, climbed through the ropes and stood in the centre, a glistening, sinister figure, an ugly, coal-black statue.

"That's the stuff for my money," yelled Cavendish

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Bragshaw. "I'll lay four to one Richmond holds the field," he shouted, raising the odds once more.

Looking at Richmond as he stood there in the morning sun, there was reason for his supporter's confidence. The black had sobered somewhat after his walk, although he was still sufficiently under the influence of his excesses to move unsteadily, and there was an unnatural gleam in his dark, wild eyes. There was no mistaking the figure of the man. A little too stout, his black torso was massive with muscular strength, the shoulders and upper arms bulging every time he lazily stretched himself in the sunlight. He had proved a game fighter on many occasions, and as one looked at his gnarled, muscular trunk one could see any amount of power there to put behind his blows. He stood in the centre of the ring awhile sniffing the air defiantly, and at last went to the corner where his seconds were grouped.

"Bring along that chawbacon," he shouted with a lurid oath, "and I'll cook him and eat him for my breakfast," a sally which was after the taste of the ringside, and set his supporters roaring.

Almost before the roar had died away Richmond saw the crowd round the ropes open out, and the white man stepped nonchalantly into the ring.

"Ah! here comes the Game Chicken at last," called a Corinthian, making play with Hen Pearce's contracted Christian name.

Another roar of delighted laughter greeted this sample of Corinthian humour, and for the rest of his career Pearce was better known to his peculiar public as the Game Chicken, a name which stuck to him throughout his life.

Pearce strode across the ring and took the opposite corner, every eye in the crowd watching him as he did so. Nor did Pearce disappoint his few supporters, while his very appearance caused some misgiving to the men who had taken the odds against him.

"Good Lord," murmured Bragshaw; "he looks fit to fight for his life," and he immediately stopped offering the odds of four to one.

Pearce was stripped to the waist, and buffed surprisingly well. His toilet was completed by a pair of coloured fighting trunks, and the blue bird's-eye handkerchief was knotted round his waist. For a moment his appearance produced a dead silence, then a rousing cheer, and the roar of betting offers sounded louder than ever, with shortened odds. The all-night ring-goers looked on that sterling example of manhood, and were convinced against their reason. They gazed on the great neck and massive chest; on the white skin of dazzling purity which gleamed a warning of the man's superb condition; on the muscles which rippled under it; and on the sturdy, shapely loins supporting the well-set frame. A stranger to everyone present, he stood with folded arms for a minute while the last preliminaries were being arranged, a smile of confidence playing over his good-humoured, freckled face, on which no shadow of doubt or dread was to be seen. The Game Chicken looked game enough to please the connoisseur, and he was the only man in that assembly whose clean eye and ruddy face did not suffer by being brought into contact with the strong light of early morning.

Lumley Savage, looking on this type of manhood, shouted the general opinion. "Upon my soul, I

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like this chawbacon. He's the right breed all over. Bragshaw, did I hear you offering fours?"

"I'm laying two to one," Bragshaw answered, "and not a penny more."

"Reid—do you offer four hundred to my hundred?" Savage cried to that worthy, who was watching the gladiator, spellbound.

That sportsman shook his head. "I'll stick to my original opinion at two hundred to one hundred."

"I'll take you," Savage cried; "and you, Bragshaw."

"I'll lay two hundred to one the black wins, up to five hundred," Colonel Darleigh's voice rasped out, and his eyes sought Sir John Dering.

Sir John met his glance with an expression of disdain, but the Colonel's offer was eagerly snapped up by his surrounding friends, and the betting shortened and remained at that price until the fight began.

Gentleman Jackson took up his position at the ringside, and Mr. Fletcher Reid, watch in hand, watched for the signal. The roar of the ringside died away, and as Jackson turned to his timekeeper and made a sign, one could hear the quick tread of the men's feet as they walked to the centre at the call of time.

With the word, Richmond left his second's corner as promptly as an unleashed tiger. The Game Chicken walked to the centre of the ring with slower movements, the smile of superb confidence still on his freckled face. The two men shook hands perfunctorily and stood face to face eyeing each other. The black man crouched low, with his head almost

sunk behind his hands, and as they sparred, edged closer to his opponent. Pearce, standing straight, and moving slowly, watched the big black.

It was easy to see Richmond's immediate intention. He was trusting to experience, knowledge, and his power to take punishment to force the fight. Firby, in his corner, had advised a quick settlement, in view of the black's condition. The men had not faced each other more than half a minute when Richmond sailed in to put these tactics into force. With a wild rush he feinted and drew Pearce's guard with the left, and the right, swung recklessly, caught the white man a smashing blow on the face. A thin stream of blood spurted from Pearce's mouth, but he dashed in his right, which missed by a quarter of an inch, and the men closed. As quick as thought the black man, squirming like an eel, wrestled his man and brought him down to the grass with a shuddering impact, falling with his knee on the white man's body. A roar of delight burst from the backers of Richmond, as the seconds separated the men and led them to their corners.

"First blood for the black," yelled Bragshaw, nearly wild with delight. "I'll lay three to one in hundreds, and take Richmond," he added, but no response was made.

Sir John Dering turned to Sir Harry Tempest and shook his head slowly.

"It is as I said, Sir Harry. The white man lacks in knowledge all he has in pluck."

Fletcher Reid's voice was heard shouting "Time" above the hubbub. Once again the two men left their corners. The black was superbly confident.

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His dark eyes danced with ferocity. He rushed to the centre as if he were slung from a catapult. Pearce, still smiling, walked steadily to meet his opponent. The smile still played round his good-humoured, freckled face. The brief rest had been usefully employed, and the words of Paddington Jones were in his ears.

"Keep out," Paddington had said as he rose to the call of time. "Keep out, and make him follow you."

The next round was a surprise for the seething crowd. Pearce followed his second's advice. He watched his crafty black opponent, stalled his fierce rushes, and was ready when he swung his great right. This time it missed, and hurtled through the air. Almost before the blow had spent itself Pearce sprang forward. His left fist hooked the black over the heart. Richmond's guard went down, and his head came forward with startled agony written on every line of his face. Pearce shot his right from the shoulder and hit the black squarely over the left eye, the blow making a cracking sound as if the fighter had smartly rapped a table with his knuckles, and showing a line of blood where the skin had broken. The maddened black went after his smiling antagonist, and struck out wildly, but the head he sought to smash was dancing hazily five yards out of his reach. For a minute Richmond followed his white antagonist round the ring. Then he cornered Pearce, rushed in, napped two light blows, one on his wounded eye, and closed. The two figures strained like panthers in the centre of the yelling crowd, and went down together, the white man underneath.

Round the ringside the excitement was growing every moment. In the corners the seconds, spurning water over their charges, were rapidly towelling them and whispering advice to their men. The big black lay back, and his great chest heaved. Paddington Jones noted it, as did Firby, who was seconding Richmond.

"Keep out for two more rounds," said Paddington Jones to Pearce, who nodded his head. "Make him move, and keep him moving. He's half blown now, and breathing like a man with asthma."

The black fighter came out to time as eagerly as ever, but those who watched could see his overnight orgie was reminding Nature of the debt it owes to excess. Pearce followed out his second's instructions. He kept his man moving. Sometimes he napped a blow from the whirling ebony fists, and at the end of the fourth round Richmond got past his guard, and with a crashing hit, which caused the white man's head to ring again, struck him clean off his feet.

"Steady, boy, steady," Jones whispered, as the crowd roared like a pack of hounds. "Keep away from his right, and fight him."

The battle went on. But with the fifth round a change came over it. Pearce no longer fought on the retreat. The black man, mad with rage, worked like a demon, and as he struck, gasped impotently, for his breath was fast failing him. Following a straight hit, he closed for his familiar throw, and, much to his astonishment, his white opponent challenged him. They heaved together in a giant's embrace, and then, before the startled crowd realised

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what was happening, Pearce slowly raised the gasping coloured fighter and dashed him to the ground.

"Evens the white man. Even money the Game Chicken," Lumley Savage screamed in his tense excitement.

Sir Harry Tempest turned to Sir John Dering.

"It may be possible the butcher has both the experience and the pluck," he said slowly.

Sir John Dering nodded his head grimly but absent-mindedly, as if his mind were far away from the fight in progress.

Paddington Jones smiled cheerily at the man in his corner. "Bravely done, Pearce," he said earnestly. "You have him surely, laddie, if you fight him. Hit low, and never mind his head; it's like a lump of iron. Hit him where he puts his dinner, but whether you hit him or not, keep him moving. You understand?"

Pearce, leaning back on an accommodating knee, nodded. "I'm bound to win. I could fight all day," he said.

"That's right, laddie," Jones replied. "But remember, hit or miss, keep him moving; give him no rest; make him dance the wind out of himself. Go in, lad, and win—but be careful. And whatever you do, keep him moving."

"Time." Again the voice of Fletcher Reid stilled the turbulence around him.

Richmond hung about his corner for a second or two, and someone jeered him. He scowled in the direction of the sound. He found the white man waiting for him, and still smiling—smiling now in a way that for the first time chilled his fury. He



must fight to a finish quickly, he thought, and the purpose dominated his mind. He went into the battle like a fury. Suddenly he found the white man was a guarded wall of iron. Madly he rained his blows, but do what he would he could not break down a guard as obstinate as steel, while every time he struck out, back came a pitiless right, crashing on his body with a thud that sent a thrill of horror round the ring. His chest seemed to be labouring horribly, his bold eyes rolled, sometimes he could not see clearly. The blood, flowing from the cut over the left eye, dribbled down and half blinded him. He fought with mad despair. Round by round they battled, and slowly Richmond realised in his own heart that the fight was going steadily against him. Sometimes he managed to hit the white figure, dancing in and out, but the sting had gone out of his blows. Again he would clinch and throw the white man, but always Pearce rose promptly, walked to his corner, and came out of it brisker than ever. Already the opinion of the crowd had veered round. The odds were now against the black man; the lower elements in the ring jeered at him; the call, so maddening to Richmond, was always for the white man.

They had battled to the eleventh round, and the black slowly left his corner. He swayed as he faced his opponent. The white man's eyes were gleaming. The smile had left his firm lips. There was a stern purpose written in every line of his face. Richmond fought on, and men could not fail to admire his courage. But the Game Chicken was master of the fight. His calmness was terrifying. He no longer sparred with or sought to trick his opponent. From

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the call of time he hurried him round the ring. Richmond went in, only to have his guard beaten down. For minutes at a time he was dazed and almost stupid. Pearce hit him when and where he liked. Now he would shoot out the left and reach the body, and an angry patch would show lividly on the black skin. Again he would send the nigger's head back with a crashing blow. Richmond's eye was slowly swelling and closing, and, until he was battered down, he often staggered about the ring half blind. In his corner, at the end of the rounds, Paddington Jones almost danced about his charge, and sent him up to the next round with the same message: "Fight him, boy; fight him." The end came in the thirteenth round. Only with difficulty had the nigger walked out, and his condition was so pitifully distressing that the sportsmen around cried, "Take him away." There was a fierce rally, and for a moment a gleam of the black's original fire shone out in the *mêlée*. But he could not reach Pearce, who, gathering himself, stood clear of the black figure swaying towards him, and with a motion like a piston-rod, his trusty right smashed on the jaw of his foe and felled him like an ox.

Firby rushed into the ring and picked his man up. In the corner he tried to rally Richmond. He bit his ear, squirted brandy up his nostrils, and forced the spirit between his teeth, but the black man's head rolled on his shoulder, and when Fletcher Reid called "Time," the Game Chicken stood in the ring alone, while Firby, amid a pandemonium of excitement, threw up the sponge. Bill Richmond, cut and bleeding, half insensible, could not stand. All he could

say was, "I can fight no more—I can fight no more," while Gentleman Jackson announced the winner by pointing to Pearce.

The pent-up excitement of the ring was let loose. The crowd swarmed through the ropes and cheered the new gladiator, who began quietly to pull on his shirt and coat. The Corinthians, making appointments for the day, commenced to disappear one by one, and the crowd also thinned out rapidly after surging round the winner and shaking him frantically by the hand.

Sir John Dering pushed his way through the crowd, and patted Pearce on the back.

"You have fought a good fight," he said with a gleam of appreciation in his fine eyes.

"It is a great honour, sir, for a Bristol lad to fight before such sportsmen," Pearce answered with almost bashful modesty.

"Will you fight Firby a month from to-day?" Sir John asked. "There are big stakes, and much involved that you do not know of now. I am Sir John Dering—Belcher's backer."

The big lad from the West Country looked at his new patron with the simple, direct honesty of a child.

"I am a willing lad from Bristol, sir," he said. "Thank you kindly; I am your servant, sir. I am a willing lad from Bristol, and I'll fight any man you like, sir. You do me proud."

Sir John Dering turned to the centre of the ring. A group of still excited Corinthians were clustered round Gentleman Jackson, talking over the details of the fight.

They included Sir Harry Tempest, Lumley Savage, Colonel Darleigh, and Fletcher Reid. He walked over to them, and stood in the centre.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I beg to announce my intentions for the fight ratified with Colonel Darleigh last night. If I cannot induce Belcher to take the ring, or if his accident prevents him, my man will be the gallant fighter you have seen win to-day—Hen Pearce, the Game Chicken. I think that is in order."

"Quite, Sir John," Jackson said, and the party turned towards the West End once again.

Colonel Darleigh, walking slowly, scowled to himself. He had seen the fight, and guessed what the end would be. The match he had forced last night did not seem to him so good a thing, viewed in the cold light of the morning and in the face of this surprise.

## CHAPTER V

IT was noon, after the early morning fight, when Sir John Dering turned out of his house in Bloomsbury. To look at him, none would have guessed that he had gone through the stirring events of the night and early morning. An hour or two of rest, a cup of chocolate, the best part of the morning spent with his valet, showed the world the Sir John Dering it knew, cleanly built, spruce, and debonair. He wore the extravagant costume of his day in fawn; his cravat was faultlessly adjusted; he carried a gold-mounted stick and a glass, and picked his way carefully towards the West End, quizzing the people as he walked, with slightly mincing gait, and saluting such friends as he recognised by the way.

To look at him, friends would not have imagined he had a care in the world, but Sir John's easy-manner of facing the town concealed something like a turmoil within. Here he was, with pressing liabilities. The game of cards was bad enough, but only a flea-bite to his liability over the unknown quantity—the Game Chicken. That he should have been so easily irritated by Colonel Darleigh as to incur a liability of twelve thousand five hundred pounds over the impending fight astonished him in the cool light of the morning. He thought of his promise—in the afternoon of the previous day—never to touch a card

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again, and smiled grimly to himself as he did so. He would have been better employed at the card-table, he thought, as he turned the matter over—indeed, he would not have incurred a heavier liability.

Deep down in his heart he knew the matter was almost inevitable. He could not refuse to answer Darleigh's challenge. Useless to shrug his shoulders in the clear morning sunlight and blame the wine. If Darleigh had challenged him in the park at noon when passion was not so high, his answer would have been the same. The old antagonism was too deeply rooted. Fate had made them fighters from the beginning. Their ill will began at school, where Sir John had been popular and Colonel Darleigh had not. They had fought their battle there, and Sir John had won. They had fallen in love with the same woman, and again Darleigh had lost. Ever since then the two men had met as antagonists in the world of sport with varying results. The fight, Sir John said, should be the end of a long rubber.

Walking down Pall Mall, towards the Corinthian Club, Sir John noted a well-known figure—Colonel Darleigh—sauntering towards him. A meeting was inevitable.

Sir John walked stiffly forward. Colonel Darleigh did not alter his gait.

"Good morning, Sir John," Darleigh said, and there was an unusual cordiality in his words. "Trust you are no worse for the late hours and excitement of last night. Faith! we had a series of surprises."

To return the angry phrase that rose to his lips was the first thought in Sir John Dering's mind, but he controlled himself.

"I am quite well," he answered coldly.

Colonel Darleigh stood irresolutely on the pavement. Then, with seeming candour, he said what was evidently in his mind. "Look here, Sir John, we work at cross purposes always. Now why should this be? Suppose we consider that the ill influences end with this fight, and that whichever way it goes, we become friends. I have a proposal to make."

Sir John Dering looked at his rival with a pride that chilled. He would have passed on, but the other detained him by placing a hand on his arm.

"I offer peace," Darleigh said hoarsely. "At least, you might hear my proposal."

There was an eagerness in the dour face of Colonel Darleigh which arrested Sir John's attention.

"I am prepared to listen. Will you walk towards the Mall with me?"

"With great pleasure."

The two men strode off side by side.

"Listen, Sir John. I am not an old man, nor am I a poor one."

Sir John's lips curled.

"I am at the moment what even the most fastidious might call a good *parti*, and you know the old adage about the reformed rake."

Sir John Dering's manner was frigid.

"God's luck," he said. "You grow sentimental in your old age—surely it is dotage. How does this affect me?"

Darleigh's dark face flushed.

"In many ways. I have lately had the pleasure of meeting Miss Rosa Dering often. She reminds me of the past in a manner you will appreciate.

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With your permission, I would like to pay my addresses to Rosa. It is this I have had in my mind."

Sir John Dering stopped in his walk as if he had been shot, and raised his stick, ready to strike there and then.

Darleigh realised his anger.

"My proposal does not please you," he said smoothly. "Do not make a scene—there will be no gain in that."

"Your proposal is an insult. I would sooner see Rosa dead. I know you too well," Sir John answered.

"Think, Sir John," Darleigh urged. "The sands are running against you. A wealthy alliance might help you to-day; might be necessary to-morrow. I know you are embarrassed."

For a moment Sir John was almost overcome with a rage which wellnigh left him speechless. When he recovered, he faced his old antagonist.

"You presume on my fancied embarrassment. It is the idle gossip of the clubs—it is not even remotely true. Even if there were truth in it, I would not forward your suit. You forget what I said last night, but by God I do not. When the proper time comes we will take up the quarrel where we left it overnight, and as God judges me, I shall add to my indictment the fact that no daughter of mine shall be persecuted with the attentions of a blackleg. In the meantime, out of my path."

He waved his cane angrily, as if to sweep the other aside.

Colonel Darleigh did not move.

"I have made you an offer, Sir John," he said,



and there was a menace in his words, "which would have been an honourable truce. I would have called this fight off because I know it is not a good thing for you. I also know what it will mean to you if your man loses. You have refused, and refused insolently. Well, we'll play the game out, and by all the furies I'll bring you down like a shot pigeon. I know you are badly winged, but I'll bring you down to the dust."

Sir John turned to resume his walk. He had recovered his composure. Dignified, smiling, almost insolent in his indifference, he raised his glass and looked upon his enemy with a contempt almost painful to witness.

"Threats from you—tush! They do not add an extra beat to my heart. You may go and do your worst, and you may be damned. Play out your pretty game to the end. You never know how a fight will finish while yet there are two men in the ring."

With unruffled calm he walked on, leaving his antagonist glowering as he stood there on the footway.

Sir John strolled into the Corinthian Club with complete self-possession. Gathered there were many of his friends of the night before—Fletcher Reid, Lumley Savage, Cavendish Bragshaw, and Sir Harry Fane Tempest amongst a dozen others. They greeted him noisily. The fight was now the talk of the town; the lists were up in all the sporting drums; already there had been a little desultory betting. Sir John listened to their high-spirited banter for some time, then, noting Captain Harry Trevelyan hovering

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in the rear of the group, he walked quietly round to him, and cordial greetings passed.

"By the way, Harry, I'd like a talk with you. Come to the library," he said.

The two men quietly left the crowd in the assembly room.

"What's this madness about the fight?" Trevelyan said as soon as they were alone.

"It's true; and as you say it is madness. It came out of a taunt by Darleigh—you know how we stand—and late in the evening, when the wine was running hot in our blood. I went in much further than I ought to go, and a great deal further than is safe. But I am in it now, and I will stay in."

Harry whistled.

"What's your man like—this Pearce, the Game Chicken?"

"As fine a piece of blood as ever stepped, but young and possibly inexperienced. I am sending him down to Leatherhead to train. You might run over and see him yourself. But in the meantime, how do you stand with Rosa?"

Captain Trevelyan's buoyant personality showed a momentary sense of depression.

"By my faith, Sir John, I hardly know. I saw her last night. She blows hot and cold, but I have the best of hopes that all will come right."

Sir John patted his young friend affectionately on the shoulder.

"Here is a piece of news that will help," he said earnestly. "That man Darleigh stopped me in the Mall an hour ago and made a proposal for her hand."

"The devil he did," the younger man ejaculated.  
 "What did you say?"

"I told him politely I would see him damned."

"Thanks very much, sir."

"I tell you this in confidence to further your suit with Rosa. I would like it settled; and the sooner you are on good terms the better. People are talking about my embarrassments, and Darleigh desired to make them a means to an end to forward his suit. In other words, he threatened me. I'm so badly gone, Harry, that if his man Firby wins, he will accomplish his threat—that is, he will bring me down like a shot pigeon. Of course, it would only be a temporary eclipse. The estates are good with a little nursing. But I knew your father, Harry, and I know you. If the worst comes to the worst and I have to go abroad for a while, it would be a great comfort to me to know my little girl is in safe hands, and in hands that will only make for her complete happiness. And knowing that, I go into the last round with Darleigh with a contented mind—win or lose—whichever way the game may go. You understand?"

The two men, the tall, grave dandy of an affected age and the breezy, frank young sailor, shook hands heartily.

"I appreciate the honour," Trevelyan said; "rest assured I shall merit your great confidence. In the meantime, I will try to see Rosa, and you may count on me to be on hand and help you through the last round. I'll come down and do a bit of sparring with your man. I can soon tell you whether he is any good. I'm not one of Gentleman Jackson's pet pupils for nothing."

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The two men left the club together and journeyed arm-in-arm a part of the way. They passed along the Haymarket, across Piccadilly, and separated at the corner of Wardour Street—Harry for Bloomsbury Square, in the hope of seeing Rosa, and Sir John on a different errand.

The nicely attired aristocrat, with a hint of displeasure on the curl of his fastidious lips, picked his way down Wardour Street. This old artery of Soho was narrow, badly paved, and unsavoury with the many smells which arise from ill-kept streets. On either side it was crowded with houses, shops, and taverns, and passages led to over-populated slums behind. The appearance of such a personality as Sir John, with his mincing walk and extreme note of dandyism, did not excite surprise. Indeed, the shabby women who stood at the ends of the passages, dangling their ill-clad offspring, would have guessed at once where he was going, and guessed rightly. Many exquisites made pilgrimages from the opulent streets of the West to the faded, shabby byways of Soho, and as a rule their quest only led in one direction.

Sir John stepped carefully down the dirty street until he came opposite a tavern which sported the sign of the "Two Brewers," the two hilarious representatives of the brewing interest being freely represented in oils on a board which swung on an iron frame projecting from the walls. The house was of a type not often seen to-day, but from without looked prosperous—the doors and windows being newly painted. It was a low building, with small windows, and to enter it the visitor had to descend

two steps into the main passage. Inside there was a bar, stone floored, and surrounded by partitions, the windows of which were curtained with a red material. There were three public rooms, very plainly furnished, and another larger room, from which a strong smell of cooking was drifting—the kitchen and living accommodation of the household.

A comely girl in the bar was drawing a foaming mug of beer for a waggoner as Sir John entered. He was evidently a familiar guest, for she turned at once to him.

"Morning, Sallie, fairest of Soho's pretty daughters," said Sir John.

"Good morning, sir; and how you do talk."

"Don't you find the pretty face makes the gallants talk?" he asked with a smile.

She blushed, and, showing some slight embarrassment, played with the bib of her smart white apron.

"Where's Jem?" Sir John asked, "and how is he?"

The girl raised her hands in great agitation.

"Oh dear! oh dear!" she said, "and him such a picture. He's about in the kitchen, sir, and one side of his head is all bound up. And they do say master will never have the sight of his eye again, and can never hope to be the great Jem Belcher any more."

"Is he able to see anyone?" Sir John asked.

"The doctor says he will be better kept quiet, but he will see you, I'm sure. He's been talking about you all the morning."

Sir John walked down the passage and knocked on the kitchen door.

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"May I come in?" he called in his clear, high-pitched, slightly affected tenor drawl.

There was a stir within, and Sir John heard a deep voice almost growl out the words:

"Lively, Hen—lively. Don't keep Sir John waiting."

The door was thrown wide open, and discovered the broad, smiling face of the Game Chicken awkwardly greeting his new patron. Sir John nodded pleasantly, and walked into the dark room. It was a big apartment with an open fireplace, a low ceiling, and stone floor, on which one's boot-heels ground the covering of fine red sand. It was simply furnished. A plain oak table stood in the centre, there were a few chairs, and near the open fire a big settle with red cushions on it, the fine wood of the back being polished by the many coats which had rubbed against it. From his seat on the settle, where he had been watching a leg of mutton spin round on the spit, a great man tried to rise, a man dressed in broadcloth of a sporting texture, a big man with immense shoulders, and a head set upon them like a lion's. Round his neck was a loosely tied blue bird's-eye handkerchief, knotted in a manner the man now wearing it had made the fashion.

Sir John rushed forward.

"No, Jem, no. Sit still. There is no need to rise."

"It isn't the thing to be sitting when such a noble sportsman as Sir John Dering comes into my little kitchen," the big man said, resuming his seat. There was silence, and the two men looked at each

other. Sir John, familiar with the stalwart frame, could only find eyes for the bandaged head. The man sat there listlessly peering at him through his one uncovered eye. The other eye, the right, was swathed in bandages, which went half round the massive head. The man remained motionless, bent forward in his chair, his great hands dangling between his knees—the hands that had so often fought their way to victory. He looked pitifully impotent, this great lion of a West Country man weakly sitting there quiescent—a wounded gladiator.

“Jem—Jem,” cried Sir John Dering impulsively, and grasping the fighter's big right hand, “I never expected to see this—it's heart-breaking.”

The fighter's head was bowed. As he sat there, Sir John grasping his hand, the massive shoulders heaved, and a terrible sob, a throb of bitter anguish, shook his frame convulsively. When he looked up, a great tear was running down the left side of his face.

“Master,” he said brokenly, “it can't be helped.” He tried to smile at his patron, and dashed the tear from his eye. “Forgive me,” he said; “but it comes mighty hard to a man like me. That ball could have smashed my hand, but I should have had something left. I've been cut to ribbons in every other place, and come up again smiling. But this is the end of Jem Belcher, sir. A one-eyed man is no use as a fighter. I've got to sit against the chimney corner all the rest of my life like an old man, and never again shall I chuck my old hat in the ring.”

“Nay—nay,” Sir John Dering answered, “it is

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not so bad as that. Bear it bravely, my lad; time will help."

"It won't help me to remain champion of England, sir," said Belcher grimly.

"Never mind, lad, never mind," said Sir John. "Every champion has his day, and you've had a good one. If you are not able to fight another fight, there'll never be a better champion than you were."

Belcher shook his head.

"There's always better than the best coming along. I've fought some good fights for you, sir, and I'd like to have taken my coat off to this young man that's coming along for Colonel Darleigh. I'd have whacked him to a standstill in half an hour's good milling. But never again for me."

For a moment he stood there, a woeful picture of conscious impotence, and then he pulled himself together.

"Damn it all; there's no good in crying over spilt milk," he said, almost shouting the words. "What cannot be fettled, must be put up with. And if I'm not to be champion any longer, I know who is."

"Bravely spoken, Belcher. Do I know your new champion?" Sir John asked.

Belcher stood up and crossed the sanded floor. He ranged himself side by side with the Game Chicken, pushed that modest lad forward into what little light there was, and smacked his broad shoulders with an open-handed punch that knocked the breath out of the man.

"Hen Pearce—that's the man. Look at him, sir. He's got a fighter's head—look at it; a fighter's



body, and a fighter's hands. And he's got a fighter's spirit. I know him, and I've tried him. I've pasted him in the old stable-yard, and he's pasted me. I had enough of it, too, as fun; a champion doesn't want to fight the likes of Hen Pearce for nothing. He's bigger than me; he punches harder, too, and he's almost as fast. He's a willing lad from Bristol, sir, where good fighting-men are bred, and he takes my place. I don't know whether I can lick him or not, but if I'd two eyes, I'd like to try, for I do know there's nothing in the market better than him. He's the kind of stuff that's got fighting bred in him—brain and bone and blood."

The Game Chicken's face crimsoned.

"Thank you kindly, Jem. There's nothing I'd like better than to stand up afore you, with your two eyes back, and see which is best man. There'd be a bit of tidy walloping."

"In the meantime," said Sir John, "I've seen the Game Chicken in action, and I like him. He's slow, but he will improve, and he goes out for me against Firby. You are willing, lad?"

"Aye, sir, hearty and willing," answered the Game Chicken, "and for such a honourable gentleman as Belcher's backer, I'll fight as long as I can see and stand. No man can say fairer."

"Good," said Sir John. "That's the spirit. Now this is what I have arranged. To-morrow we shall all go down to Leatherhead. I'll take quarters for you at the 'King's Head,' on the Dorking Road. Paddington Jones will go with you as a sparring partner, and I should like you, Jem, to train him. You'll be your own man in a day or two, and better

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than all of them, even with an eye short. And you shall teach the Game Chicken how to win battles like Jem Belcher used to do."

Jem Belcher almost capered on his own sanded floor.

"Aye—will I. Aye—will I. Gentlemen, let's drink on it. Sallie," he roared.

The girl from the bar appeared, and drinks were ordered in.

"Here's to the champions, old and new," Sir John said with genuine pride and some emotion, as he looked on the two stalwarts before him.

"To you, Sir John," said Belcher, raising his mug, "and success to the Game Chicken."

"Amen to all that," said the Chicken in his droll, simple, and modest manner. "But for God's sake, Jem, look behind."

They turned at once.

"Why, damn my one eye, if I aren't letting the mutton burn. My old girl Nell will dust my jacket for this. She'll trim me with her tongue, which is worse than the Chicken's right."

He hastened to the spit.

"To-morrow," said Sir John, standing in the open door.

"To-morrow for certain, sir," Pearce answered.

"And you, Belcher?" Sir John asked.

"You may bet on me as sure as if I were fighting for you, sir. I'll come and teach the Chicken all I know—that will I."

Sir John went more cheerfully on his way.

## CHAPTER VI

A WEEK passed over from the day when Sir John Dering interviewed the Game Chicken at the "Two Brewers" in Soho, and during the time Pearce, Champion Belcher, and Paddington Jones had been installed at the "King's Head," a pleasant and little-frequented hostelry between Leatherhead and Boxhill, on the road which leads to Dorking.

Their coming was heralded to Tom Bullen, the landlord, a hale old fellow, on the day following the meeting at the "Two Brewers." Standing in his bar-parlour, he heard the clatter of a coach and four as it tore down the road—an unusual event at noon, after the Dorking and Guildford mail had gone by. Much to his surprise, the team of four spanking chestnuts pulled up at his door.

In his shirt sleeves, his big brawny arms showing, old Bullen hurried to the door as fast as his gout would let him. He was in time to see Sir John Dering jumping from the driver's seat, and three other men clambering from the roof.

"What, Sir John Dering, sir," he said huskily; "and at my house. The old 'King's Head' is honoured." He turned to the other men. "Jem Belcher—blow my dicky, if it isn't. Dang me, Jem, it's a proud day, if you'll step in and sample my

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home-brewed. Who'd a thought I'd be serving a drink to the champion of England. And Paddington Jones—I owe you something, if you'll only walk inside. I won a year's rent when you hammered the Cornishman outside Epsom last year. Hey—dear, hey—dear. I knew something would happen out of the ordinary to-day—my gout told me. I was only saying I ought to have killed them three cock chickens this morning—and now here I am, and I've only some cold beef in the house."

The garrulous old man was almost incoherent with delight at the honour of entertaining Sir John and the two distinguished fighting-men—heroes to him, through many an exciting day at the ringside.

"Be there a fight agoing on in these parts, Sir John? Do give old Bullen the office, if there is."

"Not to-day, Bullen; not to-day. But I've brought you some guests who will make a fight in four weeks' time that will do your eyes good. They are going to stay here until it takes place, and train my man for it."

Old Bullen looked at the fourth figure in the party—whom he did not know.

"Is that him there? Who might he be?"

"The Game Chicken," Sir John answered. "I thought he would thrive in the Surrey air. You must look after him well, and see that he does."

Old Bullen glanced over his guest with the critical eye of a connoisseur, and ran his arm over the big fighter's shoulder and biceps.

"I like him, Sir John. Dang me—he's a picture, and he's got the stuff in the right place. Hope

70 THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE

you will win, sir—whoever you fight. Who do you fight?"

"Firby—the Young Ruffian. Thank you kindly, landlord. I'll do my best."

"That's the way to speak, lad—that's the way."

The old chap returned to his bar, and was busy amongst the glasses.

They toasted each other all round—the Chicken dipping his freckled face into a pint pot, and sighing contentedly as he did so.

"Aye, lad, make the most of it," said Jem Belcher grimly. "It will be the last time you drink good English ale for a month."

The Game Chicken smiled slowly.

"From to-day you are my man," said Paddington Jones, "and Belcher here sees fair. In fact, you're our man. You've got to eat what we say, drink what we allow you, do what we tell you, and sleep when we send you to bed. And if you don't do as you're told, we'll hammer you silly between us—me and Champion Belcher. So you'd best know what you are in for."

The Chicken grinned acquiescence.

"Fair's fair," he said. "I'm a willing lad, and make no trouble. I'm proud to be in such good hands."

"That's right, my lad—that's right. Do as they tell you, and work hard—it will all come out successfully when the big day arrives," Sir John said to his nominee.

"Aye, will I, sir," the Chicken answered.

Sir John shook hands all round.

"Men," he said, "I trust you all. This fight

is everything to me, and I look to you all to win it. Indeed, we must win—you understand."

"We shall win," said Jem Belcher. "Leave it to us."

Sir John Dering left the house soon after, and the men remained installed at the old "King's Head," preparing for the great fight.

In three days, Belcher's eye was troubling him but little. By the end of the week they were busy all day. They had Pearce out on the road in the morning; they set to in the inn yard with the muffers in the afternoon; in the evening, about the big kitchen, they played out hands of cards, and told yarns of the fights of other days. And at ten the Game Chicken was sent to bed like a child. Old Tom Bullen watched the preparation, rubbing his hands. He killed his young pig and his Surrey chickens generously, and went about the country worrying for the best of the food supply, while Mother Bullen and her kitchen-help cooked on behalf of the house of Dering and the well-being of Pearce, and was all the more keen because she fancied the fighter was like her one son—"who has gone to the wars, and the Lord only knows how they are cooking for him to-night," as she put it.

The Game Chicken, under such treatment, improved steadily day by day. His form made the eyes of the two fighters who stood by him gleam with pride. They were ministering to the production of the thing they loved most of all—a clean, sound, physical, fighting instrument. They watched the Chicken weigh a little finer as the flesh which rounds under inactive living grew hard, and the

muscles of their man, tautening underneath, bulked larger. They watched him strip, and noticed the increasing polish of his skin growing finer and whiter each day. They hustled him about the yard at practice, and laughed with glee as the Chicken moved quicker day by day and gave them punch for punch, and something better. They had the thing they worshipped even more than the money he meant; the fighting-machine, perfecting itself before their eyes; a man readying himself so that when the time came for him to be unleashed every ounce of the good strength with which a healthy man is endowed would come into battle, driven by a mind that would not give way so long as it had the consciousness to will itself into action.

On the Monday, a week after their arrival, a big young man drove up to the "King's Head" in a Tilbury and, leaving his horse in charge of an accompanying groom, strode into the old inn. The house was devoid of customers. He had to strike the bar-room table sharply, and almost cried himself hoarse before Bullen hurried in as fast as his gouty legs would move him.

The new-comer called for a draught of beer, which the landlord served with apologies.

"Very sorry, sir—very sorry. But there are such goings on in my house as never was."

"Of what kind?" the young man asked, without any apparent interest.

"Fighting, sir; good, honest fighting. Perhaps, being a stranger in these parts, you don't know the 'King's Head' is training the Game Chicken."

The young man's manner was objectionably

brusque, due, old Bullen thought, to the fact that he had been kept waiting.

"I do know all about it," he said curtly, "though I should be sorry to belong to such a county as Surrey. This Game Chicken is like your Surrey chickens, I suppose—soft, even in the best condition, and only good for eating. That madman, Sir John Dering, is a fool in his match-making—everyone knows that."

"By the Lord, you are mighty civil," said the landlord, "and, gentleman as you are, I'd trim you, if I hadn't this gouty leg. But this is a public inn, and a landlord must suffer fools gladly, so I pass by what you say of Surrey—only this, that I doubt whether it ever bred a whipper-snapper like thee."

"Softly, landlord, softly," the insolent visitor said with a smile. "I take back all I said about Surrey, and soft, tender chickens are good to the tooth. But I've no stomach for soft fighting-men."

"As for fighting-men," answered the landlord, slightly mollified, "perhaps you are a judge, and if you are, you'd better go into the stable-yard and see Pearce for yourself. He's got that Paddington Jones looking as if he were trying to follow flashes of lightning, and is hammering him all round the yard. See for yourself, sir. It's great sport, and that's why I forget my customers, for I'm getting on, and I do love a ding-dong fight, and must enjoy one when I can. There be fine goings on in my house these days, and it makes life worth living. See for yourself, sir."

The new-comer, whose dress betokened the town, walked into the stable-yard with the gait of a man



more accustomed to the Haymarket and St. James's. An interesting picture met his eyes as soon as he got outside of the passage through the inn. In the yard two men in woollen sweaters, their hands muffled by big gloves, were engaged in a ding-dong spar. The new-comer's eyes gleamed as he noted the features of Paddington Jones, and he guessed instinctively that the other man was the Game Chicken. Any sign of appreciation he may have shown was quickly obliterated, and his face regained a disdainful composure which was painfully disparaging. He noted the other personalities in the ramshackle stable-yard. Belcher, with his coat and vest off, his one eye still bandaged, sat on an upturned tub, a bucket at his feet, and a towel across his knees. He was instructing his man aloud. "Now, boy, that's it; bring it over. That's the game. Follow him, Hen, follow him. Now you've got him—let him have it in the ribs—quick. No! no! much too slow. You've let him get away." When the Chicken scored quickly and well, he offered up blessings in astonishing terms; when he failed to land, or was landed, he cursed him up hill and down dale for a slow-coach and butter-fingers, and a miserable, God-forsaken muddler. The other occupants of the yard were a grinning stableman, a couple of yokels from the nearest village, old Bullen, the landlord, who had returned, and one or two of the boys from the labourer's cottage near by. They were all obviously enjoying themselves.

The boxing practice went on some minutes, at the end of which Belcher called a halt. The Chicken pulled up, breathing regularly and perspiring but

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slightly. Paddington Jones threw himself down on a bale of straw out of breath, his cheerful face red with exertion, the sweat rolling from his temples.

"Blow my old bunch of fives," he said, "you get quicker every day."

"That he does," Belcher added. "When we've finished with him, he'll be able to fight a bit. What do you say, sir?"

He turned to the nonchalant visitor, who sat flicking the dust off his polished boots and silver buckles.

"He might," said that person so distinctly challenged. "He might—but if he isn't much better than he shows himself now, he won't be good for anything much, unless it is to brush flies off the mirror in a lady's boudoir. You don't call that fighting."

The Chicken's honest face crimsoned with wrath. Paddington Jones spat out the straw he was chewing, and promptly sat up. Jem Belcher kicked the bucket over in his anger, and rose with a grim expression that boded no good for anyone.

"I suppose you are a gentleman," the latter said irately, "but you're mighty free with your talk. You'd better keep a civil tongue, my young coxcomb, or I'll pay you myself—even though I've only half my eyesight left."

"Now! now! gentlemen, please," said the landlord.

"That's all very well," returned Belcher, "but the young fool is asking for it."

The young man laughed in a particularly supercilious and annoying manner.

"Nay, nay, Champion Jem—you are over-easily drawn. Gad, lad, there's no need to get angry. I do but say what I think."

"Well, no one wants your opinion," added Paddington Jones sulkily. "And in any case, what you know about fighting does not amount to much."

"That's as it may be, my surly friend." The young blood seemed to desire to be deliberately insolent. "But I can make Gentleman Jackson and all his professors travel, and I once knocked over Tom Belcher—who, some of the folks say, is nearly as good as Champion Jem."

"You've got too much jaw," Paddington Jones shouted, rising angrily. "For two pins I'd knock you off your stumps myself."

"You might do it," the visitor said, "and again you might not."

The Game Chicken thrust himself forward, his quiet eyes shining with anger.

"The gentleman is very knowing, and he's asking for trouble. Suppose he finds out whether I could knock flies off him—he's as polished as a lady's mirror. I'm a willing lad from Bristol, and I'll do my best to knock all the flies on him off him—aye, and dang my eyes, I'll polish him up too."

"With all the pleasure in the world, my buck," the insolent young man said. "By your leave, gentlemen, I'll teach this chawbacon a trick or two. Practice with his betters will make a fighter of him, perhaps, and some day—"

It was more than they could endure. They wrangled amongst themselves, and looked angrily at the stranger, who sat on a rude bench, nonchalant,

insolently cool, still flicking the dust off his polished boots.

"It's more than flesh and blood can stand," Paddington Jones was saying angrily.

"It's not reg'lar," said Jem Belcher, "but I'd like to slip the Game Chicken at him for a round or two."

"What's the harm?" asked the Game Chicken. "If there's any trickery in it, you are here, and can stop it. Let me have a slap at him. I'll put a smile on the other side of his face, and it will do me good, if he is any class, as he says he is."

"Right," said Belcher, turning to the man who had annoyed them. "I don't know who you are, sir, but you seem to have come for trouble. If you really want to get it, the Chicken will give you fifteen minutes. We can't allow him to go longer, but we think—I and Jones—that you'll find that long enough."

The young dandy jumped to his feet.

"You are most kind," he said. "Just one moment or two."

He began to take off his driving-coat. A striped silk waistcoat quickly followed. When the stranger pulled off his fine linen shirt, he bulked so well that the three pugilists nodded significantly.

"Raw uns or muffers?" asked the Game Chicken.

"Do we require gloves?" his opponent added.

"Do you?" asked the Chicken.

"Not a bit," the young man answered.

"Then let's get at it. Forgive me if I spoil your pretty face."

The visitor's eyes gleamed.

They went at it with right good will, to the intense delight of Bullen and the disinterested spectators. While it lasted, ten minutes by Bullen's watch, it was quite a pretty fight. The buck in the smart knee-breeches knew the game, and liked it. The Chicken appreciated the attention. There was not much in the mill for five minutes. They gave and took hard knocks in a fight that was chivalrously fair, and grew more good tempered as they did so—smiling as they sparred after each clash. It was a pretty fight—a dashing little *mêlée*—to watch. Even Jem Belcher, conscious that the turn up was irregular, began to forget his spleen, and consoled himself by thinking a bit of the real thing, perfectly on the square, was good for his charge. Paddington Jones danced with joy, and gave his advice to both parties impartially. It was such a pretty, good-tempered battle, and the love of fight was in all of them.

Six irregular rounds they fought, and then, with a "crack," the visitor's fist landed squarely on the Chicken's face.

"First blood," grinned the visitor, cheerfully.

"I'll pay thee, sir," said the Chicken; "see if I don't."

And it was so. Clever as the visitor was, he had landed on the Chicken hard enough to set him fighting. It was a surprising round. The Chicken planted a thundering blow on the clean white ribs, moving so quickly before him, as the young sportsman danced about the ring. It stopped him where he stood, and before he could move the Chicken stepped back, recovered his balance, and swung his

right, which landed on the ear of the astonished foe, and toppled him over on to the ground.

He sat there a moment, then rose slowly.

"I give you three minutes more, sir, if you want to do anything at the Chicken," Belcher said with a smile.

The smile on the young fighter's face was just as frank.

"Thank you, Belcher—not to-day. There are no more flies on me. I've obtained what I came for."

"What was that?" Paddington Jones asked, helping him to dress. "A thick ear?"

"No—I've got that, thanks to Pearce. But I promised Sir John to see his man, and report on him. Now I've seen him, I can do so very sincerely. Your hand, Pearce—you're a very willing lad, as you say."

"Thank you heartily, sir," said the Chicken. "I gave you that clip across the lug with the greatest respect."

"That is quite understood," said the good-humoured guest. "My name is Trevelyan—Captain Harry Trevelyan. I'm very much obliged for a pleasant afternoon. Let us go and toast the Chicken, and I'll back him when I get to town, and put him down for a hundred to nothing."

An hour later Trevelyan gripped the reins, as he mounted his Tilbury.

The three fighters stood at the door as he took his seat.

"Good-bye, boys," he called. "You'll see me often before the mill. Best of luck."

The Tilbury rattled away down the road.

"Now that," said Jem Belcher, with a chuckle of appreciation—"that is what I call a slap-up sport; a clinking, true-blooded Corinthian. I'd like to have a round or two with him myself."

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## CHAPTER VII

It was close on six o'clock when Captain Trevelyan neared London, and the clocks of Westminster were striking the hour as he drove through Whitehall towards the West End. Fashionable London was passing from its afternoon preoccupations in the direction of home, though a few familiar figures were still sauntering about and taking the air, the day being particularly fine. Sir John, walking the pavement, noted Harry and his smart equipage as he turned into Whitehall, and almost at the same moment the latter espied Sir John, and, guiding his horse to the kerb, almost pulled that spirited animal on its haunches.

"Why! how now, Harry?" asked Sir John, pleased to see his young friend. "That's a puffy ear you are sporting. It has the flavour of the palmy days of the prize-ring about it."

"In very truth it has, and when I got it, it rang true, too. In fact, Sir John, I could hardly tell the difference," Harry answered. "I was so keen on seeing your man Pearce that I toiled my bit of blood to Leatherhead and the 'King's Head.' I was fool enough to deliberately pick a quarrel with your man and get his dander up. Bigad, sir, I succeeded admirably, and the result was a turn up with the Chicken and the raw uns in the stable-yard."



Sir John smiled on his young friend's enthusiasm.

"What! you took on the Game Chicken?" he queried. "That would not be my idea of a pleasant afternoon's sport."

"It soon ceased to be mine. I did not exactly take the Chicken on. Truth to tell, he took me on. This damaged ear is his method of stamping on me his sense of the honour I had extended to him."

"What think you of Pearce, after your arm's-length inspection?" asked Sir John. "How did you leave him?"

"Just as I found him: very polite, vastly civil, and with a punch ready for anything. I believe you've got a man of sand who will damp the enthusiasm of the excellent Darleigh, and I feel sure he is such a good investment that I am going to take advantage of the odds myself. I hear they are laying them against the Chicken."

Sir John nodded his head slowly.

"I am beginning to think I have not been so rash as I thought. The gossip of the town is going my way, and the odds are shortening. In the 'One Tun' to-day I heard someone asking for even money on the Chicken, and only a day or two ago he was at the odds of two to one. It is a good sign. In the meantime I hope to go down to-day or to-morrow and see for myself how my nominee is going on."

"You may take it from me, Sir John, your man is progressing very favourably and looks a picture. He played ducks and drakes with me, and Gentleman Jackson will tell you I am no baby with Nature's weapons. Of course, I might have put up a better

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show, but when I retired it was getting rather sultry. After all, I am not a professional, and I did not quite fancy appearing in the Mall with a battered headlight. If I had stayed much longer I doubt whether I should have had a face left at all, so I made it up with the Chicken after seeing enough of his methods to make me like him. Come what may the lad carries my money, and I think he will carry the Dering colours to victory."

"I hope he may," Sir John answered seriously. "The success is necessary to our fortunes."

So saying he saluted Harry who touched up his mare and drove rapidly to St. James's.

Reaching his rooms, Captain Harry found a letter lying on the hall table, and his eyes brightened when he saw the writing on the carefully folded, sealed, and scented envelope.

"Rosa—at last," he said, with a sigh of relief and tenderly broke the violet seal.

He glanced at the contents with considerable eagerness, and, as he did so, his face crimsoned with pleasure. Written in a dainty feminine hand of scrupulous neatness, the letter read as follows:

"DEAREST HARRY,

"You will remember that at our last interview, on the night of Lady Huntley's ball, I showed myself vastly annoyed with you. I then said that at the proper moment I might make terms. That moment has come to-day. Something supremely hateful has happened to me, and you can help me to readjust a grave difficulty, which is troubling me more than I care to say. I need your help to repair

a blow inflicted on my self-respect. Directly you get this, write me a line saying I may expect you. I shall be at home all this afternoon and evening.

“Yours, as ever,

“ROSA.”

Harry stood looking at the letter with all the rapture of an astonished but admiring lover for several minutes, and wondering what lay behind it. Then, kissing the signature, he folded the missive carefully and locked it away in a cabinet. At once he penned a reply and dispatched it to Bloomsbury Square, and at eight-thirty he ascended the steps which led to the mansion occupied by the Derings.

His inquiry for Miss Rosa was evidently expected and indeed eagerly anticipated. He was at once shown into the drawing-room, where Rosa, evidently labouring under some form of suppressed excitement, was awaiting his coming, the sole occupant of the room. As he entered, the girl came forward to greet him. Harry noted that the chilling shadow of reserve which had kept them apart at their last meeting had vanished. Her eyes were shining her welcome, and the warmth of her greeting was in her manner as well, and thrilled in the hand that lay for more time than was necessary between his own. She was dressed in soft, white muslin elaborately flounced, which showed to advantage her round neck and shoulders and her full white arms which gleamed like ivory in the candle-light.

“Harry,” she said, her oval face raised to his, inviting his salute, “I thought you would never come. I have been waiting for you all the afternoon.”

"I only got your note this evening," he answered, "or I would have been here within an hour of your request. I have been out of town all day."

"It is very good of you to come so quickly," she said, "and oh! Harry, I want your help. It is an ill thing being a woman—there are so many things she must not do, and so many things she cannot attempt. God knows I felt hurt the other day, when I saw you, but I am humbled now. One of the things against which a woman cannot protect herself happened to me to-day—this morning—and the mere humiliation of it makes your help vital to my happiness."

"You know that anything you ask of me I am always waiting to do—that you have only to make the request and it is as good as done," he said tenderly.

"Perhaps you will think it extraordinary, but I want you to announce our engagement at once, and so set me free from unwelcome addresses."

For a moment Harry was astonished with delight at Rosa's unexpected capitulation. But almost at once he remembered the sinister flavour of the reason she had given.

"Surely," he said, "the duty you lay on me is a delight and has been the dream of my life for weeks. But the reason you give makes me think someone has made you unhappy. Tell me what events have led to this request?"

She looked at him earnestly, half hesitating, and then without further consideration explained the happenings of the morning.

"To-day I was walking in the park alone, and

while I was promenading Colonel Darleigh joined me. Knowing the attitude of papa to this gentleman I did not give him a very encouraging welcome. Besides, I had another reason. I have met Colonel Darleigh several times of late, notably at Bath, where he chose to admire me covertly. To-day, before I could check him, he proposed for my hand, and in such a way that made me think I was a chattel, to be bought by a rich man, as one would acquire a horse, or a house, or a choice piece of bric-à-brac. He dwelt almost entirely on his wealth, his position, and the advantages of such an alliance, and as he spoke there was something ugly, almost snake-like, about him, and his manner conveyed a suggestion I did not like."

"What did you say?" Harry asked curiously, pressing her hand which rested in his.

"I told him I was not free and that I was affianced to you. I told him even if I were free I could not reciprocate the attachment he professed, and that any advantages his offer might imply could not influence my decision. I told him—for I was embarrassed and sometimes felt I knew not what I was saying—that even if I could look favourably on his advances my father would not tolerate such an engagement."

"You honour me deeply," said Harry, a note of passion vibrating in his voice. "And tell me, for it is important to us all, what did Darleigh say in reply?"

Rosa hesitated for a moment, as if she were searching her mind for the exact words—as if she were desirous of only stating their bare significance.

"He seemed to threaten me," she said quietly, "and

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there was that in his manner which was a menace. It was not so much what he said, as the underlying current of the thought behind his words. I am anxious that a foolish woman's fancies should not weave significance into commonplace phrases and that I should not credit Colonel Darleigh with intentions he did not convey. But of this I am sure—his manner was a threat. He was angry, and yet controlled himself. He would have said more, and yet withheld it. He said, 'You might remember the amiable Sir John is not without his weaknesses, and his opinion is not necessarily final or invincible.' He said, and there was meaning behind the words, 'There might be ways of coercing Sir John. It may be that I am offering you a chance, not only advantageous to yourself, but one which might save a falling reputation. Sir John is walking in dangerous places these days.' "

She paused a moment and looked anxiously at Harry.

"Are these foolish words? If they are, I was overwrought and may be exaggerating the import of what he said. But always there was the feeling of something withheld—of a blow kept back which might have fallen, there, where I stood. I told him, Harry, that he spoke in riddles. I also said as nonchalantly as I could, that if he had messages to give to my father, he had better speak the words to Sir John himself. 'He will know how to answer you better than a defenceless woman,' I added. He seemed to increase in passion and anger, but at once restrained himself. 'This is not the place,' he said at last, 'nor the proper time. In the proper place

and at a more opportune time, gentle lady, you will hear more, and you may like it less. The position affects not only your happiness, but Sir John's immediate future.' Colonel Darleigh did not speak again, but made me a low bow, somewhat overdone in its profound respect, and with the sinister gleam still lurking in his eyes, which seemed to mock me, walked quickly away. Harry—it may be foolish of me—but I was afraid."

"Have you told Sir John, dearest?" Harry asked.

"No," she said slowly. "Sir John is not quite himself. Something is weighing on his mind, though he turns the brave and smiling face to the world. He is occasionally irritable and uncertain in his temper. Besides, I know of his hatred for Colonel Darleigh and I am afraid that in redressing me he might do something rash. Colonel Darleigh bears a sinister reputation as a swordsman and with the pistols."

Harry shrugged his shoulders.

"Sir John is well able to protect himself and his honour and to extend that protection to his household, even at the point of the sword," he said grimly. "In the meantime he knows Darleigh's desire. Colonel Darleigh made the offer he put before you to Sir John, the other morning, in the Haymarket, and there was a scene. I am surprised Darleigh has pressed the matter further, for the moment."

"But what does all this mean, Harry? Colonel Darleigh spoke as if he had us in his power."

"It means ugly work," said Harry, with conviction. "There is no doubt about that."

Briefly he told Rosa of the happenings at the "One Tun" leading up to the matching of Firby and the Game Chicken.

"But how does this affect me, or father?" asked Rosa. "What right does it give Colonel Darleigh to address veiled threats to Sir John through me?"

"I do not quite know—but we shall find out soon," Harry replied. "I do not wish to alarm you unnecessarily, but the fight arranged is not quite an ordinary one, where for a little sport two men are matched for a few hundreds that do not matter much to either winner or loser. Rightly or wrongly, Sir John and Colonel Darleigh are bringing an old antagonism and lifelong rivalry to the final test in this fight. There is an ugly note of feeling behind it, and Sir John believes Darleigh has deliberately chosen an opportunity to humiliate him. He feels, for instance, that Colonel Darleigh knew Jem Belcher had been maimed and forced the fight on him, on the old promise, believing he could not find a substitute who had a chance of winning. They had an altercation there and then over this part of the matter, but that aspect of the quarrel is for the moment in abeyance. The worst—I may as well tell you—is that considerable feeling has been imported into the match. Sir John believes this is the last round he will play in the old battle of rivalry, and he has been carried away by his emotions. He stands to lose over ten thousand pounds if the Game Chicken fails, and, if he does, the truth of the matter, which Colonel Darleigh seems to know, is that he cannot pay or, if he does, is temporarily ruined. When they



quarrelled in the Haymarket, Colonel Darleigh swore to bring Sir John to the dust, and he meant what he said. There are very ugly influences at work, I am afraid."

The startled look of agony in Rosa's eyes touched Harry to the quick. Almost, he wished he had not spoken so frankly.

"It is the curse of the Derings," she said wildly. "Only a week ago Sir John gave me his word of honour not to risk the integrity of his name, or the security of his house, on a gambling transaction, and he has broken that promise—a step towards degradation which he has never taken in the bitterest moments of his folly. Indeed, the promise must have been broken within a few hours after he entered into it."

There was a long pause between them. Rosa's thoughts were indeed bitter. To her, trained to the ideal of the unbroken word, the unfulfilled promise was more threatening than the worst consequences that could ensue. She searched her mind for the terms of the promise, and she was helped by the sound of Harry's voice.

"I have known Sir John for some years," said Harry at length, "and I am sure it does not come easy for him to break his word."

As he spoke recollection came to Rosa. Her eyes softened with a gleam of understanding—a smile rippled round her lips.

"Why, of course," she said, "it is like my dear, foolish papa. There was a nice distinction such as men of honour make and consider complete absolution. I am glad it is so. I remember Sir John did

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not make the promise in the terms I have used. He gave me his word of honour he would run no further gambling risk at cards."

Facing each other, involuntarily they laughed almost gaily.

"The next time you influence Sir John," said Harry, "you will have to widen the terms of his promise. Your hare has slipped away just as you were rounding him for the kill. Sir John is the soul of honour, and in this reckless match-making he is still within the terms of his promise."

Rosa paced the room for a minute, thinking deeply.

"So this accounts for Darleigh's veiled threats," she said slowly.

Harry silently agreed.

"Then what shall I do?" she asked, and the trust in her eyes was the sweetest thing Harry had seen in his life.

He took her in his arms.

"Do nothing," he said. "Trust your father and me, and let us all stand together on the strong right arm of the Game Chicken. Darleigh can do nothing but financially embarrass Sir John, and your father would not claim indulgence as the price of your hand. At the worst, we draw closer together in the hour of misfortune, and if I have your love and confidence, Colonel Darleigh, even if his scheme succeeds, cannot come between us."

She looked into his eyes with shy confidence, and Harry noted that in them was neither reserve nor defiance—that the shadow between them had drifted entirely away.

"Besides," said Harry confidently, "the position is not lost. The game is only beginning and the fight has yet to take place. It is the last round in a lifetime of hot rivalry, and Sir John will see the last fight is not an inglorious finish. All our anticipations of trouble are based on the belief that the battle will be lost—that Colonel Darleigh has a hand full of trump cards. Believe me, Sir John has a good man, and in the end the tables may be turned on Darleigh."

"Well," said Rosa, "I suppose the die is cast. I am a daughter of a race of sportsmen and will watch the game until the end."

"Bravely spoken, Rosa, and rest assured all will come right. Everything we can do—for I am in this with Sir John—will be done, and the Game Chicken will be fit to fight till he drops, for his life and the honour of the Derings."

"What manner of man is this fighter? It is strange the honour of our house should rest on his shoulders."

"For the moment it does," Harry replied, "and they are fine shoulders to bear the burden. He is one of Nature's gentlemen, a shy, modest, willing lad, and a fighter. Though he has the thick ears of a professional fighting-man, he has plenty of intelligence, and is, I believe, entirely honest."

Her eyes were on his face as he spoke, and woman-like she compared him with the man he had described.

"Why, you have the ear which is the mark of the fighter. What has happened to it?"

He laughed gaily.

"It was a present from the Chicken himself, as an earnest of his intentions."

"Surely, Harry, you have not been fighting?" she asked, with a woman's anxiety in her voice.

"Not exactly fighting," he answered. "I went down to see our man to-day and test whether he was fit to fight for the honour of the Derings. In the process of proof I got this damaged ear. It is the Game Chicken's mark to the compact he has made with Sir John."

"Which reminds me, Harry," she said, with a note of deeper seriousness, "I mean to state the terms of our truce, as I threatened. I want you to announce our engagement to-morrow—it is our best answer to Darleigh. But there are conditions—conditions which a woman must make to guard her happiness."

She blushed a little as she spoke.

"I will obey any condition you may choose to impose," he said slowly, "and will respect it as a religion."

She paused a moment, and then resumed with an increasing purpose slowly dominating her manner and gathering added force in her gently thrilling voice.

"I want our lives to be very happy together," she said. "In this house I am leaving there has always been a shadow, and I have seen it grow, day by day, into an ugly menace which threatens to wreck us. Papa has been everything to me, and is a delight to all his friends. But slowly he is bringing our house to ruin. Even yet it may not be too late, and all the better influences in Sir John, choked by his

growing love of hazard, may yet rise and bid him throw off this evil influence. I want you to promise to save me the anxiety of being a gambler's bride by never risking your name or safety on any gaming transaction."

He laughed merrily into her face.

"It is not a promise that means self-sacrifice to me. The game of hazard with coins has no charm for a sailor who gambles with the highest counter of all—his life. I admit gambling can be a craze—a destroying mania—but you exaggerate its evils. For the most, it brings a little zest to life, a spice of adventure into the dull routine, and by it few are ever ruined, and not many of us are even crippled. But it does not matter to me. My life is full of greater excitements, and the times are coming when a sailor will not need to play games of hazard to add colour to his existence. If it will make you happier for a single moment, I will give you an absolute promise never to risk a coin on a hazard of any kind—on one condition."

"Harry!—conditions at such a moment. How can you make conditions? That is the woman's privilege."

"There are conditions on both sides of nearly every bargain," he said. "My terms are very simple—we all stand or fall together on the strength and skill of the Game Chicken. He wears our colours and carries our honour in his hands. The condition is that for the last time you allow me to have a thumping bet that the Game Chicken wins."

"As we are bound up so much in the coming fight I cannot, as a sportsman's daughter, refuse

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## THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE

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your terms," Rosa said at once. "When the morning of the fight arrives I will pin the colours on our man with my own hand."

"With such an omen the Game Chicken will win," Harry answered.

There was a happy light in Rosa's eyes as they kissed on the compact.

## CHAPTER VIII

ON the Wednesday in the second week of his training, Hen Pearce started out on his usual six-mile spin along the quiet Surrey roads. On these morning walks the Game Chicken was accompanied by Paddington Jones, as Jem Belcher, still suffering from the shock of his accident, refrained from supervising any of the road work. The two men usually travelled over the same ground—a mile or two across the fields skirting Leatherhead, then over the downs in the direction of Hawkshead, and so on to the eminence known as Boxhill, and along the road which led to the "King's Head," less than a mile further on.

Walking briskly along the road, their talk was mostly concerned with the sport in which they were engaged, but scarcely ever of the coming mill. Occasionally the Chicken would run along the path at a speed which outdistanced his trainer, and when the two pugilists joined each other, it was a favourite theme of gossip with them that Pearce could go his two hundred yards at top speed and pull up without even breathing hard. Now and again Pearce would take the stiles along the field-path at a run and a vault, in a manner which excited his trainer's admiration.

"When you hop over the ropes like that," Jones would say, looking at the matter from a professional

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point of view, "it will pull down the odds a peg or two in itself."

"And that reminds me," said the Chicken. "How are the odds? Not much information trickles through to the 'King's Head,' but the last time I saw Sir John he said I had gone below even money."

Paddington Jones, who did not encourage much talk of the fight on these walks, shook his head slowly.

"A man rode up to the 'King's Head' late last night. He had been in London for a day or two. He said the betting is the most mysterious part about this fight. On Monday you were at even money, and yesterday, without any reason, Firby went up in the betting, and they were laying odds on him. He did not seem to know any reasons, but appeared to think the betting was out of the ordinary."

"So it is," answered Pearce, forging steadily ahead. "So little is known about our form that where it started the betting ought to stop. At all events it ought not to go up and down like a monkey on a stick."

"You're right, Hen," replied Paddington. "When Sir John comes down again, I'll ask him about it, and find out what he thinks."

At this moment, about eleven o'clock, they were footing it strongly across the downs. Standing in their path, a hundred yards away, they noticed a woman. As they came nearer, the figure which stood upon the path took shape. What the two men saw was a girl of perhaps twenty, tall, of robust, lithe figure, which even in repose was startlingly graceful. As she turned towards them they saw



her face—round and oval, with the full beauty of young womanhood on the eve of maturity. Her face was dusky and tanned almost the colour of an Indian's. Her black hair, shining like a raven's plumes, was tied up with coloured ribbons, and hung in heavy dark masses down her straight back. In her ears were big gold, strangely shaped ornaments, which might have been either coins or charms. Her costume was also oddly barbaric. She wore a white muslin blouse, the corsage of which was laced with coloured ribbons. Her round, brown neck was bare, but knotted loosely round it was a gaudy silk handkerchief made up of stripes of gold and brown and blue. Her figure was draped in a loose, pleated skirt, shorter than the mode of the day; one caught a glimpse of bare brown ankles, and saw that her feet were shod in a rough untanned leather made into an unusually shaped boot which seemed at once half slipper and half sandal.

"My word," said Pearce. "Pipe the Romany witch. Isn't she a beauty—just like a big brown fawn."

"Steady, Pearce, steady," grinned the trainer.

Indeed there was no mistaking the pure Romany type of this woman. She had all the dusky beauty of the full-blooded gipsy, and its subtle influence haunted her soft brown eyes, her red and pouting lips, and her glorious mane of straight, shining, black hair. She came towards them with an ingratiating smile, and her strong white teeth flashed in the sun.

"A fine morning for the road, brave gentlemen," she said. "Cross the Romee's hand with silver, and

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she will tell you of the fine fortunes waiting the pretty gentlemen."

Paddington Jones certainly did not answer to her last description; indeed, neither of the two men could be exactly described as pretty.

"Come along, Hen," he said roughly. "We are not fools out for a fairing, to be rigged by any Romany child. They are all of the race of bamboozlers, and she'll only fool you with her chive."

"Ah! the gentleman knows the Romany," she said, "but he is not a pal, or he would not be so free with the jib. Cross the Romee's hand with silver," she said, turning her dark eyes on the Game Chicken, as the easier of the two prospective victims, "and she will tell you all that you want to know."

Pearce succumbed to this girl's dusky charm. He drove a big hand into his pocket, and drew a florin from it, with which he crossed the gipsy's brown palm. As he did so, she smiled into his admiring eyes, and he caught a nearer glimpse of her wonderful gleaming teeth.

"Will the pretty gentleman ask what he desires to know most of all, or shall I tell him?" she queried, with calm impudence.

"It would be so much cleverer if you told me the two thoughts in my mind, and the answers," he answered, with a gay laugh.

"Don't be a damned fool," interjected Paddington Jones. This gipsy fortune-telling was no part of his scheme of training.

"No, stop and listen, Pad," Hen said. "It's a good lark, if nothing else. And she's a stunning little witch, anyway."

"Yes, listen, brave gentleman," she commanded, with cool effrontery and an odd arresting charm. "The Romany prophecy always comes true."

Then, turning to Pearce, she said, "The first thing you are thinking is that the little Romee is good to look on. Is that not straight, brave gentleman?"

Pearce crimsoned. He certainly had been thinking the thoughts she had indicated.

"Tell me how you know that?" he asked.

"Ah!" she answered, "it is the Romee's secret. There is no answer to your thought but the one word, 'Perhaps.' Ever so much depends upon the moon and the way one looks on the gipsy girl's face."

She laughed with delicious self-appreciation at her own insolence.

"The other thought," she went on, "is of a great day, and there are crowds—mad, shouting crowds. There is a ring and there is to be a fight. You are wondering who will conquer in that fight, and the gipsy cannot tell you. The fight is in doubt. I see a man with a big broken fist, and the blood is dripping slowly down from his face and dabbling his breast. It is you who have crossed the gipsy's hand with silver. I do not know whether he wins, or even fights. There are ugly things between, and it is doubtful whether he ever reaches the ring. The gipsy girl would warn her pal. He is in danger now, and should be careful. The gipsy sees much—knows much. Heed the warning of Stella and believe. The Romany child has seen it in a vision. Beware!"

With a bound like that of a lithe fawn she sud-

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denly drew away from the two men, and hurried along the path, waving her brown hand as she went. They watched her recede, open-mouthed with astonishment.

"Damn her for a saucy jade. No good ever came of listening to beggar's French—to gipsy gibberish. Come on, Pearce, and don't stand gazing there like a stuck pig or a love-stricken serving-wench. We are preparing for a fight, and should not be going about the country like a pair of rustic girls, listening to gipsy patter."

The two men resumed their walk without another word, but the warning of the gipsy girl haunted their minds to the point of obsession. Both knew the subject of the Romany's talk was rankling in their minds, and after a silence, during which they had covered a mile, the Game Chicken spoke their thoughts aloud.

"Damn it all, Pad, my buck, I don't usually cotton on to this wayside patter—this beggar's French. But how the devil did she know I was preparing for a fight, and why could she answer the thoughts in my mind? You may think me a bit of an old wife, but I don't like it at all."

Paddington Jones shook his big shoulders, like a dog clearing its coat of water after a bath.

"It's mummery—all damned mummery," he said. "That brown-faced jade has heard all about us, and given us the stuff on the hit or miss plan. After all, our doings are the talk of the countryside for ten miles either way. She has heard the folk gossiping about us in the taverns and faked the prophecy. Let's forget it."

The men did not refer again to the subject, though this is not to say it did not remain uppermost in their minds.

They were reaching the crest of Boxhill along the base of which winds the turnpike road to Dorking and Leatherhead, when both men stopped dead in their tracks.

From the valley, piercing the quiet air and curdling it with horror, came a long, startled scream—the sound of a woman's voice vibrating with fear.

"God's love!" gasped the Chicken. "What is that?"

Although there was no further screaming the men had not to wait long for the answer. Almost immediately they heard the beat of horses' hoofs madly ringing on the flinty road, and the grinding roar of whirling carriage wheels.

At the foot of the hill, near the extreme corner, they saw the vehicle emerge from the avenue of trees. It was a yellow phaeton drawn by two maddened chestnuts, and the pair were careering at a frightful pace towards Leatherhead, the carriage rocking behind them and seeming every second as if it would overturn. The only occupant was a woman, who sat almost motionless and apparently paralysed with fright; her long veil fluttering like a ribbon as it streamed behind her.

"Good God, Pad! if she goes round the bend at the corner at that pace she'll fetch up at the old church wall and be smashed to a pulp. Here's after her."

Without a moment of hesitation Pearce dashed

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away down the incline, and made for the nearest point on the highway.

The road described a bend round the base of the hill, and the phaeton had some two hundred yards to go to reach the point where Pearce would strike it. The fighter flew down the fifty yards of turf which separated him from the nearest point of the road—his one chance of getting near the galloping horses and the rocking phaeton consisting of arriving there first.

The nearer he approached the road, the nearer the sound of the ringing hoofs seemed to be. He travelled like the wind, sobbing unconsciously in inarticulate despair—the fear clutching at his heart that he would be too late. As he ran, Pearce picked a gap in the hedge which divided the hill from the road, and diving into it, half sprang, half pushed his way through the obstacle, tearing himself as he did so. "At least," he thought, as he scrambled through, "I am on the road and in time."

Almost as he thought the words the two horses swung round the corner and were upon him. He had time to see the dust about their thundering hoofs; to realise that the woman sitting alone on the seat, with rigid lines of horror frozen on her face, had shut her eyes and was swaying where she sat as if about to swoon, when the whole flying, swinging, roaring mass hurtled forward, and was upon him.

"For God's sake, Pearce, stand away!" Paddington Jones yelled, as he saw the man and the stampeding horses come together at right angles.

His warning was not heeded; indeed, in the roar,

could not be heard. The Chicken had a fraction of a second in which to make up his mind. He jumped for the head of the nearest horse and caught the slackened reins, hanging on to them. Paddington Jones saw the man and the horses plunging and swaying together. He broke through the hedge and ran after them down the road. When he had followed thirty yards, he found them still together. Pearce, with his arms wrapped in the reins, had stopped the maddened animals, and the near chestnut was down on its knees. He stood there, pale, the sweat upon his brow, dizzy, reeling, seeing or hearing nothing. So had he been in his fighting career, oblivious to everything, exhausted and almost beaten, but with a brain that clung with the tenacious, uncomprehending despair which is personal courage in its last extremity to the one single purpose glowing in the darkening mind. The simple quality of conduct in which he had schooled himself—the quality of keeping on against the odds, and even when reason bade him stay—had won this fight with the plunging horses, even as it had carried him to victory in the ring. He had stopped them twenty yards from the turn of the road which, going downhill and twisting sharply almost at right angles, would have brought the equipage with a crash on the red sandstone walls of the church at the foot of the declivity.

He stood there quivering and trembling as Paddington Jones reached him. The two horses, wild-eyed, shivered as their spent energy left them almost in a state of collapse. Right across the front of the phaeton the woman had fallen in a dead faint,

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her ashen face hanging over the splashboard and her white veil still idly streaming downwards, moving only a little in the gentle breeze.

"God's life!" said Paddington Jones, "that was a squeak. Are you hurt, man?"

The Chicken stood staring at him like a man awakening from a bad dream. It was more than a minute before he could move his tongue. When he spoke his chest was heaving.

"By the Lord, Pad," he said slowly, as if he were picking the words one by one out of his scattered senses, "I dreamt I'd sold the fight."

Jones laughed stridently and hysterically, and ran his hands over his man with the eagerness of a mother going over her child after a bad tumble.

"Nothing wrong, so far as I can see, that a patch or two of plaster and a strong brandy won't put right. Jump in the cart, and I'll drive these brutes to the 'King's Head.'"

He raised the lady from the footboard and propped her up on the seat. Pearce sat behind, and, unsteadily balancing himself, held the woman in her place. Jones flicked the horses which pulled out quietly, and in a couple of minutes they drove up to the "King's Head."

Standing at the doorway, as they pulled up, they discovered Sir John Dering and Champion Belcher looking anxiously down the road.

"Why! what's the game?" said Sir John. "You've got my cart."

"If it's yours, sir, it's damned lucky you've not found it in pieces ready for firewood."

"What, Rosa," Sir John said, half grasping the



situation. "Has there been a spill? Is she hurt? Tell me, is she alive?"

The four men helped her down and into the big kitchen of the "King's Head."

"I think she is all right," said Paddington Jones. "At least she's not been hurt, but only badly frightened. She's fainted from the shock."

It was some hours before Rosa was herself again. Sir John had driven his daughter down in the morning, and while he had been waiting for the return of the Chicken and talking with Belcher, she had taken the phaeton on towards Dorking. He heard the story of the rescue from the lips of Paddington Jones and later from his daughter, as she sat with her head leaning on his shoulder, in the best parlour of the house.

"I cannot quite account for this," he said at length. "I've never known those chestnuts to shy before."

"It was no fault of the horses. There were three ugly men, a little the worse for drink, hanging about the borders of the wood near Burford Bridge, and one of them suddenly jumped through the bushes to see what was coming along the road. I think they must have been poachers or footpads, and they were up to no good. Not liking their appearance, just as one of the men crashed through the hedge, I whipped up the horses, and I suppose my sudden action, coupled with the noise of the man's appearance, set them going. They were out of my control in a minute, and I could do nothing with them. If it had not been for that man who stopped them I should have been dashed to death. Did you see

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him, and have you thanked him? And, if he is here, might I thank him, too?" she said timidly.

Sir John rang the bell, and old Bullen entered.

"Ask Pearce to come here at once," he directed.

Within a minute, the Game Chicken stood before them. He was quite himself again, except that a number of patches of sticking-plaster decorated his freckled face. He stood before Sir John Dering and his daughter with much the same nervousness a schoolboy shows when found out in a misdemeanour.

"Rosa," said Sir John, "allow me to present to you the Game Chicken."

"What, the man who fights for the house of Dering?" she asked.

"Yes," said Sir John slowly, "and a man who has a greater claim on our regard, and to whom we owe a debt we cannot pay—whether the fight goes with us or against us. The Game Chicken stopped our horses, and, I believe, snatched you from death."

Rosa looked at the big rugged pugilist, whose freckled face was red with embarrassment, and who shifted uneasily on his feet, as if he were expecting a scolding.

She took his big hand, and as she shook it noticed the knuckles were scratched and torn.

"It is a great pride to a woman to know a brave man," she said. "It is pitifully inadequate that for such a service one can only speak words of gratitude."

"Thank you kindly, lady," said the Chicken, looking more and more as if he had robbed an orchard.

"I'm very glad; I mean, I'm very sorry."

"I think Pearce means he is sorry the accident happened and glad he was able to help. Yours is an action we shall not forget, and for which we cannot thank you enough."

Pearce shuffled his feet uneasily, as he stood before the pair.

"I'm a willing lad from Bristol, sir; and I always had a way with horses."

"I came to see you, Mr. Pearce," said Rosa Dering, "so that I might know the man who is to fight a battle involving with its prize the honour of our house. I wondered as I came what sort of a man he would be to whom we look to carry our colours on the great day. If a lion's heart makes the great fighter, then the Game Chicken is invincible."

"Thank you kindly, lady," he said. "I'm a willing lad, and I do my best. No man can say fairer."

"I have heard many fairer speeches," Rosa answered, "which did not ring half so true."

When the Chicken left the room, Rosa turned to her father.

"At such a moment," she said, "you and I stand very near together. When I asked you to hold your hand in this mad gambling impulse which is wrecking our lives, you promised me you would abstain from cards. I thought the promise covered the whole ground of our difference, and have regretted bitterly that you interpreted it so narrowly."

Sir John looked at his daughter quietly for a moment, and she, observing him, saw in his face a purpose she had never discovered before.

"I will not put my intentions into words," he said. "As you lay unconscious, I saw and thought much during those dreadful two hours. If you will be kinder to my faults through this one last round with Darleigh, I think you will have few reasons for further regrets. After all the wasteful turmoil of the last few years, at least I have found a man who gives me a better conception of duty than I have ever cherished. The man who has just gone out, with his calm faith in himself, his simple quality of doing the task lying nearest to his hand, no matter what peril is implied, makes the part I play almost ignoble. Even now, if Darleigh had been honest in the making of this match, I would withdraw, but in the sordid game he has chosen to play, I have, by a great gift of fortune, secured an honest man who will lead him where he has threatened to bring me—to humiliation. It is the last round, my Rosa, and I believe we hold all the winning cards. When the Chicken has won this match, as I believe he will, there will only be one duty remaining—to settle a question of honour in the manner of gentlemen. After that I pass my word, I will govern my life with greater order, and will curb the curse of the Derings, or even wipe it out of my life altogether. Come, Rosa, dreadful as your day has been, it brings us nearer together, and from the simple heroism of one man, the greater lesson of duty and honourable service has been learnt."

She looked upon the fine strong face of the man by whose side she had spent the greater part of her life. The dandy, the careless man of fashion, the reckless player of wild hazards seemed to be

phases of his character which had dropped away from him like a mask, and the finer gentleman they had obscured stood revealed.

"My dear father," she said, "it may be that the incidents of the day are just a happy augury; it may be that the man who risked his life for me has saved us both. In the last round with Darleigh, the Game Chicken is more than a forlorn hope. In this final round I am with you heart and soul, and may the best man win."

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## CHAPTER IX

SIR JOHN DERING and his daughter spent the afternoon at the "King's Head." In the late afternoon they were joined by Captain Trevelyan, who dropped nimbly off the Guildford coach about six o'clock. He had promised to come on during the day, to dine with them at the old inn, and to drive back in their company through the cool of the evening.

The two men, so finely contrasted, sat with Rosa over their dinner in the small panelled room, which was the best the "King's Head" had to afford. The stirring incidents of the day had been explained to Harry. In the manner of both men, shown by the way they pressed little attentions upon her during and after the meal, there was a deep emotion which might be described as a gratitude to fate that it had withheld the threatened blow. Rosa, herself again, laughed away their concern, and they were quite a merry, though perhaps an unusually silent, party. The emotions of the day had drawn them into much closer sympathy.

In the tavern, Belcher and Paddington Jones, the day's work done, were sitting at the open window talking over the events of the morning, and, perhaps, fighting some of their battles over again.

Hen Pearce had gone out for an evening stroll.

A man of quiet, simple tastes, singularly docile in the hands of his trainers, he had pressed for the privilege of an hour to himself each day, and they, humouring his temperament, had for many days given over this hour to the fighter. He spent the time chiefly in idly strolling up and down the field-paths, lingering near the woods to hear the last song of the birds, or sometimes climbing the hill to see the late splendour of the sun as it set beyond the horizon across the mighty valley.

After dinner, seated over their wine, Sir John and Harry were talking over the enterprise which had drawn them all to the old inn.

Captain Trevelyan was saying, as old Bullen bustled in and placed the lighted candles on the table, "I cannot quite make things out, Sir John. Here we are with our man, and we have seen him at work day by day. We know what he is at this moment—as fit as a man can be. Your support ought to have made him steady, and he did settle down to evens. Since then I have helped myself at even money pretty freely, as have many of my friends. The Chicken's position in the market ought to be firm, and if it alters, it should be in the direction of the odds being on the Chicken. The facts are exactly opposite, Sir John."

"What is the latest in town, Harry?" Sir John asked.

"Well, sir, I was about the town this morning. At the Cocoa Tree rooms the betting has been very mysterious and wild. There has been as much as four or five to one laid against the Chicken's chances."

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Sir John sat bolt upright, and knit his fine brows in some perplexity.

"Zounds, Harry!" he said; "your news is mighty strange."

"Precisely what I thought as I took the odds. It is more than strange—it is sinister. Odds of five to one are preposterous, unless—"

"Unless what?" asked Sir John sternly.

Captain Trevelyan shrugged his shoulders.

"Unless," he added, "there is good ground for believing the Chicken will lose—unless someone who is presumed to know is betting on that belief."

The two men sat opposite each other sipping their wine. Rosa, who watched them, and was now as keenly interested in their project as they were, saw the concern in their faces.

"But what do influences matter, if the Game Chicken is right?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Sir John slowly, "as long as the Game Chicken is right. Let us have Belcher in and see what he thinks about the matter."

That worthy entered the room a minute later.

"Jem," said Sir John, without any preamble, "what reason can there be to justify anyone in laying five to one against the chances of Pearce in the coming fight?"

"Two, sir," he answered promptly.

"You might state them," Sir John said.

"First, that the layer of such odds is mad," answered Jem; "secondly, that he knows something we do not."

"Men are not usually mad who watch the betting lists, Jem," Sir John said, mildly.



Jem shook his head.

"No—the second reason is the best. It's not for me to say, but five to one sounds as if someone thinks the Game Chicken will not fight."

"But what reason could they have for that?" Captain Trevelyan asked.

"None, sir," answered Belcher promptly—"at least, none that's honest," he added thoughtfully.

Sir John nodded his head.

"In these matters reasoning is simple. Our worthy friend Jem puts the case in a nutshell. It follows quite clearly that if there is no reason we are aware of to prevent the Chicken going into the ring fit and strong, the danger is from without. Something is to happen to the Chicken about which we do not know."

"By the way, Belcher, where is the Chicken?" asked Captain Trevelyan. "Is he safe?"

"About now he usually takes a quiet stroll, sir. It is what he likes at the end of the day's work, and we humour him in such a simple matter. He will be within a mile of the house."

Sir John looked up, a shade of anxiety on his pale face.

"Is that wise, Jem?" he asked.

"Well, we have thought so, and when a man's training, it is just as well to let him do the little things he likes, if they do him no harm. Of course, if you think there is danger, we can cut the stroll out, or go with him. But it will look odd now, and might upset him. Little things upset the biggest men when they are training."

"Quite so," said Sir John. "We'll leave the

matter a day or two. But you might keep a skinned eye on the road and the people who come in and out of the house."

"Trust me for that, Sir John."

"I do, Belcher—absolutely—but if the betting continues as it is, we must eliminate every single risk."

"I am absolutely with you, Sir John," said Captain Harry.

"And so am I," Belcher answered, heartily.

Even as they spoke there was a quiet tap at the door.

"Come in," shouted Sir John.

The door opened, and Paddington Jones entered. His face was flushed with annoyance he could not conceal.

"Begging your pardon, sir," he said, "there is a gipsy girl in the passage who wants to see Sir John Dering."

"Do we know her, Jones?"

The fighter almost growled his reply, so indignant was he.

"I do—bad luck to all the likes of her. She's a Romany girl with a fat lot too much tongue, and if she was my girl I'd slap her. We met her on the downs this morning, and Pearce crossed her hand with silver in fun. She had the cheek to throw him a tale that he would not enter the ring, and went away spitting out the word 'beware' like a rotten old actor in a penny gaff."

"Zounds!" said Sir John; "that's devilishly odd. What can this wench know?"

The consternation of the other three men was

so marked that Paddington Jones, noting the alarm on their faces, checked the flow of his grievances.

"Straws show the way the wind blows sometimes," said Captain Trevelyan. "We are absolutely foolish, if we do not hear what the girl has to say."

"Show her in," said Sir John, and Paddington Jones opened the door.

Stella entered the room quickly, as if she had a message that brooked no delay. She appeared much as she had seemed to the two fighters earlier in the day, only now she was no longer laughing her wheedling gipsy insolence. Her appearance was slightly dishevelled, as if she had travelled quickly, and her breast heaved tumultuously. Stella's great dark eyes rested on the faces of the four men in the room, and noted also the white, queenly beauty of Rosa, who had risen as she entered. There was no trace of diffidence in the girl's manner, and without even a pause she addressed them.

"Which of the two gentlemen is Sir John Dering?" she asked.

Jem Belcher pointed in the direction of Sir John.

"I know you, sir, as the backer of Hen Pearce, the Game Chicken. These men are his trainers; that I know too. Where is the gipsy girl's fighting pal—the Game Chicken—now?"

Sir John looked at the girl in a puzzled manner.

"Really," he began, "this is unusual."

"Oh! I know that quite well. Don't ask for explanations," she added. "They can come after. Don't wonder whether I am speaking the truth—but believe me when I say I am. Where is the Game Chicken?" she asked insistently.

Sir John looked at Paddington Jones.

"He's probably strolling along the Dorking Road," Jones said promptly, and one could see his mind was working quickly.

"Then listen to me," said Stella, her voice low and clear and vibrating with the intensity of her convictions. "You ought to be out and after him at once—he is in danger."

"From what?" said Sir John. "You must tell us more."

"This morning I saw three men in the woods. They insulted the gipsy as she passed, and I hated them for that. But I hated them most because they are bad men—one can see that in their faces. All the day I have watched them, and all the day they have been in the woods."

"Father! the men who frightened the horses," Rosa said. "This girl's impression is mine."

Sir John nodded his head quickly.

"Go on, my girl," he said.

"Late this evening I passed along the lane, and by the woodside the three men were sitting there, and they had been joined by a fourth. He is a different man—not of their class—perhaps a gentleman. I have seen him at the races. They were eating from a loaf and slices of meat. As I passed, I came upon them hastily, and they did not hear my approach. When I drew opposite, one, the ugliest, was raising a mug and saying: 'Here's to the Game Chicken, and may he like the merry moonlight!' They all started when they saw me, and the fourth man, the gentleman, said 'Hist!' They stopped talking as I passed, and shouted after me. They

called after me the coarse things men of that kind say to the lowest trollop in the streets, and one man said he would give a crown for a kiss, and started after me. I ran, and easily outdistanced him, and his pals called him back. I have been running ever since, skirting the woods and coming across the field-path on the other side to get to the 'King's Head.' The gipsy girl may be wrong, but these men are curs—callous ruffians—and they mean no good."

She stopped, almost breathless.

"Be warned," she said at last. "This is not gipsy gibberish. Get out on the road and find the Chicken as quickly as you can. He is in danger. I don't know what the danger is, or how it will come—but there is danger. Get out at once and find him. If I am wrong, there is no harm done. If I am mistaken, that is all to your good; but, right or wrong, find him, and be on the safe side."

"This girl is right," said Rosa.

"Out, out," Belcher shouted. "Of course she's right. The devils may be nobbling the Chicken now."

"By God, if they are there'll be some more nobbling before the night's over," said Paddington Jones.

"A moment," Harry commanded. "Sir John and Paddington Jones should go along to the point where the men were seen last. I and Belcher will run to the same spot by the field-path. We cover two roads, and save time if anything ugly is happening, and either party can call to the other, if necessary."

"Excellent, Harry—now let us away," said Sir John.

Hastily seizing cudgels, the four men and the gipsy girl rushed out of the house, and, separating into pairs, set off along the two roads by which the Chicken had to travel on his homeward stroll.

Meanwhile, and almost at the same moment, Pearce was slowly tramping the road which he had struck after a ramble through the fields at Burford Bridge. The night was fine and clear, but dark, for the new moon did but little to illuminate the countryside. The air was cool and fresh, and the fighter, as he walked, breathed deeply and gratefully, inhaling the fragrance of the early springtime as if he were taking draughts of life itself. Perfectly healthy, physically fit after his weeks of training, pleasantly tired at the end of his arduous day, he passed through the quiet country with a tranquil mind.

Indeed, he was in that quiescent mood which comes to most healthy men who stroll through country lanes at the end of a long day of vigorous action. His thoughts were far away from fighting, and, indeed, were so vague that they scarcely took shape in his mind. He was content to be alive in that peaceful night, and to be moving with a pleasant sense of wellbeing through the wonder of the dreaming landscape.

And then, in a moment, his mind was all attention. He had turned the bend which leads into the more sheltered road winding round the foot of Boxhill, and was idly speculating on the strange chances of the morning, when he heard, or thought he heard,

a figure creeping in the bushes near him. With a promptness which only comes to men of action in emergency, he stopped and stepped back half a dozen yards. He stood still in the road and listened, and then, almost ashamed of the nervous apprehension working in his mind, would have gone on.

But his suspicions were at once confirmed. A man came from the dark shadow, and stood three yards in front of him in the centre of the road.

"A lurking poacher," thought Pearce, advancing boldly, but there was something in the furtive poise of the figure in front of him which still aroused his suspicion.

A gruff voice hailed him.

"Is this the road to Dorking?" it asked, and Pearce noted the figure in the dark was a bulky one, the collar of the man's coat was turned up, and the brim of the hat half concealed his face.

"Yes," answered Pearce, "two miles further on."

"How long will it take me to walk it?" asked the voice, and the man came nearer, and seemed to be peering earnestly at Pearce.

"Half an hour," he answered, "or rather more."

As he spoke, Pearce noticed the man lurch forward with his hand raised in the air. His instinct was providence to him. The Chicken stepped aside with the sudden swiftness of a fighter in the ring. As he side-stepped the oncoming figure, the uplifted hand came down, and Pearce heard the whizzing sound made by the swing of a heavy club hurtling near his ear.

Quick as a panther, the fighter pinned his man, grabbing him by the neck, and clutching the muffler

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round it. As he did so, the assailant, almost in terror, yelled for assistance.

"Up, men—here he is. Quick and sure—he's got me."

Pearce, who was shaking his man as a terrier mouths a rat, dealt him a swift blow in the face with his free right, and flung the figure away from him, his hand retaining the scarf round the man's neck. His quickly working mind had realised the danger. Pausing irresolutely, he heard the sound of men crashing through the bushes a few yards in front of him, and turned to retreat. As he did so, another figure loomed behind him.

"A plant, a plant," thought Pearce. Conquering his desire to stay and fight it out, he ran straight at the figure blocking his retreat, swerved as he neared it, swung his fist for the face of the man as he passed, and received a blow from a swinging club which struck him in the forearm with a force that filled him with raging pain and made the limb itself helpless.

"By God, I'll pay you for that," he yelled as he ran. "Follow me into the open, where I can see how many there are of you and where you are coming from, and I'll give you blow for blow."

His rage had roused the fighter, wounded and eager to give back what he had received in the shape of ill-treatment.

He ran a few yards down the lane to where the trees broke and the darkness was not so great. Then he slackened his speed, and half turned back. It was a foolish movement, but he was mad with rage, and wanted to fight. The first man, running quickly,



was upon him. He could hear rapid footsteps on the road, and saw three figures looming in the darkness. The man nearest to him sprang for his legs, and held on with the tenacity of a wrestler.

"Quick, you slow devils," he shouted in short sharp gasps. "Out the Hawbuck, before he knocks my face in."

Pearce made a great effort to free himself, fell on his man, and the two rolled on the road. His assailant was on top, and clutched at his neck.

"God—you fools," he yelled; "why don't you come at him? I've got him fixed."

He had Pearce by the throat, and was squeezing the sense out of him, though the big fighter wrestled on despairingly, and gave him trouble. Indeed, the man on top of him clung to Pearce with a courage which was fast becoming exhausted and turning to a gathering sense of despair.

"Hit him, you idiots—hit him. I can't hold him for ever," he called, and then it struck him that his friends were not following.

He stopped and listened. As he did so, he heard sounds of scuffling on the road.

A shrill, low whistle sounded, and from near the stile which led to the field-path there came an answering signal.

He heard the thud of a blow and a groan, then the sound of a man breaking through the bushes. The receding figure called to him.

"Sold," the voice yelled. "Leave him, and get out. They are coming from across the field."

The man who had strangled the Chicken into semi-consciousness let go his hold, took a flying

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kick at the prostrate figure, leapt for the bushes, forced his way through, and disappeared, though his footsteps could be heard receding over the meadow-land.

As he did so, Captain Trevelyan and Jem Belcher leapt the stile, Stella following them.

Pearce, recovering his faculties, was struggling to his feet. He saw the two advancing shapes, and went for them with a bellow of rage.

"Easy on," shouted Belcher—"all friends here. It's Belcher and the Captain. Where are they?"

"They must have turned, the cowards," Pearce roared. Pearce faced about, and the three men went on together. As they did so, they heard a voice calling them.

"Belcher—Harry, quick," it was saying. It came from Sir John Dering, who was speaking excitedly. Hastening in the direction of the sound, they found him standing there.

"Those brutes; they knifed me in the hand," he said, "and they've dropped Jones."

As he spoke, a figure at his feet stirred. It was the dazed shape of Paddington Jones, struggling to his feet.

"Where's Pearce?" were the first words he said. "Have they put him out?"

"No, my buck. Here I am, my hearty," Pearce answered.

"That's all to the good," said Paddington Jones, and, reeling into Belcher's arms, relapsed into unconsciousness again.

It took them half an hour to walk back to the "King's Head." Paddington Jones, who had a big

gash on his forehead which was bleeding copiously, had to be supported, but though he still reeled with the shock, he was making light of his wound before they arrived. It transpired that Sir John and Jones had arrived in the rear just as the dash was made for Pearce, and engaged the three men who were following the leader. They immediately gave fight. Two men set upon Paddington Jones and bludgeoned him down, while the third had knifed Sir John as he gave the alarm, inflicting a slight wound. The sound of the answering whistle to his summons from Trevelyan and Belcher had put the attacking party to flight.

Half an hour later when the five men, still slightly excited, reached the inn, they stood in the dining-room, and for some moments incoherently compared notes.

"Two things are clear," said Sir John, who was fast recovering his aristocratic calm. "One thing is that we owe the safety of the Chicken to Stella, the gipsy. For that we must thank her, heartily."

They looked round for the Romany girl, and for the first time noticed she had not returned to the inn.

"That's a pity," said Sir John; "but we shall see her again. Another point is also painfully clear," he continued. "This shows the reason for the wild betting against the Chicken. There has been a plot to put him away."

"Yes—but who would dare?" asked Trevelyan.

"Aye—who?" asked Belcher.

"Well, one of them wore this," said Pearce, holding up a silk cravat of primrose and blue. "I tore this from his neck."

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"Ah! then we know," Belcher said. "That is the very handkerchief Captain Stuart wore the day I got my eye knocked out."

"Damme, so it is," said Paddington Jones. "That's Colonel Darleigh's blackleg."

They stared at each other in silence.

"The game grows uglier," said Sir John, a menace in his voice. "Do you look well after the Chicken, and I'll carry this night's work to the account I have to settle with our good friend, Colonel Darleigh."

There was an expression on Sir John's stern face which boded no good for Colonel Darleigh when they came together for a final adjustment.

## CHAPTER X

THE day after the exciting incidents on the Dorking Road, Sir John Dering and Captain Harry Trevelyan, seated on the coach of the former, drawn by four smart chestnuts, trundled slowly from Bloomsbury to Charing Cross and into the Strand. The hour was close on twelve.

"We'll call in at the Cocoa Tree," said Sir John before starting, "and see whether the incidents of last night have affected the market on Pearce this morning."

Sir John pulled his horses up at the door of the well-known sporting head-quarters, and leaving them to his footmen walked in with Captain Harry.

There were many friends of both men present who greeted the two Corinthians noisily.

Sir John had not much to say to his friends, but went straight to the betting list. On it was chalked the record of bets made in the club during the morning and from midnight the previous day. The record was scarcely understandable.

Bets had been made against the Chicken at five to one on the previous night. Then, later on, it would be two o'clock in the morning, the market had grown wild and the Chicken had come back to evens.

Sir John pointed the fact out to Harry.

"Look you, Harry, that means, if anything, that

the failure of the attack on the Game Chicken was known late last night—after midnight."

"Yes—sir," said Harry. "But here's the odd part about it. Before the night closed, the Game Chicken went out to three to one again, and—here we have the Darleigh party coming in and laying resolutely against him."

"Odd—very odd," said Sir John, shaking his fine head, and obviously puzzled. "Now—why should that be?"

He turned to a group of his intimates. Amongst them was Sir Harry Tempest, Lumley Savage, and Fletcher Reid.

"Tell me," he said, "who was here last night, until the end?"

"I left early," said Lumley Savage. "It was two o'clock, and I'd lost a quarter of my year's income," he added, with a grin.

"I had other fish to fry, and was not here after dinner," Sir Harry Tempest explained.

Fletcher Reid beamed.

"I was here until daybreak. Incidentally, I have a fourth share of Lumley's income. I need the money, for both Lumley and Bragshaw have dipped freely into me this year."

The little group smiled appreciatively at this typical jest of the club. These men thrived by sharing each other's incomes—the share being determined by the turn of a card.

"Could you tell me," asked Sir John, "what caused the betting to travel from five to one against the Chicken, to even money and then back to three to one?"

The three men looked at him, and went to examine the betting list.

"I know there was betting," said Fletcher Reid. "I did not notice the movement of the market. Darleigh was here at one o'clock, and when the odds shortened he took the odds against Firby. His heavy support of Firby drove the Chicken back. There seems to have been a run on the Chicken before Darleigh appeared. He appears to be betting his reputation that your man will lose."

Sir John pursed his lips, but made no comment.

"We are going on to Epsom for the afternoon races. We shall probably see you there," he added, as he passed out.

"Let us make one other call," Sir John said, as he slowly mounted the coach. "The 'Black Horse,' in St. Martin's Lane, has a landlord who may tell me something. He keeps a sporting drum I do not often visit, and its racquet court is the one where Captain Stuart and Belcher were playing the day he lost his eye. It's a place kept by Bob Gregson."

Skilfully piloting his coach through St. Martin's Lane and its crowd of traffic, acknowledging the greetings of many friends awheel and afoot, Sir John finally drew up at the "Black Horse."

It was an ambitious house of call, with a big frontage with bay windows and bulging panes of glass. At the side was a coach entrance through which one passed to extensive stabling. Further along there was a racquets court, and the premises ended in a bowling alley. As Sir John drove up, worthy Bob Gregson, just retired from his career in the ring and bearing traces of his life on his

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face, was standing at the door. He was a jovial, burly man of the John Bull type, with a face like polished mahogany. He affected closely clipped side-whiskers; there was a gleam in his hazel eyes and he dressed very much like a miller on holiday intent.

"How now, Sir John—this is an honour. You do not often come the way of the 'Black Horse.' Mighty pleased all the same, sir," said the old pug, helping Sir John to alight, and bowing him into the hotel.

He led them into a snuggerly, and Sir John called for glasses of brandy and water. After a round of civilities Sir John came to the business in hand.

"I want you to answer me a question or two in strict confidence, Gregson," Sir John began. "If you catch the drift of what I am driving at you will oblige me by keeping a still tongue."

"You have obliged me so often, Sir John," replied the old pugilist, "that I should be honoured by your confidence."

"Well—tax your memory. Last night, was Colonel Darleigh here?"

Gregson answered without hesitation.

"Yes, sir, he was."

"Why are you so sure?" Sir John asked, curiously.

"Because he only comes now and again, and usually to meet one man."

"May I ask," asked Sir John, "whether he met that man last night?"

The landlord paused a moment. The question came close to a suspicion he had already formed.

"Don't mix me up in any fuss," he said. "A



man must live. I see a lot and hear a lot, but say nothing."

"An excellent motto for a sporting publican, Gregson," Sir John returned. "Tell me, did Colonel Darleigh meet his man last night?"

"He did," Gregson answered.

"Was that man Captain Stuart?" Sir John asked, without a moment's pause.

Gregson, looking round, nodded.

"He was here not earlier than midnight?" Sir John pressed.

"He came in at half-past twelve," Gregson replied in a low voice. "I noticed him because his face was cut and his cravat had gone. I saw him pay some money in the bar, and when he opened his driving-coat I noticed he wore no cravat."

Sir John looked significantly at Harry Trevelyan, and the latter slowly nodded his head.

Sir John stood up, and finished his tumbler of brandy.

"That's all I want to know, Gregson," he said.

"Your information carries us a long way to a solution of a mystery we are trying to bottom. It is as well to know these things."

Gregson looked round, and lowered his husky voice.

"Certainly—Sir John," he replied. "Keep me out of the row, if you can. I know what you are driving at. The betting is worrying you. I put two and two together a week ago. It began with that accident to Belcher, and since, though the Chicken has strong support, there has been big money for Firby. As soon as the odds shorten

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against the Chicken, Darleigh takes all he can get, they tell me."

"What!" said Sir John, startled at the new suggestion. "Do you suggest Belcher's mishap was not an accident?"

"I know nothing and say nothing, but I can put two and two together. It was a queer accident, and it happened a week after Colonel Darleigh's first visit. Stuart is a downright bad lot, and I should like to see him laid by the heels. He is a night-hawk of the worst breed, and against some of the things he has done to my knowledge, dang my boots, the work of other blacklegs looks white. While I would prefer to be kept out of any trouble you may raise, for the sake of the house, I'd rather be in it when the shooting begins than let this fly bird get away."

"Thank you, Bob," said Sir John, going towards the door. "It is spoken as I expected from so doughty a fighter."

Bob bustled to the door with Sir John, and helped him as he climbed to his seat on the coach. "A pleasant journey, sir. If I might make so bold, sir, might I ask a favour?"

"Certainly," said Sir John, gathering the reins and looking down on Gregson's earnest, rubicund face.

"What is the stable tip for the big fight? Which way ought my money to go? Do I back the Game Chicken, in spite of the talk of the town?"

"That depends on how you feel about it," said Sir John, with a twinkle playing in his fine eyes. "I can only tell you that our man is good enough to

please me, and carries a heavier weight of my money than I ought to risk. One other thing—our man is dead honest, and will go into the ring as fit as hands can make him—if we have ordinary luck.”

Sir John chirruped to his horses, and the chestnuts drew away from Gregson's house—the “Black Horse.”

“One fact is certain, Harry,” Sir John said, pulling on his gloves as he guided the horses through the narrow street. “Darleigh knew of the failure of his scheme soon after midnight, and yet came on to the club to take advantage of the altered odds. He rules the betting with the men who are watching him, or who know his secrets. It is his firm determination to see that by hook or crook the Game Chicken goes down to Firby.”

Nothing more about the fight was said by the two men. Sir John, with the pride of the horse lover, was occupied agreeably in guiding his chestnuts through the crowded streets, and Harry was content to sit by the driver and watch his consummate skill in handling them.

Their destination was Epsom. It was one of the first day's racing of the early spring, and several matches had been arranged. London rapidly swung past them—now Hyde Park Corner and now Knights-bridge. Soon they were out on the open road, and the brave chestnuts settled to their work. They were late out and the roads were clear during the first part of the journey. Yoho! through Kensington and on to Putney—through little hamlets clustering on the main road, with strange old inns and gabled houses on either side, and swinging signs

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projecting over the footways and the narrow streets. The horses' hoofs rang steadily on the highway, and the wheels of the coach rattled out a noisy melody. Yoho! Kensington far behind and Wimbledon near, and then the swinging, ringing progress of the coach became a halting movement, and the driver's task more engrossing, as the traffic grew thicker.

London, the sports of London, their servants and hangers-on were moving to Epsom, and every byway put its share of vehicles on to the main road. The nearer they approached Epsom the more the way filled and became a jingling, singing, roaring mass of movement. Bugles and coach horns sounding, flags flying, shouted greetings, respectful salutes for Sir John from admirers in the racing crowd, badinage on every side, and strident voices of the rabble, singing. Lordly coaches, rivalling Sir John's fine turn-out, chaises and fours with outriders, Tilburys, dogcarts with their smart teams, tandem, the tradesman's gig, the carrier's cart, and the coster's donkey shay mingled on the road and moved slowly, but without confusion, on to Epsom.

It was just two o'clock when Sir John rounded the corner and took the hill—Epsom, in its racing splendour, catching the eye. Though an April day the air was mild, if not warm. Overhead the sun, shining in a cloudless sky, gilded everything with streams of golden light. A first glimpse of Epsom showed one small and central stand, then rows of vehicles drawn up in lines near the winning-post, and many thousands of people. Behind were tents of flaring colours in blazing white, dull yellows, red and white stripes; tents flying bunting, showing roofs like

minarets or domes; or tents with their upper shapes hidden by great canvasses picturing wonders within.

Some were drinking-booths, others shows, a few eating-houses, and the most clubs and gambling-houses. These gambling-booths, richly furnished, with flowers hanging without and within, and thick carpets strewn across the turf, were crowded all the afternoon, the games *rouge et noir*, French hazard, and other vehicles of chance going on ceaselessly. In each of the booths the stout croupiers sat keeping the game going. "Gentlemen, gentlemen, make your game—any time while the ball rolls—it's *rooge a noor* from Paris, gentlemen—the fairest game for sportsmen—and the black wins, gentlemen, the black wins."

Outside, on the course, the sports of the day, fops in many cases with attendant pigeons, sat and feasted. Baskets were opened, viands were displayed, and corks began to pop. On the ground were tradesmen, pedestrians, and a swarm of racing-men. Amongst them were strewn tables at which foxy-faced men presided over such old-time swindles as thimble-rigging, the three-card trick, and various unfair, automatic gambling games. In the crowd seedy Ishmaels caught stupid countrymen anxious to prick the garter; gipsy men and town-bred sharps levied toll on neglected pockets; women told fortunes and Romany children begged alms; acrobats postured, conjurers pattered, tipsters shouted, and ballad singers chanted. A carnival of noisy pleasure; a happy-go-lucky picture of England, not to be seen now; a phase of sporting life sponged out

of the national life and almost off any living memory.

At four o'clock the big race was over. On his coach Sir John Dering was entertaining a party of friends. It included Sir Harry Tempest, the Hon. Lumley Savage, Fletcher Reid, and Gentleman Jackson.

When the big match was over and the race had been won and lost, the crowd about the coaches thinned. Sir John and Harry, chatting with their friends and replying to the chaff from the passers-by on foot, had lunched late.

"Let's get down and see the sights," suggested the irrepressible Lumley Savage. "I want to bet on something."

"So say I," said Fletcher Reid. "What say you, Jackson?"

The burly arbiter of the ring, the friend of princes and aristocrats; fighter, teacher, sporting authority, master of pugilists, smiled at Reid.

"You know I never bet; no, not even to the extent of a fourpenny-piece."

This was a literal truth which accounted for Jackson's sway—a rule of life that made him above suspicion in a world always engaged in pulling wires for a gaming advantage, and not particular how dirty the wire was that it pulled.

"Ah," laughed Sir John, "there speaks the honest Jackson. I have joined your race of non-gamblers and forsworn the hazard in every shape or form."

The men laughed. They thought Sir John spoke in jest. His reputation was too well known.

"Well—let's get on to Stranger's Club House,"

suggested Sir Harry Fane Tempest. "Those who want to gamble can, and all our friends will be there, sinking their patrimony at the shrine of *rouge et noir*."

They began to clamber down.

"At least, we can look on," said Sir John, as he helped the burly Jackson down the steps.

They made their way through the noisy, royster-ing, jostling crowd, who parted to give access to these well-dressed, gallant men of fashion, who by their patronage kept most of the people's sports alive. The racing crowd loved these familiar figures, favourites of fortune, who so freely moved amongst them, but this did not prevent them from hailing their idols with robust familiarity and crude banter. It was all given and taken in good part, and the aristocratic Roland was passed for the plebeian Oliver with a zest that was part of the life of racing of that day.

Picking their way along the line of tents, they came to Stranger's gambling-booth. It stood in all the glory of crimson drapery, its pinnacled roof was striped, and liveried servants lounged about the entrance. A buzz of conversation greeted them as they passed at once into a crowded saloon, in which many gallants were clustered about the gaming-tables.

"Make your game, gentlemen," the sallow, beady-eyed croupier was calling as they entered. "While the ball is rolling make your game. A fortune might be won on black. Four times it has turned up in four rolls of the ball. Make your game, noble sportsmen, while the ball is rolling."

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His beady eyes swept the room and caught the incoming party.

He recognised Sir John and his friends with a brief nod, though his eyes left the table scarcely for a second.

"Make your game—black wins again for the fifth time. Was ever there such a run? How do you do, Sir John? Waiter, a glass of champagne here. Make your game as long as the ball is rolling."

The party sauntered to the tables, but neither Sir John, Captain Trevelyan, nor Gentleman Jackson played. They stood for a while watching Lumley Savage and Fletcher Reid backing the rolling ball with increasing zest, though it steadily rolled against them, and when they tired of the croupier's monotonous chant, they lounged in the centre of the booth, watching the passions excited around them by the constantly changing game.

As Sir John Dering stood there, debonair, interested, the centre of his circle of friends, another movement of the crowd allowed an incoming party to walk to the centre of the booth.

When the new-comers emerged, Sir John noted they were being led to the tables by Colonel Darleigh. He was accompanied by Sir Vernon Hawk, a well-known racing man, and Captain Stuart, his satellite, while there were in his train three men whom Sir John did not know.

The formation of the crowd and the opening through it brought the two men face to face in the centre of the booth. Colonel Darleigh was carefully dressed. He wore a close-fitting overcoat almost of the colour of an olive, and from the rolled



collar, his cravat of fine linen hung loosely. A white, high hat of rough felt with a curled brim was set jauntily on his head, and from under it his iron-grey hair curled over his neck. He walked forward with great self-possession, his rasping voice high-pitched, as he talked over his shoulder to the men behind him. But self-possessed as was his carriage, full of assurance and *savoir-faire*, he almost stopped in his tracks when he found himself advancing on Sir John. His pale, yellow face, showing signs of his wearing, dissipated life of late hours, grew a shade more livid, and the smile which was upon it vanished for a moment, and only came back, forced and sinister, as the result of a great effort. In a moment he was himself again, apparently unembarrassed, and, raising his hat and bowing, he advanced with outstretched hand.

"Well met, Sir John," he said, offering his hand. Then with a subtle inflection in his rasping voice he added, "I see you play the game—to the end."

Sir John Dering's fine face became cold and grim. He ignored the outstretched hand, and looked his opponent in the eyes.

"We are not well met, sir," he said quietly. "Our affairs need only bring us together twice, and we can dispense with the outstretched hand."

Darleigh's face showed signs of the storm gathering within him. The words had been spoken in a manner which, though restrained, carried far, and were well within the hearing of friends, both in his train and clustered round Sir John.

For a few seconds the croupier's voice faltered.

He knew the tense electric atmosphere of the gathering storm.

"Make your game, gentlemen. The French game. Make your game while——"

His sentence snapped off, and a break of a few seconds followed, perceptible because of the suspension of the everlasting reiteration. Then he continued the refrain. "Make your game, sportsmen, while the ball is rolling."

"You quite understand, Sir John," Colonel Darleigh said tensely, "this is an affront before my friends."

"I quite understand," Sir John answered. "I have weighed my words carefully."

"The man is mad with his losses," shouted Colonel Darleigh, looking round upon his friends.

Gentleman Jackson interposed his burly frame.

"If you please, Jackson," said Sir John, "this is our affair. I prefer to see this scoundrel and call him blackleg to his face, and before his friends."

"Zounds!" ejaculated Colonel Darleigh, raging. "This is too much."

He held a small jewelled crop, carried in his right hand, as if about to bring it down across Sir John's face.

Without a moment's hesitation Sir John raised and swung the wineglassful of bubbling champagne, which he held in his hand, and threw the golden fluid into Darleigh's face.

The croupier's voice failed again with a snap and did not continue. But the ruling passion was strong. He swept the board of every coin staked upon it and watched the scene. Every eye was

turned on the two men, and the games going on at the little tables stopped dead.

Jackson's voice, above the rising hubbub, sounded bell-like and clear, and he thrust himself between the two men, for Darleigh had leaped like a tiger on Sir John.

"Gentlemen—you forget yourselves. The scene is painful to all—and to mutual friends. The matter must be adjusted elsewhere, but this scene must end here. Captain Trevelyan, Sir Vernon Hawk, Mr. Savage, and Sir Harry Tempest—I call upon you all. This must not go further now."

They dragged the men apart, and they stood facing each other in the swaying crowd.

"By God, you shall answer for this!" Colonel Darleigh gasped.

"As you please, and when. My friend Trevelyan will meet your representative," Sir John replied.

The two parties pushed their way through the tense crowd, many of those present following them out.

"A damned bad business," muttered Gentleman Jackson, in farewell to Stranger, as he followed in the wake of his friends.

The incident ended there. Outside, the crowd was turning towards the excitement of the next race. Inside, the strident, colourless voice of the croupier took up the chant, "Make your game, gentlemen, while the ball is rolling," and the careless units in a gambling crowd, to whom such scenes were part of the routine of day and night, tossed their gold and silver wildly on to the green baize cloths.

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**THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE**

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“Make your game; make your game, gentlemen,” the croupier cried.

Two men had made their game, and the counters they were to play with on the green cloth of destiny were to be their very lives.

## CHAPTER XI

ON the day when Sir John Dering went to the Epsom meeting, the sunny weather had tempted two other men there, although they did not meet their patron.

On the morning of the races, Jem Belcher had looked out of the windows of the old "King's Head" and along the road which led to the great racing centre. Though a prize-fighter who had once been champion of the ring, he sighed disconsolately—as one might expect a love-sick maiden to do in the course of a lonely reverie.

Paddington Jones, who was also about, had started the day by going out of the inn door and looking along the same road from the centre of it, and he had sighed too.

The truth of the matter is that racing was in the blood of these men; they knew of the matches arranged for that day, and the lust for the sport of the moving horse and the stir of the racecourse was upon them.

The two men and Hen Pearce breakfasted together shortly after eight-thirty, in the sunny dining-room overlooking the road. Their meal was both plentiful and nourishing. The Chicken packed away porridge, a sole, and two good-sized chops with the gusto of a man whose life is spent out of doors in

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strenuous exercise. His appetite was sharp-set, and his idea of satisfying it did credit to one's estimate of the powers of a fighting-man in this direction.

Belcher and Paddington Jones were equally resolute in the matter of eating, and did ample justice to old Bullen's idea of a breakfast menu, which was built on a generous scale.

That worthy looked in to see how his guests were going on. He was dressed in rather striking clothes, having discarded the suit he usually wore about the house. He was wearing riding-trousers of a green twilled, or twisted, cloth; neat fawn gaiters were buttoned over his ample calves; he wore a fancy waistcoat of a canary colour, and, for once, he also sported a somewhat loud cravat. He had not yet donned his coat, and the sleeves of his shirt were turned up.

"My God!" said Belcher, when he saw the apparition. "Here's the squire sure enough. What's the matter, Bullen?" he asked. "Has someone died and left you money?"

"No—he's got shares in the India Company," Paddington Jones explained. "This is the day when the dividends come and the shareholders dicker up."

Bullen wagged his old head wisely, and sat down.

"If I were a bit younger, I wouldn't be chipped by you colts, fighting-men though you be. I like the Chicken, mind you, but in my young days I could have given him blow for blow, and maybe a bloody nose."

"That's right, daddy," said the Game Chicken, grinning with right good humour, and swallowing

his coffee. "Chin music never hurt a man yet, and I can stand a good hiding from anybody's mouth. But what's the game, father—going to a wedding?"

"Ding! I like that," said Bullen. "At my time of life, too. No, my old girl and me, we've been hitched together forty years, and I've been to no weddings since the day she dragged me to the church. No—and I don't go to no more. Once wed, twice shy is my motto. It's a nice day for the races—and that's where I'm going."

"Got anything good on, old brid?" asked Belcher, his eyes brightening.

"They do say the Marquis of Letland's Cockpit will easily win his match, and that's where my money goes. A man from their training-stables was in yesterday and made me wise. He says it's good enough to bet my licence on. You'll not be wanting anything from the town while I'm in Epsom?" he asked, seeking to do his guests favours even in his pleasures.

Receiving a negative, the sturdy old fellow hobbled out without any signs of gout. The prospect of a day's racing is the best cure of all for any disease that impedes one's powers of pedestrianism.

When the old fellow had left, Jem Belcher pushed his cup away, rose, stretched himself, and looked out of the window again. A drag or two went by, although it was early. A puppet-show followed, and, after, a gipsy caravan, the women staying to sell wickerwork at the "King's Head," and the men lounging in the tap-room. Countrymen, spruced up, and in their best clothes, also began to hobble past

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the window. The racing crowd were on the move, though it was early in the day.

Jem Belcher sighed.

"If I were not training a low-bred, second-rate fighting-man, I'd be going to Epsom myself," he said. "It's a shame to be six or eight miles from the downs and all the jolly fun without getting on the road."

Paddington Jones nodded.

"My old mother always said my sins would find me out. Fancy being within padding distance of a racecourse on a morning like this, and not getting ready to be out and off."

"Why, lads; why not?" asked the Chicken.

"You are why, brother pug," Belcher answered, gloomily. "We couldn't let you go."

"No, excitement's not good for a fighting-man," Paddington Jones agreed, solemnly.

"Well—what's to prevent you going and leaving me here?" asked the Chicken.

"Why—you'd be off to the races yourself as soon as my back was turned," said Belcher with a grin.

"Word of honour, lad, I wouldn't. Let's get the afternoon work done this morning, and I'll promise you I'll not go near the races. I'll do my road work by myself this afternoon."

"Aye, and some of them ramps from London will come and nobble you while we're away," said Jones, anxious to be convinced.

"What, in broad daylight?" said Pearce. "I'd like to see the six men who'll do it. I'll take a club in any case. And, besides, all the ramps will



be at Epsom. There's good hunting for the foxes when the pigeons are all together in one place."

The two trainers were eager to be convinced, and they adopted the Game Chicken's suggestion. It was agreed they should leave at noon, and be back by six, and the three men forthwith set about their morning's work—two of them, at least, in fine spirits, for the lust of the racehorse was upon them.

"Mind," said Jem, as the two trainers stood in the road at noon before setting off, "no racing for you. If I see you on the racecourse I and Paddington will punch you silly between us. Won't we, Pad?"

"We will, as sure as death," grinned Jones. "Racing isn't for little boys who want to be champions."

Off they set in high spirits, and the Chicken finished his midday meal alone.

It was two o'clock when he took a club and set out for a long stroll, according to the promise made to his trainers. He had not been altogether frank with his two friends. He had welcomed their suggestion that they should leave him for the afternoon, and had readily promised to keep away from the races, much as the prospect at Epsom pleased him. He had another idea in his mind, an idea that had been slowly growing on him. He wanted to see a certain camp of gipsies. He wanted to bring about a meeting with a girl he had thought much of for some days—the dusky little princess of the Romany tribe, Stella, who had told his fortune and, perhaps, saved his life, or, at least, the fight. The thought of Stella had grown more important in his mind

than life itself. The Game Chicken was hopelessly in love.

He knew, from seeing the men about, where the gipsies were camping in the direction of Epsom—Ashtead Common. His purpose was to take his stroll in that direction.

He went along the highway singing gently to himself, a fine figure of a man in corded trousers, a faded velveteen coat, and a fur cap, his blue bird's-eye kerchief tied round his throat in a big Belcher knot. In his hand he carried a stout sapling, but the fear of the road was not upon him. He was glad to be abroad and moving, and his tanned, freckled face was lit with a pleasant smile as he walked. The girls he passed between Leatherhead and Ashtead noted this fine fellow, his springy walk, his bright eye, and the lurking smile. And as he passed they smiled back upon him after the manner of country girls, but the Game Chicken did not halt or stay. He had a vision of a brown face with bold eyes and raven tresses, of gleaming teeth flashing in the light, of a roguish manner, and a fawn-like figure challenging the sun itself with the riotous colours of a barbaric costume.

Pearce had no difficulty in finding the camp, but, strolling round the common at Ashtead, he quickly noted that, but for one or two old men and women, the caravans and tents were practically deserted. The men were evidently all at the races, and most of the women too.

Pearce decided to walk at least a little way in that direction. The hour was now well after three o'clock. He struck across the downs in the direction

of Epsom, but he no longer sang to himself. His spirits had been dashed by disappointment, though he had no real reason to believe that he would find Stella.

Luck was with him, however. Following the beaten track, he skirted some woodland, and again came out on the open down. As he did so, a hundred yards away, he saw the flash of a scarlet petticoat and also heard a little scream for help. It was a curious scene to strike so unexpectedly, as Pearce thought when he had gathered the details. Stella had left the races early, and was making her way on foot to the camp across the downs leading to Ashstead. Within a mile from their encampment, she had disturbed three of the road harpies who infest a racing district when sport is afoot. They had evidently arrived too late to get into Epsom, and were lying in the heather and on the turf. They had risen as she came, and stopped her. First they had demanded money, which the gipsy girl had given them. But that was not enough. The leader of this little gang had seized her by the wrist, and, making uncouth jests, had offered to ransom her with a kiss. Badly frightened, she was struggling in the centre of the three men when the Game Chicken rounded the corner of the woodland.

To see her need was to act at once. The smile never left his face. He strode up, flourishing his staff, before they were aware of his approach. He brought it down rapidly with resounding thwacks on the heads, shoulders, and bodies of the two rams nearest to him. They ran like so many rabbits going to cover. The third man, who had hold of Stella's

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wrist and by the expression of her face was hurting the girl, Pearce grasped by the back of his neck.

He was a typical footpad of his day—bold in the company of his fellows when preying on the weak, cowardly when face to face with strength.

"This is a pretty game for a man," said Pearce. "Dang me, what shall I do with thee, my lad?"

He squeezed the man's neck and shook him violently, turning his purpling face round so that he could see it.

"A gallows face, as I live—an ugly gallows face. Bah—you're no fit truck for men. You're loathsome, like cellar vermin."

In Pearce's grip, the man had sunk to his knees.

"The pretty gipsy girl was only telling my fortune," he whined. "I meant no harm."

"What shall I do with this carrion?" Pearce asked of Stella.

The girl recovered her composure at once, though she was still breathing heavily and bridling with indignation.

"He's not a man," she said—"he's a rat. Just bring your stick across him once or twice and make his bones ache so that he'll feel the curse of the Romany when he moves."

Pearce did her bidding right faithfully. He brought his stout young sapling smartly across the howling fellow's shoulders, and when he thought he had done enough to make the man's bones ache, according to orders, threw him down, where he squirmed on the ground, a pitiably grotesque figure, impotent in his rage and pain.

"Thank your God, my little rat, I'm a kind-

hearted man and wouldn't hurt a toad," Pearce said; "and get out of this as quickly as you can while your skin is safe."

They turned away, and left the footpad rubbing himself.

Stella, beautiful in her indignation, poured out her thanks. "Oh! I'm so glad my pal came. Never was a white man so welcome in the eyes of the Romany. Wherever I go I'll think of you and thank you," she added in her extravagant gipsy way.

"It's nothing—nothing at all," said Pearce, laughing in his deep chest. "If he'd been a man full of red blood I would have been real glad to have had a friendly turn up with him for your sake. You did us a much better turn the other night. Why did you run away?"

"Because I had done my work," she said. "The gipsy does not wait to be thanked by a pal. And besides, the Romany camp was feasting off Squire Thornton's pheasants, and I was hungry," she added with a sly, mischievous smile.

"But now I have caught you, I do thank you," Pearce said earnestly. "And you do call me 'pal,'" he added, taking comfort from the phrase.

She looked at him slightly embarrassed, but spoke her thoughts with the frank innocence of a girl.

"I like you every time I see you," she said. "The Romany loves brave, honest men, because so many men she meets are bad."

The introduction, under such circumstances, had given Pearce a self-possession he seldom felt when talking to members of the opposite sex. As a rule, he was shy and awkward with women, shutting up

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like an oyster in their company. Good fighter, brave fellow, Pearce was no ladies' man. His little adventure on the road had stirred him up and loosened his tongue. Combat made him gay, and by the very gaiety of his manner he was at once on friendly terms with the wonderful gipsy girl of his thoughts, and established an understanding which never allowed him to be silent and awkward in her presence again.

"You told my fortune the other day—what did you know?" he asked, for the prophecy still rankled.

"Nothing," she said with insolent frankness, "if you mean that I spoke to you of danger in the fight. It was gipsy gibberish. It was a lucky hit, for there was danger, as you saw."

"A danger we avoided, thanks to you," he said. "But how did you know I was thinking of you?" he asked with a grin.

"It is easy—easy as winking—to gammon people who have their fortunes told. I could see it in your eyes."

She was the woman again, and a coquette.

"But what was I thinking then?" Pearce asked.

"You said you knew."

"That the gipsy girl was pretty," she said with a laugh.

"That the gipsy girl was prettier than any girl I'd ever seen," he said, admiringly. "That was more than you said I thought."

"And perhaps too much," she returned seriously.

"Besides a fighting-man ought not to be thinking of women—brown or white," she added.

"A fighting-man's a man like every other man,"

he said, stoutly, "and he can think his own thoughts. A fighting-man is only a fighting-man when the wind blows that way—when the stakes are up, and when the crowd is there, and the blue bird's-eye that happens to be my colour is tied to the posts and worn as a favour. When a fighting-man is not fighting, he's just like any other man, only perhaps a bit softer to other men, because he knows what strength means. Ever since I saw you crossing the downs, and on the night you came to warn us, I've been thinking of you—just thinking of you as men do who know good women. Why, I came to see you to-day, and I've been thinking of you all the week. I believe you've bewitched me."

"Blarney," she said. "It's a gipsy's tale for the country lass at a fairing."

"It's as true as I stand here and see you now," he said, earnestly.

She looked at him with a new interest dawning in her eyes.

She had liked him when she had first seen him for his strong young manhood and his simple air of downright honesty. He was a long way out of her nomad life and the strange people amongst whom she moved, who had one standard of honour—a low one for the gentile, and another, a high one, for their tribal relationships. She had never thought of people outside her own tribe except as so many credulous folk to be gulled that she and her people might live. She had only looked at the big pugilist, striding over the downs, as a finer man than she had ever seen, and had gulled him in a gipsyish way, impelled perhaps by girlish curiosity to accost him.

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Now, she raised her bright, brown eyes and looked into his rugged face, and something prompted her to drop the manner of the nomad and to treat him as she would her brother.

"Let me tell your fortune again," she said with a sly laugh. "No, you needn't cross my hand with silver, and I'll tell you for nothing."

There was purpose in her tone—an idea was behind her frivolity. She had seen something in his face, and womanlike, though she wanted to test it, knew in her heart that what she saw could never blossom out its promise for a nomadic gipsy girl.

"Fortune," he returned, and his voice was big and confident. "These are my fortune," he said, proudly, and stretched out his two hands to her. "With these I'll beat Firby when the time comes, or they will not carry me out alive, and then my fortune is made—or as big a fortune as a simple chap like me can want."

"Then let me see your fortune," she said, taking his hand. She looked at the big fist closely, pretending to read the lines on the palms.

As she did so, she was thinking, quickly. And then, with her prophetic manner, she spoke her thoughts aloud.

"I see a big and brave man, a gentleman in everything but birth. I see him very successful—successful because he has only courage and honesty, and does not know how to fail or sell himself for gold. I see him pretending to be bewitched because he has looked into a Romee's brown eyes."

He stopped her story by withdrawing his hand.

"Not pretending," he said. "I don't pretend."



"No," she said, "not pretending, perhaps. We'll say you believe it. But what's the good? Put her face out of your mind, the sound of her voice out of your ears, the foolish memory of her out of your heart. The moon does not look kindly on the man who leaves his people to say pretty things to the Romany. You will do better amongst your own people, and amongst the women of your own kind."

He walked slowly by her side, and then his hand came heavily down on her shoulder.

"I don't want to do any better," he said, speaking slowly and with deep emotion. "I've seen you three times, and once you saved my life. The first time I saw you, what I am thinking now I thought then. I want you, and—there is no better."

She stopped in the pathway they were treading together.

"It is foolish, foolish, foolish of you—such lover's talk will not do for us. It won't work between you and I," she said.

"The love of a man for a maid is never foolish. I want you, and I am asking you. I'm asking you now because if I do not I shall be going back to London in a few days, and may never see you again. I'm asking you, and I want you to answer."

"Asking me," she said. "What are you asking me?"

"To come with me. To be my wife," he said, and he looked into her brown eyes as if he would compel her consent.

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## THE BLUE BIRD'S-EYE 155

The moon has touched you. What you desire can never be between us."

"What I ask must be," he said, for love had made him dominant. In every fight it was part of this man's power that he never thought of losing. In fighting for his happiness he never thought of losing now. "Why cannot it be? Where is the reason? What can come between us if you are free and will it so?"

She looked at him, almost frightened of the passion she had so quickly raised and yet thrilled by it—thrilled with a sense of happiness that made her eyes shine, her voice soft with a strangely wistful note, and her heart wildly beat as if it were rebelling.

"The Romany marries the Romany," she said gravely, the tenderness still in her voice and something he thought was love in her eyes. "The Romany marries the Romany from one generation to another. It has always been so—we cannot mate with the people of the town and of the houses. It's in the blood. We are not like you—we have different ways. We live freely and wildly, we love fiercely, but we cannot be caged. We are always passing on."

"By God I say it now—I say it here—you shall not pass on. I hold you now; I hold you now—not all your tribe shall tear you from me, and if they do, and you pass on, then I will pass on and follow you through every winding road you tread. God's life!—I do not care. It may be that I am touched by the sun or the moon, as you say, but it is the sun that lights your eyes for me by day;

it is the moon that lights your eyes for me by night."

He followed his burning words by action. He seized her lithe figure in his great arms and held her to him. She struggled for a moment like a caged bird, and then her head drooped on his shoulder and she cried.

"You can cage me now," she said. "See—you have tamed me. I am a woman like the rest of them, and, when you hold me against my will, I cry. It is all the woman can do. But the time would come when I should go back—back to the call of my blood and the ways of my people."

"No need to cry," he said, and he stroked her tresses with his big, rough hand as gently as if the wind were just stirring every loose tendril. "Nor need my bird be caged. Your ways shall be my ways, and we will follow the same winding road. I have a plan."

She looked into his face with the beginning of a complete trust dawning there.

"Tell me your plan," she said.

"Why, that I should turn Romany. All the summer we'll travel the roads, and do the fairs, and see all the races. All the summer it will be as it is now for you. When this fight is over, I'll start a booth. I shall have heaps of money. All the champions, including the Game Chicken, for sixpence a nob. I'll rattle their skulls inside, and you can rattle their coins at the door before they enter."

"It sounds too good to miss," she said with a happy, ringing laugh.

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When the Game Chicken entered the "King's Head," the hour was seven o'clock. Belcher and Paddington Jones were there, furious and bad tempered too, for the great tip had failed.

"Zounds!" said Belcher; "a pretty pug you are. Where have you been? We thought you'd been nobbled again."

"I'm fair sick with fright," said Paddington Jones. "What have you been up to?"

"Snaring wild birds," said the Game Chicken with a laugh, a laugh so gay that it softened his hearers' bad temper.

"Did you catch any?" Belcher asked, sarcastically.

"They are tickle things—wild birds," said the Game Chicken, who had absorbed a new philosophy. "To catch 'em, you need a cage on wheels."

His cryptic remark was not very illuminating, either to Jem Belcher or Paddington Jones.

## CHAPTER XII

LATER in the afternoon Sir John Dering and Captain Trevelyan reached town, and the two men dined quietly together in the Haymarket. As they sat opposite each other taking their wine after dinner, no one would have imagined that Sir John had taken part in the violent scene on Epsom Downs, or that a more trying ordeal remained before him on the morrow. He calmly went through the few courses of a simple dinner with the quiet appreciation of the connoisseur, and when he held his glass of red wine to the light to examine its colour critically, there was not a tremor from the thin white fingers which supported its stem. Sir John talked on in his buoyant, easy, and light-hearted manner, of affairs of the town, the coming fight, his engagements for the week, as if the duel of the morrow was as unimportant as the cup of chocolate which would be sent up to his dressing-room.

The dinner had ended. In the room, lighted with many candles, the two men sat facing each other, talking lightly of everything but the subject uppermost in their minds. At the end of an hour, Sir John quietly sipped his last glass of port, scenting its bouquet and lingering over its flavour as if a judgment of wines were the most important matter in the world.

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He rose to assume his outdoor garb, and then again took his seat before Harry Trevelyan.

"About to-morrow," he said lightly, and with his gay smile—"you will act, of course."

Captain Trevelyan frowned slightly.

"I am obliged, if you press me," he answered.

There was a slight pause, and Harry drummed on the table with his fingers. His emotion got the better of him for a minute. Looking at the fine face of Sir John, a friend very dear to him, and noting his easy, almost debonair, manner, he could not but admire his courage, though Harry's whole mind revolted at the danger of exposing such a great personality to the risk of being turned into carrion by a man of the calibre of Colonel Darleigh.

"I wish to God we were not in this horrible tangle," he blurted out, speaking the thought in his mind.

"There is no tangle," Sir John corrected. "It will be as clear as the sight of pistols. We shall have the choice, Harry. Kindly select pistols. I am not in good form with the blade."

"Yes—it's clear enough, as you say," said Captain Trevelyan. "But I wish we were well out of this. It's a reckless waste to imperil a great life for such a foolish purpose."

"My dear Harry," said Sir John Dering, and underneath his gay, laughing face there was real feeling, "I know how you feel about it. But this is part of the last round, and the drama must be

played out to the end. Rely on me, Harry; I'll wing his shooting hand, but I will not kill him. I desire most of all that Colonel Darleigh should stay in the game until the end. I cannot afford to kill him."

Captain Trevelyan laughed, harshly.

"God!" he said, "I admire your insolent nonchalance, but there is another side to the question. Colonel Darleigh may kill you. He means to, if he can."

Sir John shrugged his straight shoulders, and looked at Harry, whimsically.

"You should not say that to your principal, Harry—it might disturb my night's rest. These things are in the womb of time, but I have no fear. There is such a thing as poetic justice, and, believe me, I have faith that poetic justice does not demand my death at the hands of Darleigh. Do you go on to your own address and see if Darleigh has sent his second. I will be at the Cocoa Tree until the hour of eleven, and you can tell me what arrangements you have made. See the meeting happens to-morrow early, keep the affair from Rosa, if you can, and make the weapons pistols. The nearer the rendezvous the better. I do not care to travel far in the early morning."

With these light words upon his lips, Sir John Dering walked out of the eating-house with his careless, sauntering, challenging grace of movement more marked than ever. Harry sat awhile in the dimly lighted room, and then followed Sir John into the Haymarket and made his way to his apartments in St. James's,

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As he entered the hall the doorkeeper saluted and advanced to address him.

"Well, what now, Brookes? A caller—eh?" asked Harry.

"Sir Vernon Hawk awaits you. I took the liberty of showing him into your study, sir."

"Quite right," Harry said, and mounted the stairs, rapidly. He found his visitor seated by the fire, and reaching out a small white hand with fingers outstretched towards the flames.

Sir Vernon was dressed for the evening. He was a man of the town who conformed to a general type of his day. In the prime of life, he was a tall, handsome man, with a predatory nose of the high, aristocratic type. His bold, restless eyes denoted the gamester, while his high cheek-bones gave to his face and general facial appearance something indefinite, which indicated the aristocratic but hungry bird of prey. He sat by Harry's fireside, the long blue overcoat he was wearing thrown open and showing the lace of his ruffles and the silken whiteness of his hosiery. His manners were more perfect than his reputation.

"I understand I am addressing Captain Trevelyan," he said. "It is the first time I have had the pleasure, and I am delighted to meet a distinguished officer."

Harry bowed.

"Sir Vernon Hawk, I presume," he said. "The pleasure is mutual. I think I may anticipate the reason of your call."

"You are probably right. Colonel Darleigh has deputed me to act as his second, and I understand



you will act for Sir John and accept the challenge. Colonel Darleigh would like a prompt settlement of their unfortunate difference."

"To-morrow would suit Sir John Dering admirably," said Harry.

Sir Vernon Hawk smiled amiably.

"Let it be to-morrow," he said. "At what time?"

"Six in the morning would be convenient," Harry replied. "The light is good at six."

"Colonel Darleigh will think the hour of six excellent and most suitable. Have you any choice of ground?"

"Only one stipulation," replied Harry. "It should not be too far away. Sir John particularly desires not to travel far in the raw air of the early morning."

Colonel Darleigh's second smiled again, more amiably than before. His manner was that of a man arranging an early morning walk.

"That is our feeling exactly, and of course our desire is to study Sir John. If I may suggest a meeting ground, I recommend the Six Elms in Battersea Fields. It is a quiet spot, and but little frequented."

"We shall be on that ground at five minutes to the hour," Harry answered.

"And the weapons?" asked Sir Vernon Hawk, as an afterthought.

"Pistols—the regulation pistols. I will bring a set, and perhaps you will carry a set, too. We can make our choice on the ground."

Sir Vernon Hawk bowed once more.

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"Thanks so much," he said lightly; "you make my task very easy and very pleasant."

"We are anxious to give Colonel Darleigh full and prompt satisfaction," Captain Trevelyan said, coldly.

"It is an unfortunate business," Sir Vernon Hawk said, as he stood up and buttoned his great blue coat about him. He spoke dispassionately, as a man remotely interested in the matter. His sole interest indeed was that his association with such a notable meeting would be town's talk by the end of the day, and his reputation in the fast-living, fire-eating set, in which he moved, would be enhanced.

"It is, with all my heart," said Captain Harry. "But the meeting is quite inevitable."

"I understand," returned Sir Vernon, moving to the door; "I appreciate your courtesy in the matter, and have the honour to wish you good night."

Carrying his studied attitude of correct politeness to the very last phase, Sir Vernon Hawk quietly left the room. Captain Harry could hear his slippers on the stone stairs as he descended; then followed a moment's silence. After, the crashing sound of the great hall door, as it closed behind him, announced that Colonel Darleigh's second had gone.

"So be it, Sir Vernon," Harry said, speaking with grave deliberation to himself. "It is a bad business in very truth. God grant worse does not remain behind."

At eleven o'clock he ascended the steps of the Cocoa Tree. As he entered the hall, its liveried attendant approached him. "Sir John has left the rooms. He is over at Gentleman Jackson's cham-

bers in Old Bond Street, and awaits your coming there. He will not return to the Cocoa Tree to-night."

Captain Trevelyan immediately left the club, and retraced his steps in the direction of Old Bond Street. He reached the rooms made famous by the great pugilist, to which the aristocracy of that day thronged to take lessons of the most fashionable teacher of the noble art pugilism has ever known.

Harry ascended the dimly lit passage, knocked on the door, and was at once admitted. The apartment he entered was fitted up with various sporting requisites. It was long and bare. The walls were coloured, and sawdust was strewn on the floor. A few prints of great fighters of that day hung on the walls. Boxing-gloves were also suspended from a row of hooks, and fencing-foils hung in their places on a framework of polished wood. At one end of the room there was a large fireplace, and on the mantelpiece, two brass candlesticks, with half-consumed candles in them, provided the only light in the apartment.

Sir John Dering stood there with his back to the fire in earnest conversation with the arbiter of the fortunes of the ring. Gentleman Jackson turned to salute Harry, his handsome face, so often smiling, more serious than Trevelyan ever remembered noticing it before. He was dressed in the height of fashion. His scarlet coat was worked with gold round the buttonholes; he displayed the famous frill of lace, ruffles, and the short white stock; his waistcoat was of pale blue satin sprigged with white, and his buff knee-breeches and white stockings gave

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ample display to a pair of the best-turned calves in London.

"How now, Harry?" asked Sir John, advancing to greet him.

"I have received Captain Vernon Hawk on behalf of Darleigh. The hour is six o'clock sharp, to-morrow; pistols will be used; the venue is the Six Elms in Battersea Fields. I trust you approve."

"Excellent," said Sir John heartily, and then, turning to Gentleman Jackson, he said, "You will forget everything I have told you, unless something untoward happens to me to-morrow."

"I quite understand, Sir John. Faith! it is a scoundrelly business, and I hope you wing him," Gentleman Jackson replied.

"Yes—it is a scoundrelly business," Sir John said slowly, turning to Harry. "I have been telling Jackson of my suspicions and the causes leading to this quarrel, Harry. I think it is necessary that a third party should know, in view of the precarious footing on which I stand. Gentleman Jackson is discretion itself, but I have bound him to secrecy because I want to deal with this man Darleigh in my own good time."

Gentleman Jackson nodded gravely.

"May I ask how you feel about this, Sir John?" he inquired.

"Never better," Sir John replied, with a light, ringing laugh.

"Hold out your hands, sir," Jackson demanded.

Without hesitation Sir John stretched out both arms at right angles to his body, and separated each

finger of his two hands. They did not show the slightest tremor.

"A fine shooting nerve," said Gentleman Jackson, with the air of a connoisseur. "Do you shoot well—I have never seen you perform?" he suggested.

"You shall, this moment," answered Sir John.

Going to a cabinet hanging on the wall, Sir John took out a pair of duelling pistols lying upon the shelf.

"Are these loaded, Jackson?" he asked.

"They were loaded immediately they were used this afternoon by the Duke of Anglesea," Jackson replied.

Sir John walked to the other end of the room.

He stood with his back to the two men.

"Stand clear of the fireplace," he commanded. "Is all clear?" he asked again, after an interval of two seconds.

"Yes," answered Jackson.

Sir John turned and immediately discharged the pistol at the flickering candle-light on the right side of the fire.

There was a sput and the sound of falling plaster as the bullet struck the wall immediately behind the light, but the candle had gone out, as if a pair of invisible fingers had snuffed it.

Without a moment's hesitation Sir John changed the pistol he held in his right hand, and poising the second one fired again.

Sput! went the bullet as before, embedding itself in the broken plaster, and the two men watching its effect thrilled with a strange excitement.

The second candle, standing on the left of the

mantelpiece, had gone out—snuffed, it seemed, by the same unseen hand. The three men were standing in a room now only lit by the flickering flame in the open grate, which waxed and waned, and sent strange eerie shadows on the ceiling and into the further corner of the room.

“God’s love!” said Jackson, with something like a long-drawn-out sob. “You must be careful, sir, or you’ll kill him, and—there will be no fight.”

“I shall only wing my bird,” Sir John replied, confidently. “The fight must go on; it is part of the last act in the drama of two lives, and it must be played out to the bitter end. I wish I dared to kill him,” Sir John said thoughtfully, a pitiless gleam flashing a moment in his fearless eyes.

He took up his cloak, and the two men left the room, silently, without further comment.

Gentleman Jackson stood a moment in the changing, uncertain light cast by the fitful flames of the fire.

“Snuffed, by God!” he said, looking at the wicks of the unlighted candles. “As clean as a whistle, by thunder! It’s a damned bad business, but I think on the whole it looks the worse for Darleigh. I do hope Dering does not drill a hole through Darleigh’s black heart. The Game Chicken would carry my money if I were a betting-man, and I should like to see that fight. Colonel Darleigh has been playing with fire, and it seems he has lighted a flame that will scorch him to a cinder.”

It was just five o’clock when Captain Trevelyan drove up to Sir John Dering’s house the next morning. The day was grim and bleak enough in the

half-light of an early misty morning. He had scarcely slept that night, and as he drove through the deserted streets a heavy load weighed dimly on his mind. He rang the bell twice, and to his astonishment Rosa, fully dressed, stood at the door, when it was thrown open by a manservant.

"Harry," she said, turning her pale and frightened face towards him; her beautiful eyes glowing wildly and betokening lack of sleep.

"You know!" he gasped, for a moment embarrassed. "You know!"

"I know—I heard last night, at the opera. It was the gossip of the playhouse. It is the woman's part to weep, and through this night I have lived twelve months of horror and foreboding."

"And Sir John?" he asked.

"He does not know I am aware," she answered.

"I crept up at four o'clock to his room, and found him fast asleep, breathing as regularly as a child at rest after its play."

"It is well," said Harry, taking her in his arms. "Remember, dearest, you are a sportsman's daughter, and the rough must go with the smooth."

"But it's hellish to risk a life like his on such a useless purpose," she answered. "Can nothing be done?" she asked, piteously.

"Nothing," he said. "The encounter is inevitable. If I might advise," he continued, kissing her white face, "you will go to your room and wait patiently, with faith in Sir John. At least, do not let him see you—better that he should believe you do not know. I will send a message directly we get back to my rooms, where I have ordered

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breakfast. For the present, sweetheart—adieu. Be brave, my Rosa—it is all one can do.”

She looked at him fearfully, held her face to his, and he kissed her icy lips.

“Into thy hands,” she whispered brokenly, and he did not know whether she was speaking to him, or praying.

Harry went up the great stairway and knocked on the door. All was silent, and he turned the key. The room was dimly lit, and he raised the blind. Sir John lay fast asleep, and his face smiled as he stirred, as if in answer to the increased volume of light. Harry shook his shoulder, and instantly he awoke, his handsome face stiffened with a grim purpose.

“Ha, Harry!” he said, “so soon. Five o'clock—then call my man. How quickly it sometimes becomes morning. I shall be dressed in twenty minutes. That gives us half an hour for the drive to Battersea—ample time, if your horses are good.”

Sir John quickly dressed, but carefully. When he came down to the hall, where Harry waited listlessly, twenty minutes had elapsed exactly. Sir John walked down the steps equipped to the last button, as if he were going to challenge admiration in a stroll through the park.

“I am at your service, Harry,” he said, and leading the way entered the chaise standing at the door. “Cold, very!” he murmured, as he settled in the carriage with a shrug of his shoulders. “Only such an exceptional engagement, so pleasurable a duty as winging Darleigh, would take me abroad at this hour in such a damnably raw and unaired world.”



The ghost of a smile lingered round his sensitive lips, and Harry noted with grim satisfaction that he retained the strange composure he had exhibited at Jackson's rooms. The two men did not speak further. The chaise rattled through the empty streets at a gallop; Hyde Park Corner flew by, soon they were through Knightsbridge and swinging along the country lanes leading to Chelsea. At last they were at the riverside, and halted for the ferry, the boat awaiting to take them across to Battersea Fields. They left the steaming horses standing there, on the Chelsea side of the river.

As the boat slowly crossed the river, Sir John looked at the scene with eyes that seemed to comprehend every one of its early morning beauties—the pearly mists clinging about the water, the stream of red dancing wavelets where the early light of the sun touched the slowly moving river and turned the running torrent to liquid gold; the trees, a tender green, swinging against the skyline on the other side—and further, the six great elms marking the rendezvous, their massed foliage glowing in royal splendour against the deepening blue of the April morning. Something of his mission, something of its madness, something of the years leading to that meeting, touched him deeply. For a moment his face softened, and he turned to Harry as if he would speak. But the words remained unuttered. The thought was locked in the inner chambers of his mind—was indeed just a stirring song of regret, murmured by memory, in the desolate corners of his soul.

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wonderfully lit by the light driving through the tracery of waving branches above, two men stood alone—Colonel Darleigh and his second, Sir Vernon Hawk. In the shadow of the trees were half a dozen gentlemen—Fletcher Reid, the Hon. Lumley Savage, Gentleman Jackson, wearing a great mulberry-coloured coat, Sir Harry Fane Tempest, and the Hon. Cavendish Bragshaw. Apart from them was a sober man of professional habit—the waiting doctor. Further away, looking strangely dissipated in the early morning light, was Captain Stuart.

To these Sir John Dering and his second quickly walked, and as they approached, Colonel Darleigh turned aside and did not look upon his enemy. The two seconds briefly consulted, measured the ground, and examined the pistols. Sir John was offered the choice of two weapons, and, making his selection, walked to his allotted place.

Colonel Darleigh took up his stand with the other weapon in his hand, and now the two men faced each other. Cool, grim, showing the hatred in his mind on every line of his livid face, Colonel Darleigh looked fixedly at his lifelong enemy for three or four silent seconds. His eyes fell at length, and he stood there examining the pistol held in his hand.

A near-by clock struck the hour of six when the word was given.

Colonel Darleigh raised his head. Two jets of flame; two reports, almost simultaneous, riving the air with startling distinction; a flight of frightened birds.

Sir John Dering stood as erect as he was before the shot was fired, the gleaming barrel of his pistol

still smoking, the smile on his pale face hovering round his finely chiselled lips. From the other side of the measured space, a groan had escaped from Darleigh—a groan curdled with intense anguish. His raised hand dropped to his side, the pistol flying from his grasp. His ashen face blanched still further; the blood trickled from his under lip where he had bitten into it deeply in the extremity of his anguish; he swayed and would have fallen, but that Sir Vernon Hawk caught his staggering form.

"Shot through the hand," the doctor said. "This cannot go on. The wound is not serious, but should be dressed at once. The time ought to be ripe for apologies amongst gentlemen."

"There—is—no—apology necessary," Darleigh gasped, wincing with pain. "We are not yet at the last round. All the cards in the game have not been played."

The doctor deftly dressed the wounded hand, and the group of men walked slowly to the ferry.

There was only one boat there—waiting. Sir John gave his adversary the honour. Darleigh's mind, frenzied with hatred, showed itself concentrated on the angry passions let loose by his humiliation. He took his seat in the waiting boat and turned to Captain Stuart.

"Accompany me, Stuart," he said. "Good morning, gentlemen." Then looking at Sir John, with hatred written vividly on his drawn face, he said slowly, but with a fury of passion that seemed to have dispelled his reason:

"Look to yourself, Sir John Dering—look to yourself and yours. This is not the end."

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Sir John stood amongst his friends, awaiting the return of the ferry. He saw the boat slowly carrying his enemy across, watched him land on the other side of the river, noted the waiting chaise was whipped up at a furious rate, and rapidly rounding the corner, disappeared.

"All I can say of this morning's work," said bluff Gentleman Jackson, flicking a speck of dust from his polished boots with a lace-edged handkerchief, "is that Colonel Darleigh takes his blood-letting with damned bad grace. He has not what I would call the habit of giving a sporting touch to these occasions."

### CHAPTER XIII

COLONEL DARLEIGH, as he was whirled to town on the return journey, sat back in the chaise—thinking. Three days more remained before the fight took place. His attempts to humiliate his enemy had failed. Resolutely Sir John had met him, and each stage of the war Darleigh had waged in such a sinister fashion against his rival had gone against him. There was the attempt to maim the Game Chicken—that had failed, and what was more, Sir John had seen his hand in it. His rival had withheld a public statement, but Darleigh knew the incident on Epsom Downs, in Stranger's gambling-booth, was his opponent's direct impeachment. The duel of the morning—the memory of which rankled in his mind, and throbbed, a dull, aching pain, in his shattered hand—was one stage further in the rubber in which he had persistently held the wrong card. He was desperate, and prepared to snatch at any chance of ensuring his rival's downfall, and staving off the heavy financial losses that would come upon him, if his man Firby were beaten in the ring.

Firby he had seen the morning before. That sturdy fighter was in his pay, but was not a party to his warring thoughts. Firby was training quietly at the "Spaniards," on Hampstead Heath, and was as fit as a fighter need be, but Darleigh had long

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dropped the sporting project of leaving the great issue to the hands of the good man he had secured to fight his battle. Since Darleigh had seen the Game Chicken perform against the black pugilist, in the early morning fight following the matchmaking at the "One Tun," he had been haunted by the belief that Pearce was more than a match for his man. He had been convinced when he held Sir John Dering to his promise, in the full knowledge Belcher would not be able to do battle, that a second man capable of meeting and beating Firby could not be found. And in the very moment of his belief, this Bristol lad had dropped from the clouds, and promised to be as good as Belcher himself, and more than a match for his man, Firby.

From the moment Darleigh saw Pearce strip for his mill with Bill Richmond, the idea of leaving the men to fight out the battle arranged at the "One Tun," had never crossed his mind. He meant to win and to be certain of winning, apart from the quality of Firby, and to use outside and unscrupulous methods either to keep the Game Chicken out of the ring, or ensure he should go into it badly handicapped by some physical disadvantage. His persistent support of Firby, with this in his mind, had been so marked, that the whole of the more unscrupulous betting-men connected with the ring had followed his leadership and made the Ruffian favourite, instinctively guessing Darleigh's bold support of Firby was founded on something he knew, and did not depend on his estimate of the two men's chances. Such was Darleigh's game. At whatever cost, the Game Chicken must not have an equal

chance. No means were too ignoble, if he could but ensure Sir John would either forfeit or lose. Colonel Darleigh's one dominating idea was to bring his rival to his knees, and humiliate him to the point of ruin. As he rolled to London, these thoughts were in his mind, now black with anger, and, frustrated as he had been that morning, his intention became set with the frenzied fixity of a madman's purpose. Whatever came or went, the Game Chicken must bring about the forfeit, or be made to fight in the certainty of losing.

His companion, Captain Stuart, whose army title was now more of a courtesy than a fact, sat by his side in the chaise and watched his patron carefully. Stuart was a gaunt, spare young man of thirty—who had been about town for five years. Pale, with the unhealthy tint that speaks of nights turned into day, of heated rooms and inflamed passions, though carefully dressed he had that flashy air of smartness which seems to cling to the dissolute, the vicious and the unprincipled—a suggestion scarcely definable, and indeed as intangible as a slight tarnish on a polished surface. His eyes were bright with an unnatural light, and overstrained, showing visible signs of excesses constantly repeated in the inflamed veins which streaked the white around the green pupils. Seated, he was never in repose—his eyes falling before the direct challenging glance, or wandering away with an uneasy, self-conscious movement to some other object. His fingers, which slightly trembled, were always working, and often played nervously about his weak mouth. His face was loose and coarse, the nose being hooked like

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the bill of a parrot. There was something indescribably furtive about every line of his features, the glance of his eye, and the restless movement of his hands. He wore a dark coat, with a cape of many collars and metal buttons; a white, high hat with a rolling brim was worn slightly aside on his head; his feet were encased in highly polished Hessians. He might have passed for a gentleman at first sight, but it was a fact, though no positive accusations had been brought against him, he was considered shady, and generally shunned by men particular about their associates.

As their chaise rolled down Piccadilly, Darleigh spoke to his companion for the first time.

"Damn this popinjay," he said, speaking aloud his thoughts to Stuart. "Damn him and all his brood. Wing me, will he, and make me the talk of the town. Let them talk—by Heaven! let them talk. I'll bend him yet—by all the black furies, I'll break him!"

Captain Stuart listened to him furtively, and thought in his mind that these were the ravings of a madman.

"And you—you poltroon. What have I paid you for, and what have you done? You had the Game Chicken in your grasp, and could have made the yokel's fighting career end there, when you had him. And you ran away. Why, damme, if you had been anything but a cur, you could have put the whole pack out of action."

Captain Stuart knew his man. Scenes of this type were not uncommon. He listened in sullen silence; an angry flush upon his pale face.



Colonel Darleigh continued in this manner for some minutes—raging incoherently in blasphemous terms, and then falling back into a fretful stream of vague recrimination.

“By God—it must be done!” he said, as the chaise turned towards his house in Pall Mall. “I’ll win that fight if I have to murder the Chicken, and I’ll do worse even than that. In the meantime, I have a plan which you can carry out, if you have the wits of a toad and keep them about you. If you don’t succeed this time, I’ll make London too hot to hold you.”

The other man stirred uneasily in his seat.

“Look here, Colonel Darleigh,” he said, “London is getting too hot to hold me as it is. I’m sick of this game of being hunted and hacked about like a dog. You hold some knowledge of my secrets, but you can go too far. Others are holding the same knowledge, and, unlike you, they do not need me. My position may be rendered intolerable any minute, and I shall have to skip, whether you hold your hand, or bring it down. I’m pretty deep in this damned business of the Game Chicken, but you might as well know at once, you can’t drive me into it deeper by using threats.”

Colonel Darleigh, with another flare of anger blazing in his eyes, looked at the man he had used as a tool. Stuart’s eyes fell before Darleigh’s flickering glance of anger, but the latter saw some purpose dawning in the furtive face before him.

“What do you mean?” Darleigh demanded. “Have I not treated you well? Do you dare round on me, you hound?”

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"Softly, Colonel, softly," answered Stuart. "Let us be clear about it. You ask, have you treated me well?"

"I do—you know what I have done for you," almost shouted Darleigh. "You've had my money, and you have not always succeeded."

"Your treatment," said Stuart, with returning confidence, and an indifferent wave of his hands—"your treatment has been so-so. I have done your dirty work, sometimes because I needed the money; sometimes because you threatened. You have paid me for what I have done. Well—we're quits. But it is just as well to remember that if the work has been dirty—your share of it has been as foul as mine. You know also, I've done other dirty work as well, and some of it is rising up against me. Already they are after me, like blooded hounds eager to tear me down. I'm no longer afraid of your threats, or any other man's. I've got to run for it, and one more enemy more or less makes no difference."

Darleigh scowled at his companion.

"How does this affect me?" he asked, with a sneer.

"Simply this—we are playing a dangerous game in the Dering business. I don't mind the danger—I'm used to it. But if I stop in this game any longer, I must be paid for it—and paid mighty well. If you intend to cut out a more dangerous task for me, I go into it on one condition only—you must make it worth my while. I'm going to bolt and get out of the way for a bit, and I want the money."

Colonel Darleigh looked at him, gloomily. His thoughts worked, busily. A gleam of approval appeared for an instant in his sinister eye. Already he had a plan, and here was Stuart desperate—cornered, ready for anything to save his skin and get out of the country. As the thought struck his mind, the chaise rattled along Pall Mall, turned down a side-street, and brought Darleigh to the door of his gloomy town house.

"Come in," he said, curtly dismissing the horses. "Come in, Stuart, I've need of you. We'll go into the final venture with the house of Dering, and on terms that will meet with your approval—or terms which will enable you to get out of the country within three days."

He led the way into the house, across the hall, and finally turned into a grim dining-room. It was an oppressive apartment crowded with heavy, ornate furniture. One or two pictures hung upon the walls. They were mostly portraits of dour-looking ancestors, who seemed almost ghostly in the heavy shadows caused by the dark hangings which almost prevented the light from streaming in through the big French windows.

Colonel Darleigh touched a bell, and a manservant appeared. In a few moments, after his departure, he returned, carrying a tray on which was a decanter containing brandy, and a bottle of champagne.

Darleigh's servant opened the bubbling wine, and filled his master a large glass, which he drank greedily. The stimulant was grateful to his quivering nerves and exhausted senses, and a second glass

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even dulled the throbbing pain in his wounded hand. He pointed to the tray, and advised Stuart to help himself. That worthy poured out half a tumblerful of brandy, and drank the spirit without diluting it.

"Ah!" he said, with some relief. "Brandy is the tippie for the tobyman, as the old saying has it. It puts new life into me—in very truth it does. Ask me anything short of murder, Colonel, and I'm yours, body and soul. It's like new blood in one's veins."

Colonel Darleigh, pale still, though the exhaustion of the drive and the excitement of the morning seemed to have left him, sat very quietly in a great arm-chair, and closed his eyes for a minute. Then he poured out another glass of wine, and drank it hastily, as before—as if he felt the need of stimulant.

"Plague take these early morning drives," said Captain Stuart. "The cold gets into the blood and freezes the marrow in one's bones. No man ought to be abroad at five o'clock, unless he is coming home after a night of pleasure or adventure. If you don't mind, I will punish your brandy again. After an adventure such as ours has been, it is liquid life."

"Yes—help yourself," said Darleigh, "and then let us to business."

While Stuart primed himself with another stiff glass of brandy, Darleigh sat motionless in his high-backed chair, watching his man closely. He did not watch more closely than Stuart observed him, with swift, furtive glances out of the corner of his eye.

"Listen," said Darleigh, at length. "You want to get out of the country. You want well paying

for your work—the dirty work, as you call it. What is the amount you want for this new adventure—this flight abroad?”

“A man’s purse would be thin, if he tried an exit for a year without two hundred and fifty guineas to set him going,” Stuart answered, with a grin.

“Good—now I’ll give you that for one last day of service,” Colonel Darleigh said. “You may have half in cash and half when your work is completed.”

“Tell me what is the service you ask?” Stuart demanded curiously.

“Listen to me, carefully,” Colonel Darleigh began. “To-day is Friday, and the fight takes place next Tuesday. During Saturday and Sunday we shall make no sign. That may throw them off their guard. On Monday, we shall make an attempt to kidnap the Chicken, bodily.”

“Perhaps you will tell me how it is to be done,” Stuart asked, sardonically.

“I will. I shall want you in that district for other work on the same day, of which I will tell you later. At six o’clock on the afternoon of Monday, you will be at the ‘Rangers’ Arms,’ two miles further up the Dorking Road from where Sir John Dering’s man is training, at the ‘King’s Head.’ I will send there a covered van and two horses, and inside will be four men I know, in addition to the driver. These men have done similar work before; they will probably know very little of the man we want, and I shall not tell them. They will be sent to the ‘Rangers’ Arms,’ under the promise of good pay, to do what you ask them to undertake.”

Stuart slowly nodded his gaunt head.

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"It will be easy for you to take your men, concealed in the vehicle, near to the 'King's Head.' Providing you keep out of sight, it might drive within a hundred yards of the door. Your task will be to get Pearce out on the road. I am told he still walks about freely at night, between seven and eight, without going far from the house, and I have further heard that a gipsy girl comes occasionally to see him. I have had the house watched after dark these last six nights, and almost as often this girl has stolen to the inn about eight o'clock. She makes a sound three times, like the hooting of an owl, and Pearce slips out for half an hour—probably with Belcher's consent.

"He talks with her for half an hour, perhaps," Darleigh continued. "He never goes more than one hundred yards from the 'King's Head,' and mostly stands near a gate which leads to the meadow on the other side of the road—about forty yards from the front of the house. You'd best go down to-night and to-morrow, and watch his movements for yourself."

"I see," said Stuart, "you desire me to nobble him as he is about his love-making—is that it?"

"Yes—bring your van close up to the hotel, get Pearce on the road, or be there when you know he is coming out, and set your men on him. Go for him with sand-bags, and strike him down, and the girl too. You'll find these men will fight. And when you've got him, place him in the cart and drive away."

"Where to?" asked Darleigh's listener.

"I have thought that out. I have an old house at Kingston—a lonely place, on the river-side. I

used to find it convenient in my young days, when my blood was hotter than it is to-day. Some strange scenes have happened there, and it always awaits my coming, in charge of an old servant and his hag of a wife. They are tied to me in many ways and will ask no questions—if I give them the word. Go there to-morrow and make your arrangements, and when you get Pearce, drive him straight to The Hermitage on the river-side. Bind him, gag him, and keep him blind. You've only to keep him there overnight and until four in the following afternoon. Then you can drive him five miles into the country, and throw him out on the highway. No one can prove anything against us, if you are careful."

"My God—it's mighty risky!" Stuart said.

"Why? Once get the Chicken and it's much better than trying to stun him on the road, as you did, and a great deal less risky. If you are careful, nothing could be easier. You need not be squeamish about it—you have done worse things."

"Yes," said Stuart, slowly, "I have done worse. But why cannot I meet these men in London and drill them for the task?" he asked.

"For two reasons," Darleigh said, rubbing his hands, grimly. "The men will be all the better for not knowing the personalities in the plot. There is less risk of them talking, though there is not much chance of that. There's less risk of their being afraid of tackling a fighting-man, which is more important. You will find them desperate men and not over-particular, but they will be reliable, because they will be well paid. And I have another reason."

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"Tell it me," Stuart whispered, hoarsely, helping himself freely from the decanter.

"At noon on Monday, Sir John and Trevelyan will be away at Boxhill. They are sure to visit the 'King's Head' the day before the fight. I am going to play my trump card on him, and here the game becomes desperate."

Darleigh chuckled to himself, and his laugh was not good to hear.

"On Monday, at noon, you are to go to his house and see Rosa Dering—she does not know you. You will go in a chaise which should look as if it had made a journey; you tell the girl her father and Trevelyan have met with an accident on the road, and that Dering is so badly injured he is not expected to live. You will offer to take her on to him at once, and she will come."

"Good God!" said Stuart, "and what have I to do next?"

"Drive her to The Hermitage, at Kingston, in a closed carriage, and keep her there until you hear from me."

"Zounds!" said Stuart in amaze, "this is a hellish plot. What do you propose doing with the girl?"

Darleigh's rasping chuckle again broke the following silence.

"I will keep her there," Darleigh slowly answered, "and much will depend on what happens," he added, malignantly. "If we fail with the Game Chicken, and I lose the fight—I shall have another weapon with which to break Sir John's spirit. If the game goes with me and I have him ruined, as I hope, his financial loss may not only bend his head, but



this second blow will bring him to the ground. Again, I know that Sir John suspects ugly play and will demand an inquiry from the Corinthian Club, of which we are both members. With Rosa in my possession I can fight back, whichever way the war is waged, and beat him off and down. After the fight is over, perhaps a month after when all is settled, Rosa will be fatally compromised. I may allow her to return, or may force her to the Continent, and complete her ruin there."

Stuart, steeped in all the villainy of the worst side of London, blanched.

"You devil!" he said. "You must be mad!"

Darleigh stopped chuckling, and ceased to rub his hands.

He turned his pale face towards his companion, and eyed him fixedly. When the two men's glances met, Stuart's eyes were the first to fall. He had seen something in Darleigh's expression that had not been there before—in all their intercourse. Hatred, mad hatred, blazed in his eyes and distorted every nerve of Darleigh's face. The passion he had planted in youth, nurtured all through his manhood, was growing not only a menace to the objects of his hatred, but to the man himself.

"I must be mad, you say," Darleigh answered slowly, and so great was his passion, he failed to pronounce perfectly some of the words he used. "Perhaps you are right. I have thought of that myself. But if I am mad, no one knows. I go about, I am received, and I observe no change in my friends when they meet me. But I do know there is a change in myself. This hatred has grown

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all my life, and every moment in it this man has thwarted me. I wanted the woman he married, and would have won her but for him. I hated him then. Because she is like her mother, I wanted his daughter, and his attitude when I referred to my desire was an insult. I was mad when we began this last round at the One Tun Inn, and this madness has been raging in my mind ever since, with growing fierceness, as if it were a roaring furnace. When he threw that glass of wine before the whole company—before our world—for a moment I lost control of my emotions, and almost for the first time. I would have strangled him there and then; I would have shot him like a dog this morning, if my hand had not failed me. Mad—you say. Yes, I may be that—but it is the madness of a growing hatred, and I will give the rein to my impulses, mad as they may seem, and follow them to the end.”

He sat back, limp and exhausted in his chair—panting for breath, so violent had been his outburst.

Stuart looked at him steadily now.

“You’ll follow those impulses to the devil,” he said, secretly elated, for at last he knew the weakness of his man.

“I care not,” whispered Darleigh, for his voice had almost left him. “If it be to the devil, and I roll into the abyss, I do not care—if I can only drag that man Dering down with me. Will you go into the last round, and help me in my final ride to the devil?”

“It’s a black business, Colonel Darleigh,” Stuart answered. “If I go in, I play for a coup and a

clean break away. My price has gone up. Before I start, I want two hundred and fifty pounds down in cash. On the morning after the fight, if you win, I shall want five hundred pounds more, and if you lose, two hundred and fifty pounds. Your hatred is not mine—to me this is a matter of business.”

Colonel Darleigh rose, walked to the window, looked out from between the heavy hanging curtains, on the busy street below, and seemed for half a minute to be trying to master his emotion.

When he returned to the centre of the room, his manner was quieter and more composed. He had become the grim Darleigh with the sinister face which his world knew so well, but Stuart, watching furtively, noted his eyes still gleamed with a fierce light that never wavered—the flames of a devouring hatred. Darleigh looked at the man before him for a moment, and there was a silence between them. Then he turned and went without a word to a cabinet, unlocked it awkwardly with his left hand, and grasped a bundle of notes.

He counted them one by one, and they fluttered to the table, as he did so.

“That’s for the Game Chicken,” he said at length, pointing to the notes. “See you get him to The Hermitage.”

Stuart moistened his lips and nodded.

Colonel Darleigh patted the remainder of the bundle of notes.

“There are more,” he croaked, for his exhausted voice seemed to rattle in his throat. “I shall be very happy to pay for the proud Rosa, when she is

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caged in The Hermitage. See that you snare this bird securely, Stuart. You will not find me ungrateful."

Without speaking another word, the army black-leg pocketed the notes and left Darleigh's sinister presence. The great door clanged behind him, and he stood in the sunlight of a still early morning. Pausing a minute there, he shook himself, and his movement was very much like a hawk's when pluming itself before flight. Then he swaggered down the street, carrying himself bravely; a man of fortune once more, heedless of the fact that his pockets were lined with tainted gold. He swaggered bravely enough, and carried his fine feathers well, but that furtive, subtle, warning influence, so difficult to define, seemed accentuated in the honest light of day. It might be likened to the symptoms of decay set up by a poisoned soul, the sin within revealing itself by physical signs without.

## CHAPTER XIV

"I WONDER what Darleigh is doing," said Sir John Dering, at ten o'clock on Monday morning as he and Harry drove off in the direction of Leatherhead. They had decided to spend the day at the headquarters of the Game Chicken. Captain Trevelyan had also arranged to stay the night at the "King's Head," to which Sir John would return early on the morning of the fight.

Both Sir John and Captain Trevelyan had their minds very much occupied by Colonel Darleigh. After the stormy days of the mid-week there had been a lull. Darleigh had not been seen in town since the morning of the duel, or at his accustomed haunts. Already the events of the week were the property of the town. There had been much talk and a great deal of wild betting. With the withdrawal of Colonel Darleigh the wild rush to lay against the Game Chicken ceased, and his position in the lists improved.

Sir John had seen his man Pearce on the Saturday, while Harry had driven over to the "King's Head" on the Sunday. Everything was going on well at the Chicken's head-quarters, and the two trainers had almost forgotten the attack on Pearce, and were full of confidence, both as to the safety and the condition of their man.

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There were no signs of any interruption of the ordinary routine, and no indications, either in London or Leatherhead, that Darleigh was making an exceptional move. And yet Sir John was not satisfied.

"I don't like it at all," he said, stroking the off leader's neck with his whip-lash. "Although I have absolutely no reason for it, I have the fixed notion this calm is the kind of thing that comes before the crack of thunder."

Harry, seated by his side, agreed.

"After the events of the week," he said, "I, too, have a feeling that before the fight happens, we shall hear more of Darleigh."

They drove on together, little dreaming of the promptness with which their forebodings would come true.

Their departure from Sir John's old house in Bloomsbury had not passed unnoticed. An old man, apparently standing in the square, looking for alms, as soon as he had seen Sir John and his companion mount the coach, took off the label hanging to his breast, which appealed for charity. With surprising activity for such an old man, he left the square and threaded his way through the maze of streets which then lay between Bloomsbury and the West End.

At twelve o'clock, a chaise and two horses drove up to the door, and a young man jumped out of it, ran up the steps and rang the bell. The vehicle in which he had ridden was dusty, and had evidently been on the road; the horses were hot, and showed signs of being rapidly driven.

Rosa, sitting in the quiet drawing-room, heard

the summons of the bell, and shortly afterwards the doorkeeper entered the room.

"A gentleman to see you," he said. "Mr. Alan Upwater."

"Mr. Alan Upwater," she queried. "I do not know him."

"No—madame. He said you would not know the name. He has business of importance which he can only communicate to you. He says the matter is urgent."

"Strange!" she said. Then, to the waiting manservant, "Show Mr. Upwater into the morning-room. I will see him there immediately."

She went down slowly, and as she entered the room, a man she had never seen before, who was standing at the window and looking out on the leafy square, turned to greet her. It was Darleigh's henchman—Captain Stuart. He was correctly dressed for the road, but dusty and soiled.

"Mr. Upwater, I believe," she said, a question in her voice.

"Yes," he answered. "I will not apologise for this intrusion," he began, hurriedly. "The truth is, I am the bearer of ill news. I hope you are brave and are prepared for an unpleasant shock which I would save you, if I could."

Her face grew slightly pale.

"Tell me, at once," she said, dread clutching at her heart with icy hand.

"Your father, Sir John Dering, and Captain Trevelyan have met with an accident on the road. Coming down the hill outside Epsom, the brakes refused to act and the coach went over. Sir John

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was still unconscious when I left. Captain Trevelyan has unfortunately broken a leg."

Rosa did not faint or burst into tears, though her heart was wildly beating, and she was slightly breathless.

"Tell me—where are they now?" she asked, pain in her tense, young voice.

"In quite good hands, you may rely. I have a small property in the neighbourhood, and as my house was nearest to the scene of the accident, both men were conveyed there. I have driven over to tell you, at the request of Captain Trevelyan."

Rosa did not doubt the story for a moment. With characteristic decision she made up her mind.

"I will go to Epsom at once," she said, then stopped and eyed him, doubtfully.

"If I might suggest it—my chaise is at your disposal. I have to return immediately."

She looked at him, gratefully.

"I am very much obliged," she added, with a graceful bow. "I shall not keep you waiting long."

Five minutes later, Captain Stuart, after briefly instructing the driver, set off with Rosa, along the road to Epsom.

It was about half-past twelve when they whirled out of London. Captain Stuart, under the pretence of shielding Rosa's distraught features from the gaze of people in the streets, had drawn the curtains of the chaise windows. As it rolled through the town and out into the country lanes they sat side by side in silence. Only when the chaise, which was now travelling quickly, had drawn away from Putney did Captain Stuart reveal his purpose.



Without a word of warning, he seized her two hands, and tied them together. There was a slight struggle in the swaying vehicle before he accomplished his design, and in those few moments the curtains in the carriage were shaken out of their place, and the light streamed through the undraped window.

It was a moment and only a moment before Stuart had thrown Rosa back into her seat and replaced the curtain, but in that moment, a woman walking along the highway had seen the anguished face and noted that all was not as it should be with the occupants of the vehicle. The swaying chaise went past her like a flash, and she had only time for a swift glance—but it was sufficient to allow her to see the woman clearly, to get a swift impression of the man, and to note the general character of the vehicle.

Within the vehicle, Rosa, panting, almost sobbing with surprise and a sense of outrage, looked from her bound hands to the face of the man who sat by her side.

"What means this insolent, unmanly conduct?" she asked.

Stuart looked at her grimly.

"I shall have to gag you," he said, "and then I will explain. Useless to protest, and it will not profit you to scream or call for help. This is not a much-travelled road, but when we get nearer our destination I cannot afford to give you an opportunity of calling the attention of the people on the road."

Heedless of her protests, Stuart wound his scarf about her face, and tied it securely.

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"Now," he said, coldly, "I shall be glad to tell you what it means. You are absolutely in my power, and you might as well know exactly what is happening. I may say at once I regret to inconvenience such a charming lady, but at the moment my needs and the devil are driving me. So far as I am concerned, you have nothing to fear. If I had my way, or followed the dictates of my heart, this would not have happened, and you would not have been molested. I act for a man you know, Colonel Darleigh, and my share of this strange incident ends when I deliver you at the rendezvous appointed."

Rosa, who heard the words, started and grew a shade paler. She would like to have questioned Stuart, but could not. He seemed, however, almost to anticipate what she would ask him.

"There was no accident on the road this morning, so far as I know, and the probabilities are Sir John and Captain Trevelyan are quite well, and arrived safely at the 'King's Head.' Everything will be done for your comfort, so far as I am concerned, and you have nothing to fear for the moment. Your real enemy is Colonel Darleigh, and your danger begins when he meets you. That will certainly not be until after the big fight is over."

If Rosa had been able to speak, she would have appealed to this callous adventurer's manliness and his respect for her sex. As it was, she looked her supplication, and her eyes were very eloquent, though they betrayed no weakness. Stuart, however, was not a man to weaken in his purpose. He sat by her side and drummed nervously on his knees

with his fingers. All the time, the carriage was tearing wildly along the country lanes. It was just striking two o'clock from the church tower when the wheels rattled loudly over the cobble stones of the old village street of Kingston. They did not take the main roads, but skirted the village, and in a few minutes the driver turned down a lonely lane which led to the river. Only two villas with ground round each were in that lane, and the last one, the roof which could be seen above the high wall that surrounded the garden, was The Hermitage. It was a big gloomy house, though very little of it could be seen from the road. From the river, one might have viewed its front. It turned a somewhat dour aspect to the stream. The building was of brick and painted stone, three storeys high, and almost every window was closed up by heavy shutters and iron bolts. The garden and lawn were neglected, and indeed there was an air of desolation about the premises—the only sign of life within being a thin stream of blue smoke ascending in an almost straight line from the chimney to the sky.

As the carriage moved rapidly along the lonely road, towards this house, its arrival was evidently expected. The great gates were noiselessly unbarred and swung open. The chaise, drawn by the now steaming horses, did not stop, but turned straight into the drive leading to the house, and as it did so, the gates were swung back again and bolted once more.

The old man who attended to the gates was one Isaac Bradley. In appearance he was a combination of butler and gardener, so far as his dress was

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concerned. His face was small, wrinkled, and ugly. There were little tufts of straggling white whisker on either cheek. His mouth, clean-shaven, was full of big, ugly, broken teeth. It was a loose-lipped, sensual mouth—the mouth of an animal. The worst feature of the man was that he was blind in one eye, and the other eye, bright and as fierce as the eye of a ferret, glowed like a little lantern. There was an unpleasant expression on his features as he saw the carriage brought to a standstill at the rear of the grim old house, and as Stuart hastily jumped to the ground, he went forward, rubbing his hands, an evil grin about his cruel mouth, a still more ugly glitter in his single eye.

"Ah, ha!" he said. "Another bird for the empty cage. Let's have a look at the pretty beauty—bring her out and let's have a look at her."

Stuart helped the shrinking Rosa to alight. As he did so, he removed the gag about her mouth and the bandage from her hands.

"I would advise you to submit," he said quietly. "You are in our power, and no good will come of resistance. Your only chance, a remote one, is an early rescue."

"Ah, ha!" said the elderly ruffian, still rubbing his hands, on which the parchment skin was stretched so tightly that one expected it to break and let the knuckle-bones burst through. "A pretty bird for the empty cage. Rescue—you say, Captain Stuart—no one is rescued from our river-side retreat."

"Damn your garrulous tongue! What good is there in mentioning my name?" Stuart fumed.

"It is interesting," said Rosa. "I have heard,

and shall remember. Rest assured that this day's work, evil as it is for me, will be the worse for you in the end."

"Evil," said old Bradley. "Who talks of evil? Lots of birds have come to the cage, and there was no trouble about them. They came of their own free will and only left when the door was opened and they were compelled to go. Evil—my dear! Why they liked it."

He grinned all over his ghastly face, and Rosa shrank from him, as if the very sight of the man were pollution.

"See to it," said Stuart, "that she remains in the cage. She does not come of her own free will, and may escape if you are not vigilant. You know what Darleigh can be if he is thwarted, and there is a devil in him now that will make him a hundred times as bad if you bungle the matter. In the meantime, see this girl is carefully looked after—Darleigh insists she should be properly treated, with the respect due to her position."

Rosa listened to his speech, and watched the effect it had upon the old man.

"Here and now," she said defiantly, tapping the pavement with her foot, "I protest against this outrage. In this villainy I am in your hands, but you will reap a harvest from this day's work, that will end your schemes for ever. Sir John Dering is not the man to let the matter end here. Go to your master and tell him so. I am not afraid, and the end of this mad folly is not yet in sight."

The old man hobbled across the yard and entered the rear of the house. In half a minute he returned,

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accompanied by an old woman. She was wrinkled and toothless, and her cheeks and lips had fallen in. Her grey hair neglected, badly kept, straggled in fitful wisps and disordered tresses on her shoulders. A cap, set awry, was on her head. She wore a man's coat about her body, with a scarf drawn loosely around her neck. Her petticoat was short, and showed her feet encased in heavy boots, such as stable-men might wear. This elderly hag came forward, her hands resting on her hips, and surveyed her young charge with a very sinister leer of appreciation.

"Lack-a-day," she said, "we've had a might of pretty ones at the old Hermitage, but you are certainly as good as the best. The Colonel always had the eye—that he had. Come along, my pretty one—come along. I'll show you to your quarters."

Beckoning to her charge, she turned towards the house. Rosa thought it would be better to follow her, and did so. But before leaving the two men, she turned to them. Proud she looked—fearless, queenly, in the early spring sunlight. An expression of withering contempt was on her lips; the fire of a righteous anger gleamed in her eyes.

"Men!" she said slowly, with a rankling scorn. "This is pretty work for men. But see to yourselves, both of you. You are raising forces by your actions stronger than a weak girl, and you will need all your coward's spirit to meet them."

Without another word she followed Bradley's hag of a wife towards The Hermitage.

"Hee, hee!" laughed Bradley, rubbing his parchment hands. "A good plucked un—a good plucked

un. I like 'em when they are good plucked  
uns."

"Don't cackle; attend to me. I'm going to take a quick meal and I must be off again. To-night, between seven and nine, I shall return with another bird for the cage. There will be a van with five or six men in it—one a prisoner. Be on the watch and when the van comes along the road, admit it. If I am not in charge, take your orders from the man who is, and be careful they are obeyed. You understand?—be careful they are obeyed."

It was about three o'clock when Captain Stuart, muffled to the ears in a heavy coat, left The Hermitage, and was rapidly driven away in the chaise on his journey to Boxhill.

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## CHAPTER XV

SIR JOHN DERING and Captain Trevelyan arrived at the "King's Head" before midday, and found Paddington Jones and the Game Chicken still out upon the usual walk, on the morning before the fight.

Jem Belcher hastened out of the house as Sir John pulled up his horses. Bullen, the landlord, followed as fast as his gouty legs would allow him to move.

"How now, Champion Belcher?" Sir John called heartily. "What is the news from head-quarters—eh?"

"Good—only good. The Chicken is fit—fit for anything. You will see for yourself when he arrives," Belcher answered, helping Sir John to alight.

"Fit!" said old Bullen. "Fit—and him packing away one of my Surrey chickens every day, and my old missus cooking for him with her own hands. Fit—and him punching Belcher and old Pad Jones, —as if they were skittles, and going to bed and sleeping like a baby. Why, blow my old dickey, he's fit to fight for the sign of the old 'King's Head,' and that's not likely to be taken down, in my time. I've got a year's rent on him, Sir John, I have. He's the prettiest bit of scrapping goods



ever seen in these parts, and don't you make any mistake about it."

Sir John's fine eyes gleamed as he heard this eulogy.

"Well—we shall see, we shall see," was all he said.

"What's the office, sir?" asked old Bullen.

"Twelve o'clock on Epsom Downs. That reminds me, Belcher—is everything all right?"

"Quite, sir—here comes the Chicken now," Belcher answered.

"Well—the order of the day is we leave here soon after eleven o'clock to-morrow. That gives us ample time to arrive at the ring. Firby, they tell me, is at the 'Spaniards,' on Hampstead Heath, and has put in a fine preparation. He travels up to London to-night, and will be driven down to Epsom first thing to-morrow morning. You'll see everything is ready for a start at eleven o'clock."

"Everything will be ready, sir, and the readiest thing of the lot will be the Game Chicken. See for yourself, sir," said Belcher, pointing down the road.

Sir John followed the motion of Belcher's hand, and saw two men approaching along the quiet highway—two tall men, clad in sweaters, who moved over the road at four good English miles an hour.

Old Bullen danced in front of his own house. The fever of the fight was upon him. He could hardly restrain himself, and his whole mind was full of anticipation of the morrow.

"Here he comes, the beauty—here he comes. Isn't he a mover, Sir John—isn't he a mover, sir?" he asked, almost capering with glee.

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The two men coming along the road so quickly, noted the group in front of the "King's Head." Almost spontaneously they quickened their pace, and made for the inn as fast as they could run. Pearce arrived first, and pulled up without betraying any indication of effort. Sir John, looking at him, felt a sportsman's pride in his champion. The Chicken's eyes were bright and clear. His face was ruddy with health, and though a little fine it indicated just the moment in the fighter's life when he is at the top of his physical form. He stood in the road, saluting Sir John, his manner quiet and calm, the youthful smile always present on his cheerful, willing face.

"How now, Pearce?" Sir John said. "Does all go well with you?"

"Never better, sir; never better."

"What think you, Harry?" asked Sir John, turning to Captain Trevelyan.

Harry's glance was fixed admiringly on the Game Chicken. His expression conveyed those stern signs of pleasure which one brave man may show on recognising another. He shook the Chicken by the hand very heartily as Sir John spoke.

"A perfect lad, Sir John," he answered. "I would not quarrel with him for a king's ransom, this morning."

The Chicken's smile broadened.

"Always at the service of such a sportsman," he said slowly. "There are some gentlemen a willing lad would fight for nothing, and if I may be so bold—you are one, sir."

"Thank you, Hen, thank you," smiled Harry.

"But not this morning. I have tasted your quality sufficiently, and one thickened ear is enough in one month. Besides, we are not out for fun to-day. We want you in perfect trim for the great to-morrow."

The Game Chicken smiled back at Harry, and looked towards Sir John.

"Aye, aye, sir. I'm in quite good trim right enough, and could fight every day in a week and for a month of Sundays. I'm a willing lad, and I'm fit to do my best. You'll see, sir, to-morrow; I'll do my best. No man can say fairer."

"I have not the slightest doubt of that," Sir John replied, looking into the fighter's eyes. "Let's hope Firby is willing too, and may the best man win."

"Aye—may the best man win," said the Chicken, "and maybe it will be me. At least, that's what I hope and that's what I believe. I said it in my prayers last night."

"There ain't no maybe about this," said old Bullen, patting the Chicken's shoulder. "If I don't land my year's rent to-morrow, I'll never cook another chicken for nobody, no more. Hear that, Pearce?"

The Chicken nodded and smiled, and the little party went into the inn. The arrangements of the day were simplified. Belcher explained they were giving Pearce an "easy," and the work of the afternoon had been cut out. The Chicken would remain quietly at the "King's Head," get to bed early, and be ready for the road at the time stated by Sir John. Lunch was being served as they entered the inn, and they all sat down together round

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the dining-room table—gentlemen and sportsmen both. Their talk over the plain meal dwelt very little upon the coming event, but was of the battles of other days, and Belcher told of some of his earlier triumphs, with the old fighting gleam lighting his one eye. Incidentally, they talked of Darleigh and his man, and the prospect of any further interference.

"Everything has been quiet," said Belcher grimly, "and the Chicken is under our observation night and day. He'll be a good man who beats us on the post, or prevents us from putting our man in the ring as pretty as a picture."

"Aye, sir, we even watch the Chicken at his courting," grinned Paddington Jones.

The Chicken's face crimsoned.

"Courting?" said Sir John, a query in his voice.

"Yes—he's fixed it up with that gel, Stella, the Romany. We allow him half an hour with her every night, and she's coming to pin his colours on, in the morning," Paddington Jones answered.

The little group of men round the table laughed—all except Pearce. He bit his lip and looked as if he would like to express his private opinion of Jones in heavy punches.

That worthy, undaunted, went on with his chaff.

"When this fight's over, and the Chicken is laden with his winnings, he and the gipsy wench are going to make a match of it. No love in a cottage for the Chicken, not much. He's flying for higher game—is the Chicken."

"Yes, a booth if you please at the races and the fairs," broke in Belcher.

"Aye; and all the champions for sixpence a nut," Paddington Jones added, banteringly.

They all laughed together with Jones—all with the exception of the Chicken.

"Saving your presence, Sir John, I'd like to say this here. I'm a willing lad, and all they say is true. Stella's mine, and I'm proud of it. When I get that booth, I'll not charge old Pad anything. No, I'll let him in for nothing, and punch his ugly old head off when I get him there. If I wasn't going to be busy to-morrow I'd do it now; but it will save, Pad, old Pug—it will save."

Sir John intervened to turn the conversation, which apparently embarrassed the Chicken.

"Hearty good luck to you, my lad," he said. "We owe you much, and to-morrow, win or lose, if your ambition is that way, the swellest boxing-booth, with the most gorgeous cloths outside and the yellowest wagons to carry the lot and to live in, will be yours."

"A sporting offer," said Belcher, with a laugh.

"Yes—and put me down for the horses to drag the wagons," Captain Trevelyan added.

The Chicken's face crimsoned again—this time with pleasure.

"Thank you kindly, gentlemen; no one could say fairer," he replied. "I'll have the nobbiest little fighting fit-up on the road, the handsomest wife, and the best patrons a willing lad ever knew. My respects, gentlemen, and thank you kindly."

As they sat, laughing and chatting over the meal, the subject of their conversation, Stella, threw open the door of the dining-room and stood before them.

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The Game Chicken rose and went eagerly towards her, and as he did so she seemed inclined to run from the room. Half proudly, half shamefacedly, she suffered Pearce to kiss her before all the company, and to draw the attention away from the Romany girl's confusion, Harry Trevelyan promptly stood up and toasted her in glowing terms as the woman who saved the Chicken on the night of the attack.

Stella's mood was curiously antagonistic to the light atmosphere of banter which had been the prevailing note of the gathering during the luncheon. Almost impatiently she pushed Pearce away from her. They noted that the girl was looking anxious and tired. She had evidently travelled far and fast. The gaudy shawl about her rounded shoulders was spattered by the mud of the road, and a spot of it had even caught her warm, brown cheek and clung there, like a patch of an earlier period.

"There is a time for everything," she said, "for pretty actions"—she looked at Pearce—"and for pretty speeches," she added, with a glance at Captain Trevelyan. "I came to ask how Miss Dering is?"

There was a purposeful note in her voice, which arrested their attention.

"Why, never better," said Harry, "never better, my good girl, and always with a kindly thought for your bravery of the other evening."

"Yes, yes; she was well—when?" the girl insisted.

Sir John, noticing the anxiety in her voice, slowly rose from his seat at the table. "She breakfasted with us this morning," he said slowly. "Rosa was

quite well when we left her at ten o'clock. She was going to her costumier's at noon, and had made an engagement to lunch with the Trevelyans. She purposed coming on to Epsom first thing to-morrow to pin the colours on the Chicken's coat and wish us all luck on the great day."

"Then," said Stella, "I could not have seen her beyond Putney, travelling in a chaise, alone with a man."

Sir John started and looked at Harry. The gipsy's manner disturbed them both. Captain Harry's expression showed the same thought had crossed their minds simultaneously.

"I would say it was impossible, Stella, if I did not know you better, and were not sure you have something behind all this. Tell all you wish us to understand and let us judge," Sir John urged, his manner increasingly grave.

"The matter is very simple," Stella answered. "Once before I asked you to take a seemingly impossible belief of mine for granted and act upon it. You did, and what I feared proved true. That which the gipsy girl tells you now seems more unlikely still—but I want you to act at once. I want Captain Harry Trevelyan to go straight to London and see whether Rosa is at home. I want him to go as fast as he can, find out, and come back and tell us here. He should return before seven o'clock. If Miss Rosa is at home I have made a mistake and Captain Trevelyan's time has been wasted. If Miss Rosa is not at home, he should inquire when she left, and, if possible, where she has gone. If she is not at home my fears are justified."

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Sir John, startled out of his usual calm, walked across the room and took Stella's brown hand in his.

"You know, Stella, we have proof by your past devotion that you have all our interests at heart," he said, speaking the thought in all their minds. "We shall be glad to do exactly as you suggest. Captain Trevelyan will return to London, as you desire."

"At once," said Harry, promptly, "and as quickly as possible."

"But tell me, Stella, what do you fear?" asked Sir John, his great uneasiness betrayed by his voice and manner.

The men in the room stood round the gipsy girl in silence, waiting upon her next word.

"I fear everything, and I know nothing. It may be that I am gammoning you all. I only hope so. But the gipsy's eyes are keen, particularly for a sight of friends, and this morning, shortly after twelve, I thought I saw Miss Dering. I was walking the road beyond Putney when a chaise and pair dashed past me. They were travelling hard, and I had only a second to see what has disturbed me ever since. In that second or more, a picture was fixed in my mind which I cannot believe is untrue. Miss Dering was in that chaise, struggling with a man, and looking very frightened. Her eyes seemed to appeal to me. It was all over in a flash, and I could not look again to make sure of what I seemed to see."

"Who was with Miss Dering?" Sir John asked, sternly. "Did you see the man?"

"I saw him as I saw Miss Dering, and he seemed



to be the fourth man who led the attack the night they tried to put out the Game Chicken."

"What! Captain Stuart!" Sir John shouted, and his voice vibrated with rising fear as he spoke. "Tell me, my dear girl—are you sure of this?"

"I am sure of nothing," she answered earnestly. "My eyes are quick, but I had little time, and they may have made a mistake. At least, I am sure I was not dreaming, and I want to know if what I think I saw is true."

Captain Trevelyan's hand went to the cord of the bell, which he pulled furiously.

"What think you of this, Harry?" asked Sir John, turning a pale and troubled face to the Captain.

As he spoke old Bullen came into the room.

"This is what I think of it," said Trevelyan. "Bullen, have the horses round as quickly as possible—in five minutes, if you can. Hurry, man, hurry. That's what I think of it. I go to London at once. We must be certain. There is a sinister probability in all this, which makes me panic-stricken."

"What can we do?" asked Belcher.

Sir John turned to the girl. "What do you suggest?" he asked. "You have been right so often, I would trust your instinct better than my judgment."

"I am going back on the road. I know the chaise and I know the way it was taking. They were travelling the Kingston Road. I know every house of call on that highway and will make inquiries. Men who hang about the inn stables watch the traffic very closely. I shall come back here at

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seven o'clock. And by that time Captain Harry will be back, and we shall know. If I find anything out, and what I fear is true, I shall be able to tell you then. We can do no more at present."

As she spoke the horses were brought, harnessed to Sir John Dering's drag, and stood champing their bits and pawing the cobbles in the roadway.

"The girl is right," Harry said. "There is nothing more to be done. Au revoir, Sir John. I'll be there and back as quickly as possible. God grant that Stella has made a mistake—but it looks serious enough to demand our urgent attention."

Captain Trevelyan strode out, sprang into the vehicle, and in a second the horses were stretching themselves and breaking into a cracking pace for London.

"I go now, Sir John," the gipsy said. "One other foolish favour I would ask. Stick together, the four of you, all through the rest of the day, and do not let a soul get near to the Game Chicken—not a man you do not know and trust."

Sir John shook the Romany girl's warm hand.

"It is wise advice you give us. It is the only course we can take likely to help," he answered gravely. "Rest assured your wish will be carried out to the letter, and we await your return with eagerness."

Stella sped away along the high road. The time was just after one o'clock. By ways known to herself, she obtained lifts from the drivers of various vehicles, and was back on the Kingston Road before three. Patiently she began to make inquiries about the inn yards, but although she questioned every avail-

able idler her search ended in nothing tangible. Some thought they had seen the chaise, others were certain in a vague kind of way they had not. Again, they were sure they had seen it going north, east, south, and west. Sometimes the road appeared to be barren of scarlet chaises; other times hundreds of the same vehicle appeared to have been on the move. When a near-by church clock had struck half-past four, reluctantly Stella gave up the search without having gleaned a clue worth following.

A neighbouring farrier, driving out of the inn yard where she had been making her last inquiries, gave her a friendly lift. It was useless spending the time in further inquiries—and necessary she should be back at the "King's Head" by seven o'clock. The kindly farrier's game mare rattled along at a pace the driver justified by the evident anxiety of the handsome girl to get upon her way. He was going into Guildford, and shortly before six o'clock the gipsy girl climbed out of the vehicle, at the nearest point to the "King's Head"—the cross-roads near Leith Hill. From where she alighted to the "King's Head" was a good three miles—two miles into Dorking, and one further mile along the road to the inn.

Tired as she was Stella stepped out bravely. The day was ending, and the world was soberly hushing itself into a twilit serenity. A mist was rising over the downs; the evening air was cool and quiet; the western sky was lurid with the after hues of sunset. The trees, in their new green leaf, were fading out into massive patches silhouetting themselves against the skyline. The world was a great fragrant silence

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only disturbed by the girl's own footsteps and the last poignant song of birds, calling to each other in the loneliness around—singing, as it were, an evensong to the dying day.

Stella had no thought of the beauties around her. The girl's whole mind was concentrated on the Derings and the safety of Rosa and her own lover, the Game Chicken. She had travelled far and was footsore, but she kept forging bravely ahead, depressed by her failure, but determined, though she could shed no helpful light, to be back at the inn by seven, and to hear what she expected—the worst. Stella had no doubt some foul plot had drawn Rosa Dering from her home.

On she walked, and now the roofs and spires of Dorking could be seen, less than a mile away. As she descended the incline, dropping down towards the town, her senses almost dulled by the exertions of the afternoon, a strange incident happened that drew her flagging attention into concentrated activity. Behind her, horses, rapidly driven, rang their hoofs on the flints of the highway, and quickly overtook her. She had barely time to draw towards the hedge-side, when they galloped by at full speed. As they did so, she saw the vehicle behind them. It was the scarlet chaise!

As soon as it had passed, impotent and mad with her baulked desire to follow effectively, she ran, panting and sobbing, along the highway.

"No use, no use," she gasped to herself, as she ran. The horses were at the gallop, and were rapidly disappearing. Almost crying with the anguish of her dashed hopes, she slowed her pace down to a

rapid walk, and the chaise finally disappeared behind a bend in the road.

Stella walked on for about a quarter of a mile and rounded the bend—hopeless, almost despairing. As she did so she came upon a roadside inn—the “Rangers’ Arms,” a low-lying building, with a swinging, creaking sign, standing back from the road. There were vehicles occupying the space before the inn. One was a dark and lumbering van and—the joy of it danced in her mind—the other was the scarlet chaise.

The gipsy girl crept along the road, in the shadow of the hedges. As she did so, a church clock struck six. In front of the inn all was quiet. The horses had been left unattended. The windows of the inn were uncurtained. In one of the front apartments—a tap-room—three or four men of the soil were drinking, and a rough-bearded, tipsy man was singing lugubriously. He was leaning forward drunkenly, his arms upon the table, his head lolling upon his arms. The other men were wrangling noisily. The second room, on the other side of the door, would have been in deep shadow but for the ruddy glow cast by a blazing fire. Creeping up she looked inside, and saw there, sitting round tables, four men. Standing up was Captain Stuart, who was giving instructions to the postboy.

Hastily she darted out of the circle of light and stood away on the other side of the road, against the dark hedge. Footsteps grated on the sanded floor of the inn passage; two men came out, and one man spoke.

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"I shall not want you further, Wilks. Take the horses back to Kingston, and send your bill in to The Hermitage." She guessed the speaker was Stuart. The other man touched his hat. In a moment he mounted his horses, and the scarlet chaise drove away as quickly as it had come, and back along the main road. The man at the door watched it disappear, and then turned and re-entered the tavern. Stella heard his grating footsteps, as his boots ground the sand, and then a door slammed. In the failing light and the silence outside she stood, her heart beating so loudly it seemed to her the men assembled in the inn must hear its throbbing movement. Stella remained there until she had recovered her composure. After, she walked silently across the now deserted road and along the front of the house, to the window of the inn. She could see part of the room. Two of the four men within the range of her vision were listening. There was an amazed concentration on their sullen, vicious faces. Captain Stuart was speaking; she could even hear the murmur of his voice, but to catch the meaning of a syllable was impossible.

Stella quickly made up her mind. She walked boldly into the inn. At the end of the passage was a bar, red-curtained. Leaning against it were two men of the carrier type, talking over their mugs of beer. The landlady, a stout woman, sat toasting her feet at a small fire, her eyes fixed placidly on her knitting.

The gipsy girl strode up to the bar and asked for a glass of mulled wine. The placid landlady made

her the beverage, talked cheerily about the weather, and then withdrew to the fire, the light of it glinting on the deftly working knitting-needles. The two men at the bar boldly eyed Stella, and she, shifting uneasily and in apparent confusion, retired to the shadowed passage and sipped her wine modestly, as if desiring to escape their observation. It was the most natural thing in the world that she should do so, but Stella, in her maidenly retirement, had taken up a position against the door of the room occupied by Stuart and the three men.

In the tap-room opposite, the drunken man was still roaring. From the room where Stuart was talking, came the sound of his voice, but not a word could she single out from the low murmur. Across his words, drowning them, crashed the yokel's raucous song:

"Giles Scroggins courted Molly Brown,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido.  
The fairest wench in all the town,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido.

"He bought her a ring with a posy true,  
If you loves I, as I loves you,  
No knife can cut our loves in two,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido."

Stella stood in the shadows, near the door which shrouded the secret she desired to share more than anything in the world. All she could hear was the voice of the foolish drunkard trolling out his catch. She sipped her wine with apparent composure, but as she raised the glass her hands trembled. Standing there her lips moved. She was praying wildly,

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her mind working ceaselessly on a formless hope—that the drunken man's tongue would be still, if only for a minute.

"The day they were to have been wed  
Fate's scissors cut poor Giles's thread,  
So they could not be MAR-RI-ED,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido."

The voice swung on with its frightful drone.

"God's curse upon his muddled head," she thought, with a passion that made her feel as if she were screaming the words aloud. "Will he never stop that dreadful song?—will he hammer it out all night?—will he——?"

The foolish voice stopped, as if arrested by a mysterious Providence, and it seemed for a moment that the inn stood still in a deep compelling silence. She listened in that strange, unexpected void—every nerve, every fibre of her body, nay her very soul listened, as if hearing were an appetite starved to an agony of strength that would tear down the very walls that separated her from the secret.

". . . seven-thirty to eight, spooning with gipsy wench to-night . . . make no mistake, strike him down . . . van . . . drive . . . Hermitage. . ."

In that strange providential silence these were the detached words she heard.

The silence ended. Again the drunken voice raised itself in song. Again the crazy old ballad crashed through the murmuring flow of Stuart's words.

"Poor Molly laid her down to weep,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido,  
And cried herself quite fast asleep,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido."



"When standing fast by her bedpost,  
A figure tall her sight engrossed,  
And it cried, I be Giles Scroggins' ghost,  
Fol de riddle, lol de riddle lido."

Stella walked from the shadowed passage to the bar, placed her glass upon the oaken ledge, smiled on the placid, knitting landlady, and slowly moved back towards the door.

Away from the inn, her mind a jumble of words jarred by a drunken ploughman's voice, she broke into a run, and fearful as a hounded deer, sped through the whispering night along the darkening, lonely road.

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## CHAPTER XVI

IT was a depressed and somewhat irritable party which sat in the old "King's Head," on that Monday afternoon, before the great fight, awaiting the return of Captain Trevelyan. Sir John Dering for an hour or two made an effort to maintain his composure, and no one looking at him would have suspected the turmoil working in his mind. The three fighters, interested in his fortunes and respecting him as a noble sportsman, a considerate employer, and a kindly gentleman, shared his anxiety. The gipsy girl's warning, improbable as it seemed, weighed heavily on their minds. They had all learned to know and respect Stella, and were convinced she would not speak such grave thoughts without being convinced of the necessity. In addition, they had experience of Darleigh's methods, and saw interference with Rosa, as the beginning of another train of events set in motion with the view of menacing the fight. All tacitly assumed the truth of the gipsy girl's statement, and all, in some way, expected a later *dénouement*, which would, in some way, endanger the chances of Pearce in the coming battle.

The long afternoon wore on. Fretting after the uncertainty and inactivity, Sir John Dering's composure gave way as the hours dragged out their weary length. He spent the afternoon alternately

pacing up and down the road in front of the inn door, and inside the old-fashioned dining-room. Outside he would stop his promenade, to gaze wearily down the highway; inside, for half an hour at a time, he would stand motionless, looking absently through the leaded windows. Then he would resume his uneasy walk again, and as he did so, his face seemed to grow sterner, ageing in a grim and wintry manner one can scarcely define. No one, watching Sir John through the hours of that tedious afternoon, would have seen him as the graceful, debonaire dandy, indifferent to the moment, and careless of the morrow. The mask of affectation he habitually turned to the world had fallen away. The real man, tortured with anxiety, irritated to breaking-point by forced inactivity, stood revealed.

The three men who noted all this and shared his consuming anxiety did not allow their fears to check their activities. Both Jem Belcher and Paddington Jones were much too experienced to mope or let their man fret. Although no active work was in progress, they kept up a stream of talk, and exerted themselves to prevent the Game Chicken from making too much of the shadow hanging over them. There were many details to be arranged about the morrow—final instructions, arrangements for getting on the road, the preparing of the Chicken's outfit, and other matters of importance to them, and these the men performed as if the last day at the training-quarters was running its usual course. But under their too conscious cheerfulness was a load of care. Deep down in each man's heart was a fear of something he could not name; a cloud gathering and

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then beginning to glower with threats of a coming storm; the tense, dark, uneasy calm which heralds an explosion.

Time does not stand still. The hours slipped away slowly, and each one of the four men watched them go, with the fevered longing invalids show through the night when they yearn for morning and the promise of the unshadowed day. From six o'clock Sir John kept his watch over the road with growing impatience. Almost every ten minutes he was out of the inn, and now he began to gaze expectantly along the high road which led to London. Half a dozen times perhaps he had done this fruitlessly, and had turned back to the inn, striving to conceal his disappointment. A few minutes spent in irritably pacing up and down the dining-room floor, and he was out again—watching for signs of movement along the highway.

The light had nearly gone. Outside the road was shrouded in gathering darkness only broken by here and there a light gleaming from some cottage window. So far as Sir John could see the road was deserted—the faint sounds stirring were but the normal little noises of the night. He stood motionless in the centre of the road, listening acutely. A sigh of relief, which was almost a groan, escaped him. Faintly, but growing more distinct, he heard the rattle of horses' hoofs on the metal of the highway. The hoofbeats grew rapidly nearer, and now he saw dimly revealed in the twilight a carriage travelling as rapidly as horses could drag it. Watching the vehicle as it came nearer, Sir John felt that all his future was overshadowed by the message it

carried along the highway towards the old "King's Head."

Standing opposite the door, and using the light streaming out of the inn, Sir John noticed the time was nearing seven o'clock. As he replaced the watch in his waistcoat pocket, he heard the grinding crash of wheels, the vehicle shot forward, the brake whirred on the wheels, and his own horses, steaming, were pulled up on their haunches. As the vehicle stopped, Jem Belcher, Paddington Jones, and the Game Chicken rushed out of the house, and old Bullen hobbled after them.

There was no cheery greeting from the driver of the phaeton, and all felt the ominous quality of his silence as Captain Trevelyan descended.

"Is it true, Harry?" Sir John said hoarsely, as Captain Trevelyan silently offered his hand.

"The gipsy is right," Harry said, and he spoke the words as if each one were choking him. "Let us get inside."

They all followed, except old Bullen, who led the jaded horses into the stable yard.

In the dining-room Harry told his news.

"Rosa left to join us here. Someone came and told her we had been hurt on the highway. She left with the man who delivered the message, at twelve o'clock—and the man's description answers to Darleigh's blackleg, Captain Stuart."

"What else did you find out?" Sir John asked, his aristocratic face haggard and working with emotion.

"Nothing," Trevelyan answered. "You know all I have learnt."

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The two men searched each other's faces in a strained silence. It was broken by Sir John.

"The only other facts we know are the incidents related by Stella."

"But, damn it all, there are five of us," Belcher said, "let's go and find her."

Paddington Jones spat on his hands, and rubbed them with grim anticipation.

"Where?" asked Sir John grimly. "Where shall we seek?"

Then they saw the hopelessness of such a search. Once again they looked into each other's faces, and not one of the five men spoke. Standing there, nonplussed, overwhelmed with helplessness, it was as if they had been deprived of sense and initiative. In the strained silence, which they seemed unable to break, a clock struck seven.

"By God, Sir John!" said Harry, breaking the silence, "our only chance is Stella."

"Yes—Stella," Sir John answered, and he mumbled the words as if his mouth were dry. "Stella—and she has not come."

Almost as he spoke the sound of footsteps, many footsteps, running quickly, beat out their approach on the road outside. The inn door opened, and the feet clattered on the passage. The door of the dining-room was flung wide, and Stella entered with a headlong rush, while six swarthy men followed just as quickly. Stella stood before them, her hair wild, her eyes dancing with passionate mischief, her nostrils quivering, her bosom rising and falling with the exhaustion caused by her long run through the night.

"Friends of mine from the camp—the Romany. Bob, Dave, Rupert, and the rest—all men of ours. True as steel, they will fight like madmen for the fun of the thing. I brought them along as I came by the camp. They are wanted."

The bewildered group looked on the invaders, puzzled, baffled, uncomprehending.

"Rosa has gone," said Captain Harry, at last.

"Yes—with that man Stuart," Stella answered. "She is in his power."

"Do you know where?" Sir John asked.

"I am not sure," Stella replied, "but I think I do. Do not question me. Time is short. Listen to what I have to say, each man carefully, and act as I tell you, at once."

"You have helped us so often that all here trust you implicitly, and wait upon your direction," answered Sir John.

"Then turn out at once. I and Pearce are going down the road, as we have done every evening for a week. We shall pretend to be lovers."

"Pretend—I like that," said the Game Chicken, surlily.

"Don't interrupt, or we shall pretend for ever. We shall stop at the old gate along the road, leading to the sheep pasture. There are ten men here. Divide into two parties of five, and stand on either side of the road in the shadow. A van will come up. In it there are four men, and the driver is with them—making a force of five. The success of our scheme lies in capturing every one of that party."

Sir John nodded his head slowly.

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"I think," he said, looking round, "we all grasp your meaning. I take it our Romany friends understand."

The biggest man in the party brought by Stella, a sun-tanned giant in corduroy, with bold dark eyes glittering at the prospect of a fight, looked at Sir John and smiled.

"You bet we do," he said, with grim emphasis.

"Remember," said Stella, "you must catch every man, and not let one escape. If one of the five gets away, we may make an irreparable mistake."

"We quite follow that," said Sir John. A grim confidence had returned to him and to his party. The inactivity of the day was over. Here was exciting work to do.

"One other point. The attack is directed against the Game Chicken. Make sure Pearce is not struck down in the *mêlée* before you get up to us. Hen must jump the gate directly the van comes along."

"What, run away?" asked the Chicken. "I'm damned if I do."

"You'll be damned if you don't," said Belcher heartily. "This time you've got to do as you're told. We can take no chances."

"Yes—Stella is right. The Chicken must jump the gate," said Sir John decisively. "We cannot risk a chance blow likely to put Pearce out to-night."

Hen Pearce, looking very much like a boy who has had a favourite toy taken from him, sulkily assented.

"That is all," said Stella. "But be careful—a false step may undo us," she added earnestly.



"Out men, out," said Sir John, and there was a rush for cudgels, and the party were quickly and quietly on the road.

They were soon near the gate. The road was clear of any signs of traffic. Pearce and Stella took up their stand at their favourite trysting-place, and the ten men behind them vanished amid the trees on either side of the road, some further down than the gate, others nearer to the inn.

"Put your arms about me, Henry," the gipsy said in a shy whisper.

Their heads were close together. All was silent about them—not a sound on the road, although near them ten men waited and watched without speaking, and marvelled within themselves.

Stella's warm arm was raised impulsively. She drew the fighter's head downwards, and pressing her dusky face to his, kissed him passionately.

"Hold me closer, sweetheart," she said. "It is our last night. We may not have another minute to ourselves before the dawn. You are brave and good—you will win to-morrow. You will win," she added impulsively.

He kissed her upturned face.

"You are brave and good," he replied huskily, "braver and better than us all. See, I kiss your face—so—and once more. To-morrow I shall beat Firby, or I will never kiss your dear lips again."

"No—no!" she said. "Firby is a good man. If he wins fairly, there is nought of which you need be ashamed. In good fortune or ill; win or lose, promise me you will come back."

"There is no winning or losing about it," he said.

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"I shall beat Firby, but I shall not win. You have won this fight. And I shall come back."

She moved in his arms ever so slightly, and then he noticed her fingers hovering about his coat collar. She was holding a favour between her fingers, and pinning it upon the coat lapel. Even in the dark—he knew. The ribbons of the favour were blue and white, blue with white spots, white with blue spots—the Blue Bird's-Eye.

"I have kept my promise," she said. "I have been the first to pin your colours on—to pin our colours on the brave man who is to carry them through a great fight."

Freely, without embarrassment, she kissed him again, and the Game Chicken, his chest swelling, his pulse beating high, stood in that amazing silence, and held her closely in the warm intimacy of her first voluntary embrace. Her full lips were moving, and he bent down to hear her speak.

"The Romany's heart is very full, but all her love is bound up in the Blue Bird's-Eye. I shall tremble all to-morrow, but my heart will be with you, and I wish you luck."

He started to whisper his reply, and stopped almost before he had spoken the first words. The sound of horses moving along the road had reached his ears. They could also hear wheels bumping on the irregular surface—a heavy vehicle was nearing them. The road was straight from where they looked along it, but there was no sign of lights. The two stood there, against the gate, motionless, listening, their hearts beating wildly side by side.

"Do not forget," she whispered. "They are

coming. Jump the gate, as soon as the van stops."

A quiet night. Two lovers whispering by a gate. Darkness about them. Only the sound of live things, moving and calling in the shrouded grasses, and the ring of horses' hoofs, and the grinding of wheels upon a quiet country road. A peaceful countryside—but ten invisible men's hands tautened and tightened on their clubs. The van came slowly nearer. A man walked a few yards in front of it. When he was opposite Pearce, and the van almost immediately behind him, he stood still and whistled. Then he jumped for Pearce, a heavy sand-bag in his raised hand.

Before that blow could fall, a heavy cudgel crashed upon his head with a sickening thud. He fell as if poleaxed, and Paddington Jones sat upon him and remained seated on his strange resting-place. Pearce slipped over the gate, and the gipsy girl followed him. Three men jumped from the van, and the driver dropped nimbly from his seat. The quiet country suddenly became a little inferno, as another party of men sprang out from places of concealment. The sound of scuffling, the dull thud of blows, screams of frightened surprise and curses. It was not a fight, but a debacle; a wild scurrying and scuffling, and then the *mêlée* separated into five more orderly parties. One consisted of Paddington Jones, sitting on an unconscious man, the others were made up of two or three men holding and binding more or less willing prisoners.

Sir John moved amongst his men, as coolly as if he were promenading Pall Mall. He met Captain

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Trevelyan, who was wiping a gash upon his head, from which blood was streaming.

"How do we stand?" said Sir John, coolly shaking hands with Trevelyan.

"We've bagged the lot," Captain Harry said, with the stiff simplicity of the quarter-deck.

"Then sling them into the van, and we'll drive them back to the 'King's Head,' and have a look at them."

They were soon back at the "King's Head," and the five men were dragged, blinking, into the light. Paddington Jones' capture, recovering consciousness, was Captain Stuart. He stood there, in the big bar-room, blood upon his face, and matting his hair. As he saw the men who held him, his expression grew furtive, and he maintained silence. The last to enter the room was Stella, the gipsy girl, and the Game Chicken, who was broadly smiling.

As she came into the light, Sir John Dering advanced, and bowed as if saluting a reigning beauty in an aristocratic *salon*.

"I have no words to express my gratitude," he said. "We have been entirely successful."

"No—we have only been partially successful, Sir John," she said. "We have not yet secured Miss Rosa."

Sir John bit his lip. In the *mêlée* they had almost forgotten the sinister happenings of the afternoon. He looked round on the five bound men—four of them burly ruffians, now plaintively nursing their bruises—and his eyes rested on Captain Stuart.

"You see, we have arranged a little surprise for you," Sir John said, with a sneer.

The rascally henchman of Colonel Darleigh met his adversary's glance with reckless contempt.

"It is not half so surprising as the one we have arranged for you. We still hold the trick, and the price I demand for my knowledge is an unconditional freedom," Captain Stuart said, with a sneer.

"You know where Miss Dering is?" Captain Trevelyan asked.

"I do—of course I do," Stuart answered.

"And you refuse to tell?" Sir John asked, threateningly.

Captain Stuart laughed, insolently.

"Only on conditions," he said. "You have some of the good cards, but I have a better one. I will tell you where Miss Dering is if you promise, on your word of honour, to let us all go scot-free, at once."

Sir John and Captain Trevelyan stood nonplussed, in the centre of the crowd of excited men. Captain Stuart held the last trump, and both gentlemen knew it. They drew apart and briefly consulted. Harry, wracked by his anxiety for Rosa's safety, advised capitulation at once. Sir John, furious, but anxious too, hated the thought of freeing the precious gang of rascals, but could see no way out of it. Captain Stuart watched the consultation with a nonchalant grin, knowing well what must be the outcome. He took a cynical delight in holding the key to the situation, which expressed itself in his manner, a sinister mixture of triumphant insolence and swaggering challenge.

Sir John Dering came back to the centre of the room, and a glance at the insolent Stuart made him determined to make one more attempt to at least

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hold the ringleader. He looked over the other four ruffians and addressed them.

"I should be lacking in honour and integrity, if I let you rascals go free of the consequences of this night's work," he said, curtly. "We hold you in our power, and the law will deal with you harshly. But we have a greater need, and I am prepared to make terms. I will give fifty pounds to any one man, excepting this rascal Stuart, who will tell me where Miss Roşa Dering is at this moment, and to that I will add personal freedom the moment we verify the truth of the information."

Stuart, standing bound between Belcher and Paddington Jones, laughed harshly.

"A wise move, Sir John; a pretty move. It is a game after my own heart, and I expected it. Try them, Sir John; try them all and try them hard. But you will fail."

He laughed again, and it was evident the situation pleased him.

The Game Chicken strode up to Sir John.

"Let me strangle the information out of the black-guard. We don't need to be nice about his sort of carrion," Pearce urged.

Stuart's face paled a little, but he still smiled insolently on Sir John.

"Yes—set your hired bully on me. But you won't get anything for your pains," he answered.

"Does any man respond to my offer?" Sir John said, looking round eagerly.

There was no movement of assent from the four rascals, who stood guarded on either side by the stalwart gipsies.

"Ask them again, Sir John," jeered Stuart, "ask them again. They like to hear your voice. But it won't work, I tell you."

"Why won't it work?" asked Harry; "does none of these rascals want to save his precious hide?"

"Every blessed one—I, most of all," Stuart replied, mockingly. "Only as it happens," he added coolly, "they don't know where the fair Rosa is. I happen to have the advantage, and I press my claim on your attention."

Stella pushed her way to the centre of the group.

"Before you make terms with this blackleg, Sir John, perhaps I can help. Do you know where the house called The Hermitage is?"

"Damn you, you saucy jade," Stuart shouted instantly, and then bit his lip, angry at being tempted to an indiscretion.

"Ah!" Stella said, "he knows. Ten chances to one that is where Miss Dering is to be found. They were going to take the Chicken there in the van."

"Liar!" Stuart shouted, and struggled with his captors, as if had he been free he would have struck the girl down as she spoke.

"Silence, you dog!" said Sir John, sternly.

"Oh, let him talk," Stella answered. "I heard the word Hermitage, when I found out the secret of the plan to kidnap Pearce to-night. Pearce was to go to The Hermitage. They were expecting him, and the van was to be admitted directly it arrived. If you know where it is, Sir John, there you will find Rosa. I know I am right. Something tells me that my guess is true."

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"I agree with you," Captain Trevelyan said. "One glance at this craven's cowardly face proves that we are warm on the track."

"Unfortunately," Sir John said, slowly, "I do not know The Hermitage."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Stuart, malignantly. "Even if it were true, I still hold the key, and you have to buy me at my price."

"No," said Jem Belcher, with a sardonic chuckle; "we shall sell you at ours. I know The Hermitage well. It is a house occupied by Colonel Darleigh, near the river, at Kingston. Strange goings on have taken place there, in my time. I once fought there, on a Sunday morning, for a private party of Darleigh's friends, five years ago. Rest assured Stella is right now as she has been all along. I can show you the way."

Sir John, startled out of his usual composure, shook Belcher by the hand.

"The game is ours," he said. "Gag each one of these bound birds of prey, and sling them into the van. Order out the phaeton, Harry. If these good fellows will accompany us, we will take the lot to The Hermitage, and break into the house. Pearce will remain at the 'King's Head,' with Paddington Jones. The attempt to nobble him has failed, and will not be repeated. Watch him carefully, Jones, and some of us will return to-night, and to-morrow I shall be ready to see our man prepare for the journey to Epsom, with Rosa accompanying me—the first to pin on his colours and wish him good luck."

"The second," said Pearce, with a grin. "Al-



ready I wear my favours, and Stella has pinned them on."

"And who better?" answered Sir John Dering heartily. "Stella, my brave girl, will you come on with us to Kingston and see the end?"

"That I will, with every Romany here," she answered; "but not to see the end—it is only the beginning."

A few minutes afterwards the cavalcade started for The Hermitage at Kingston. In the van the five men, bound and gagged, lay in the charge of six gipsies. In the phaeton, behind the coach, rode Stella, Sir John Dering, and Captain Trevelyan, with Champion Belcher as guide. Sir John, looking younger, as if the waking nightmare of the afternoon had slipped from his shoulders, cheerily cracked his whip. They were up and doing, and success seemed to smile on their adventure.

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## CHAPTER XVII

AT The Hermitage things were very quiet for the rest of that fatal Monday in April. Rosa, trapped in the gloomy mansion, strode fearlessly up and down a big bare room, at the top of the house. Into this apartment she had been forced by Captain Stuart, old Isaac Bradley, and his hag of a wife, and from it she had watched the day slowly drag its length, as painfully occupied by her thoughts as her father had been all the afternoon at the old "King's Head." A rough lunch had been served to her, but this she had rejected, and when the door had finally closed, she had turned to the window and looked out upon the river, or resumed her measured pacing of the floor of the grim apartment once again.

The room in which she was confined was lofty, and gloomy with faded decorations. The walls were panelled oak. Over the empty fireplace was a huge gilt mirror, with candlesticks affixed, and in them were the remains of candles and the drippings of their wax. A heavy gate-legged table stood in the centre of the room, and on this were pools of wax which had dripped from other candles. The rest of the furniture in the room consisted of three old chairs of the period of James the Second, with cane backs and seats and finely turned legs gloomily

ugly. Curiously out of place was an Empire settee, in the French manner, which stood, with its dusty, rotten upholstery, on one side of the room. About the whole place was an atmosphere of dust and neglect and of faded finery—tangible in the appearance of the furniture about the apartment, and all-pervasive in the subtle manner with which its presence was made apparent in the musty air.

In such a room Rosa Dering paced the hours away. The window, which admitted her only light, was square and barred from the inside, so that she could not reach the rusty leaden catch and throw it open. It had been her first thought, when left alone by her captors, to open the window, and make signs to anyone who chanced to float by on the river, but the bars at once presented difficulties. She realised grimly enough that she was not the first bird to beat captive wings at these bars, nor was this the first time the room had been used as a prison to further one of Colonel Darleigh's sinister designs.

For the most of the afternoon the house was silent. Her lonely watch was undisturbed. A brave girl, she stood dreaming at the window, and as she did so, the hours slipped away and the light began to go. That was the moment Rosa feared the most—the moment when the world outside became a blank and her horizon turned to the forbidding four walls of her darkened prison.

Light had faded completely. She had seen the river, first a silvery pathway, then a leaden stream, turn to nothing but a memory of a prospect blotted out by the darkening mist. And now the world outside was a blank, and the room itself one deep

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shadow. She tapped her feet impatiently on the floor and bit her trembling lip. A prisoner in the darkness, the fear of isolation in the deadly blank room grew upon her with increasing force, and only by the exercise of great self-control could she refrain from screaming.

Downstairs she heard the old couple begin to move about in the late afternoon. Again, she heard their voices raised angrily. Sometimes there was a crash of glass, and now and again the old woman broke into a shrewish, maudlin song.

Rosa judged it was after seven o'clock when she heard footsteps on the stairs. They were irregular footsteps; a man's voice swore aloud, but to himself; the light he carried unsteadily showed through the door-frame as he advanced. The sounds of this progress stopped when the figure causing them halted before the door.

She waited expectantly, and as she did so a panel in the door flew open. A long and skinny hand, a trembling hand clutching a brass candlestick containing a lighted candle, was pushed through. It was followed by the evil, grinning face of the old man with the one eye—the one eye which glowed like a ferret's, though it was now slightly dull after the potations of the afternoon.

He waved the candle round unsteadily, and as he did so a drunken leer spread round his loose-lipped mouth.

"Aha—aha! my pretty bird. Duty is duty, and I've come to see how it likes the cage."

Rosa spoke not a word, but stood in the centre of the room.

"Sulky, eh? sulky," he chuckled. "Well, well—they are all sulky at first. You'll prink up, my pretty beauty, in good time. We know how to tame them here—we know how to tame them."

She did not answer him, and the old man waved the lighted candlestick.

"Here—take the light," he said; "we do not want our pretty bird to die in the dark, and to-night you'll have company."

Rosa eagerly took the light. This was what she had wanted most, and the very presence of the candle gave her courage.

Old Isaac Bradley pushed a tray forward through the aperture.

"Eat—my little one," he leered. "In our little cage we never starve the birds. There's good eating even for a lady—take it, my pretty one; take it."

The tray he pushed forward contained the wing of a fowl, a small decanter of red wine, bread and fruit.

"My old girl ain't much to look at," leered Isaac, "but she can cook, drunk or sober. I think she cooks better when she's drunk, and this ought to be good, for she's been three parts drunk ever since you came."

Rosa stamped her foot.

"Take it away," she said. "I will accept no hospitality from you or your master. Whether I am here a day or a week, I will not eat. Go!"

"Ah—a good plucked un," he croaked. "Well, well—we like 'em so. All the more pleasure in the taming. When the keeper comes to the cage, you'll

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learn to sing, my pretty one—you'll learn to sing. No song, no sugar—that's our way with the pretty birds in this cage."

She did not answer him, and he babbled on.

"We'll have more company to-night, but not such a pretty bird as you are. He'll be lucky if he's fed at all."

A drunken voice at the foot of the stairs, maudlin and foolishly caressing, broke the silence.

"Isaac—deah; it's eight o'clock. It's getting time for our company to come. You ought to be at the gate."

"Aye—aye, old girl; plenty of time," Isaac called. "We'll be ready for the second bird, missie. Not so fine as you, he ain't; but more useful."

He wagged his old head.

"He's more of a chicken than a bird, but if he stops here long, he'll be like you—he'll soon take his food. Chickens or birds are all one to us—we know the way."

Rosa started as she stood in the panelled room.

"Of whom are you speaking now?" she asked.

"Of the Chicken, pretty one; the Game Chicken. He'll be here to-night, with luck, and he'll stay here to-morrow when he ought to be fighting."

Rosa's heart seemed to miss a beat. This, then, was the plot. They were snaring the Game Chicken too, and all she could do was to walk round a panelled apartment wringing her hands impotently. For a moment the girl forgot herself, in the face of this new danger.

Slowly Isaac withdrew his ugly face through the panel, taking with him the loaded tray, and she heard

his unsteady footsteps receding as he descended the creaking stairs.

Rosa stood there biting her lips, her hands working convulsively—the hysteria of impotent anger raging madly within her mind. For the first time that day she completely broke down and cried wildly, the sobs shaking her frame. She seemed to relieve her overwrought nerves, for at the end of a quarter of an hour her eyes dried, and her mind became quieter. She settled down to wait and listen, and now, forgetful of self, her sad condition was lit with new hope—that the second part of the plot would break down, and the fighter who was to carry her father's colours on the morrow would not arrive. In the panelled room, lit by the flickering candle, resigned and hopeless, so far as relief from her own distressing surroundings were concerned—she sat there listening and waiting while her heart cried to the night a prayer, that the second part of the plot would fail.

As she waited in the dark room, old Isaac waited at the gate. At the end of the carriage-drive, armed with a lantern, he stood within the shadow of the closed entrance. Now it was well after eight, and any moment the second bird would be there, ready for the cage. He placed his lantern on the ground and rubbed his wasted, prehensile hands. Here was a game after his wicked heart, and the old man's one eye glinted in the darkness with an evil appreciation of his own disrepute.

"Brave doings there've been in The Hermitage in my day, but, dang my one eye, this bangs the lot," he muttered, and then stopped, suddenly. He

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listened for a moment, then hastily grabbed the lantern, and stood crouching with his hand on the bolt of the gate. Along the quiet river-side road, growing nearer, came the sound of the approach of a rumbling vehicle.

"Aha!" the old man chuckled; "here comes bird number two."

He stood there in the darkness, listening and waiting, with a smile upon his crafty face. As he did so the oncoming vehicle lumbered nearer. He heard the sound of the horses' hoofs, the flick of the driver's whip, and then the steady roll of the van, as it drew level with the gate.

"Whoa!" growled the driver, and the sounds came to a halt—all but the champing of the horses' bits, and the noise made by the driver jumping to the ground.

The old man nodded his head with senile glee.

"What a game, what a game; we've got number two," he mumbled.

A heavy whip-butt hammered on the gate. A ringing voice called out, "Open—open quick. We've got him here."

The old man drew the bolt and pushed open the gate, a grin of cheerful anticipation on his parchment-like face.

As he did so two strong hands, with sinewy fingers, grasped his neck and closed tightly round it, choking him and shaking him to and fro.

"Oh! Holy Mother! Holy Mother!" screamed the old man. "Murder, murder, murder! Oh! for the love of God let the poor old man go. He's done no harm—he's done no harm!"



Jem Belcher carefully strangled him into silence and non-resistance, then shook him by way of stimulating his intelligence.

"Listen—you crabbed old effigy, or I'll break your sinful head, like a walnut. How many are there in The Hermitage?"

"Oh—murder, murder! leave me be and let me go. Only two, pretty gentleman, and the bird. Oh! murder, murder—only two, me and my old girl. For the love of God, do leave me be!"

An aristocratic voice at Belcher's elbow spoke quietly and decisively.

"Truss the old fool, like the rest, and throw him in the van. Let us go on to the house, and take our chance whether he is speaking the truth or not."

The van rumbled on, Belcher leading the horses, and seven men walking behind.

Rosa, waiting in the silent room, listening, hoping, also heard the sound of wheels. She followed the movement of the vehicle with her ears, and as she did so her heart sank. She heard the bolt of the gates shot from the slot, and the sound of voices. Then silence as she crouched, listening. Again the van started. It came along the carriage-drive slowly.

"Alas!" thought the imprisoned girl, with a heavy heart, "the second victim is coming. Darleigh has beaten us on the last day. The Game Chicken is a prisoner. Papa is ruined, and my honour is not worth a day's purchase." These thoughts wildly beat themselves into her consciousness, as her unwilling ears tried to piece together the actions of the party outside. The sound of

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the moving van, now nearer, suddenly ceased. She waited half a minute, and then heard a rattle on the door.

"Aha! my merrie gentlemen," she heard the old hag, Isaac's wife, began to croon in drunken glee. "Here comes the second bird to-day. We have good company at The Hermitage."

Slowly the bolts were drawn and the door opened.

There was a curious, uneasy, following silence. It seemed to be something visible, fluttering in every corner of the old Hermitage. Rosa, listening, her heart beating, her mind a warring tangle of wild thoughts, stood wondering and waiting. In that oppressive silence, in the dark neglected mansion, it seemed as if events stood suspended for a few seconds—seconds that dragged into an eternity. Above the brooding, pregnant void, the suspended action of wicked schemes, night itself appeared to stir and hopefully to flap its sable wings. The terror-stricken girl, waiting in the room, listened hungrily, and wondered how long the tense moment would last.

It could not last for ever, and the silence ended with a scream—a woman's scream, riving the mysterious hush hovering about the old house, and setting it trembling again with action. Curious action, too, Rosa thought. After the one scream there was a confused babel of voices; much tramping of feet, and then uproarious shouts and noises spreading about every corridor—it seemed to be every cranny—of The Hermitage. First there were cries; then mad beating of panels followed by dreadful crashes. And once more calling voices and stamping feet.

Rosa listened—and upon her haunted brain one fact seemed to shed a ray of hope, illuminating as the swift first streams of early sunlight, after the dark night.

Up the creaking stairs the footsteps were coming pell-mell—up, up, up to her corridor.

“This is not the course of events arranged by the owners of the house. Something, something has gone wrong,” she thought. “Why, they are searching the house!”

Rosa seized the brass candlestick, emptied its contents, and stamped upon the guttering flames. Using the brasswork as a weapon, she beat upon the panel of the door.

“In God’s name, gentlemen, whoever you be, I’m in this room,” she cried.

A voice she knew cried out. “Tally ho! forward; another corridor here.”

With waning strength she beat upon the panelled door.

“Harry—Harry—Harry!” she called, and it seemed, such was her joy, as if her senses were leaving her.

“Lights, boys—this way.” Another grim voice spoke the words with curt command.

“Father, father!” she called, and made a feeble effort to continue beating upon the door.

She heard that same voice, dearer now than any sound she had ever hoped to hear, speaking again with quick decision.

“This door—here. Put your shoulders to it, men.”

She stood back, and the door shook on its hinges.

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In her tumultuous joy, Rosa thought she was going to faint. She stood swaying in the centre of the dark room, one hand laid upon the oaken table supporting her. As she did so, the door seemed to bend. There was a mighty crash as the hinges gave way amid a shower of splinters. The door itself flew open, and four men impelled by their own force fell sprawling at her feet. In the open passage, framed in the door-posts, holding candles aloft, stood Sir John Dering and Captain Trevelyan. Behind, Jem Belcher, dancing with excitement, waved a formidable club, while before them all, into the room rushed the gipsy girl, Stella.

The two men advanced towards her, and Harry took the girl in his arms. She lay there breathlessly still as he kissed her, gazing absently into his face. Hastily freeing herself, Rosa turned towards her father. Swaying, dizzy, hardly able to see, she had a message to deliver, and fought against her clouding reason for expression.

Rosa tried to advance towards Sir John. The smile on her lips, but not reflected in her eyes, made both the father and the lover shiver. They thought her reason was wavering, and her first words almost proved the agony in their minds. The breed of the Derings was in the girl to the last ounce of her strength.

"It is so good of you to call," she said, with a pitiful smile, her mind working over the conventional words.

"Rosa—you know us," Sir John said, and the anguish in his heart found expression in his voice.

"I—I have wanted to see you before the end of

the day," she said, her wandering attention hovering between the two faces she loved.

"Yes, yes; that is all right, my dear one," Sir John answered, taking her hand and caressing it gently.

"The Chicken—the Chicken is not safe," she said slowly, as if she were repeating the one clear phrase in the tangled skein of her consciousness. "They—will—attack—him—to-night."

"Listen to me, Rosa, very carefully," Sir John said, and his clear eyes softened with a strange pride of race, even in his agony of mind. "They have made their attack, and, thanks to Stella, have failed. The Chicken is as safe as you are; we hold every trick, and the game is closing in."

Just as the sound of her rescuers' voices had filled her mind with a joy too deep to bear, the phrases deliberately spoken by her father sank slowly into her tortured mind, and seemed to sweep it free of shadows. She tottered forward towards him and failed: reeled and would have fallen. Harry caught her as she staggered back and gently lowered her to the floor, for the overwrought girl had fainted. Stella quickly unloosed the wrap about Rosa's neck.

An hour afterwards, Captain Harry Trevelyan, accompanied by one of the gipsies, rode to town on the last errand of the Dering party, on the last act of the drama leading to the great fight—and based on information volunteered by the rascal, Stuart. Rosa, still pale, her face wholly at peace, a proud light shining in her eyes, saw him away upon his mission, before stepping with her father and Stella into the phaeton, which was to carry them back to the "King's Head."

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"To-morrow, I shall see you early at the 'King's Head,'" she said, very tenderly.

"To-morrow will see all our troubles at an end, and may all our to-morrows be brighter than to-day," he answered.

"To-morrow," said Sir John, "will see a game man win on his merits, for Darleigh has played his last card, and now must fight—a rascal using an honest man."

Stella, the gipsy girl, said nothing. Muffled in Belcher's heavy coat, with a Blue Bird's-Eye handkerchief tied round her brown neck by the man who invented its most characteristic knot, she gaily waved her hand. Still, in the Romany girl's heart, a fierce hope surged and sang its passionate song. To-morrow and the man who was to win on his merits was the burden of its message—the man who was to win on his merits, even as he had won her heart.

## CHAPTER XVIII

ON the Monday night, at the hour of eleven, Colonel Darleigh sat in the small dining-room of the "Black Horse," St. Martin's Lane. In a perfunctory manner he had ordered and made a pretence of eating supper. Darleigh had toyed with grilled kidneys, followed by a cheese toast, and now remained crouching in one of the darker corners of the room, which was divided into cubicles, impatiently sipping his wine.

The house was busy and noisy. In the public rooms there was loud talk from half-drunken sportsmen, some of whom occasionally broke into song, while above the stream of conversation one could hear the voices of the men who crowded round the betting lists, calling the odds. The old house was busy, as were all the sporting drums, for the West End was crowded with men who wanted to hear the latest about the impending fight. Sturdy Bob Gregson, in his square bar, with a smile and a nod for everyone, listened and said but little. It was his business on a crowded night to keep peace when it threatened to be broken, or to maintain harmony as long as it existed. Also, it was a more important business, so far as he was concerned, to see the reckless crowd, who swarmed the inn, were promptly served, and that no obstacles were put in the way of their unanimous desire to spend their money.

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Colonel Darleigh was the sole occupant of the dining-room, and seemed thankful to be so. He sat crouched as far back in the corner of the cubicle as he could, his hand nervously fingering the stem of the wineglass. From time to time he glanced anxiously at a clock in the dining-room, and as the hands slipped round the stolid face he grew more and more irritable. He was evidently waiting for someone, and every passing moment seemed to increase his irritation. Half an hour slipped by, according to the face of the Dutch clock. Long ago he had concluded his supper and paid the waiter. Almost, he had finished his wine. A scowl upon his face, he sat fingering the half-emptied glass, his eyes travelling expectantly to the door every time he heard a footstep sound on the stone pavement of the passage outside.

The clock had just struck the half-hour when the waiter, a stout old fellow who looked more like a plump stable hand, hobbled in.

Darleigh's disappointment was obvious, when the door opened and disclosed this very familiar figure.

He snapped his fingers angrily. "How now, man, how now? May I not have a minute to myself? Didn't I tell you to get out and keep out?"

The old fellow rubbed his bulbous nose with a soiled napkin.

"Beggin' your pardon, sir, but be ye Colonel Darleigh? A bloke is outside, in the tap, arsking for ye."

"A bloke—what do you mean?" Darleigh snapped.

"What I sye, sir—a bloke. If he ain't a bloke



he's a cove, and that's all I've got to say to it. Will you come out and see him?"

"No—show the man in here," Darleigh answered, "and be quick about it."

The old waiter travelled towards the door, and beckoned along the passage. A man came forward—a surly gipsy—with his hat pulled over his eyes and his coat collar turned up. He slouched in awkwardly enough, and the old waiter hobbled out, slamming the door behind him.

"Well—my man?" Colonel Darleigh asked, fixing his cold, scrutinising glance on the gipsy, "do you want me?"

"Are you Colonel Darleigh?" the man asked, as if he were repeating a lesson.

"I am, my lad—what do you want?" Darleigh answered.

"Nothing from you. I've got a message to give ye—that's all." The gipsy's manner was non-committal and wholly uninterested.

Colonel Darleigh held out his hand.

"Give it me—quick!" he commanded.

"It ain't in writing—it's by word of mouth," the stranger answered.

"Well, speak it, man—speak it." Colonel Darleigh's manner was getting more irritable than ever.

"A flash covey offered me two guineas to come from Kingston," the gipsy began.

Suspicion was in Colonel Darleigh's mind.

"Let me see them," he asked, peremptorily.

The gipsy slowly unbuttoned his trousers pocket. With equal deliberation he produced a red handkerchief wound elaborately round a package of money.

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At length, when he had opened the parcel, the coins it contained lay on the table. They consisted of one guinea in gold, and a number of silver and bronze coins. Having displayed them, the man tied them up in the same way, thrust the package deep into the corduroy trousers pocket, and buttoned it up again securely.

"I don't know anything about the merits of this business; but I'm no liar," the gipsy said thickly.

"Where's the other guinea?" Darleigh asked insistently.

"That was his plan to make sure I came. You have to pay me the other guinea before I deliver the message. That was the flash cove's idea."

Colonel Darleigh's eyes gleamed.

"Quite right," he said, "quite right! But we must be careful nowadays. There's your second guinea," he added, throwing a coin on the table.

It was obvious he wished to mollify his visitor.

"Speak what you were told," Colonel Darleigh commanded, attempting to conceal his impatience with a forced smile.

"The flash cove said, 'Tell Colonel Darleigh that all is exactly as he arranged.'"

"Yes—yes; go on—give me the details," Darleigh exclaimed.

"That's all. The words were, 'All is exactly as he arranged.'"

"Did you know him?" asked Darleigh.

"No—never saw him before."

"Where did you meet this man?"

"In a tap on the Kingston Road."

Colonel Darleigh's searching eyes looked long

into the gipsy's, as if he would read the soul behind them. His mind was working rapidly, and he seemed to arrive at a conclusion. He had expected a note from Stuart, but this was a better way—to see a stranger and give him a vague message, the meaning of which was clear to no one but himself. A wry smile crept round his thin mouth, which had been puckered with a frown. The game was his, after all.

“All right, my man, you have earned your guineas. You may go back to the flash cove, and say Colonel Darleigh understood.”

“No—I've no orders to go back to him. I don't know who he was, or where he came from. I don't know where he went. I've never seen the man before, and I don't suppose I'll see him again. I've done my share of the bargain by coming; but as you are so free with your money, I don't mind going back for the same price, and looking for him.”

Colonel Darleigh's face relaxed still more.

“Never mind,” he said. “The message is quite satisfactory. You may go.”

The man turned towards the door.

“One moment—here's a florin,” Darleigh said. “You may like a drink at the tap after your long ride.”

The visitor pouched the money, growled an ungracious thanks, and slouched towards the door.

When he had left the room, Colonel Darleigh finished his wine with deliberation. Slowly he resumed his outer coat, for his arm was still stiff, and the hand was encased in bandages. With nice care he adjusted his cravat before the mirror hanging

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over the fireplace, and fixed his hat with the calmness of a man thoroughly satisfied with his world.

Looking in the mirror he saw his own face and spoke to it, but the face he was thinking of, as he addressed his own, was another man's.

"So!" he whispered cruelly, as he leered at his own reflection in the glass. "The news is good, and Stuart has done the trick. To-morrow I'll have that damned strutting Dering in the dust. To-morrow I'll break him like a dried twig, and throw him to the flames of hell."

He spoke the words with intense delight, and, as he finished, his voice broke into a discordant laugh. As he stood before the mirror, laughing there, he saw something in the eyes leering back to his own.

For a moment his face whitened before the expression given back to him by the mirror. A thought had flashed into his brain, a haunting menace playing within himself. He had seen a devil's purpose flaring in his own eyes, and for a second he shivered.

Darleigh turned from the glass and shrugged his shoulders, his lips trembling as he mumbled:

"To-night I have unleashed hell itself for the house of Dering. I hold the cards for the devil himself, and I'll play them one by one."

He walked slowly from the tavern.

It was twelve o'clock when Darleigh reached the One Tun Inn, in Piccadilly. The inn was packed, and rocked with the unloosed passions of midnight London on the eve of the fight. Twelve o'clock—and the One Tun Inn, dimly lit, housed half the sports of London—gentlemen—aristocratic of mien

and flushed of face; low-browed, burly, close-cropped pugilists, heavy with drink, and calling outrageous language to each other; the wealthier West End tradesmen, more assuming in their dandyism than the patrons they served; little retailers, round and fat, laughing foolishly at petty jokes; and swarms of flashily dressed men, birds of prey, watchful, sober, calculating, waiting for the harvest reaped by the merciless when honest men slip the drag on the coach of life and clatter along uncontrolled. Wild and fierce was the crowd in the fighting night-house. The potboys hurried along the sanded passages calling their orders. The new-comers pushed their way to the bar, and clamoured for hot brandy. In the rooms, men clinked glasses, shook hands and vowed eternal friendship, or wrangled fiercely as they quarrelled. In the taps, the men of the street, loaded with the contents of the oft-replenished tankards, or repeated doses of blue ruin, pushed and sprawled, laughed and cursed, danced clumsily or chanted ballads of their day. And once again the word "fight" rumbled round the house, but now it was not the whisper of anticipation. It was a thing about to be accomplished, in the hot air they breathed, and part of the very day they were opening with unbridled and riotous revelry.

Into such a crowd, Colonel Darleigh pushed his way. His appearance was the signal for excited cheering. The cry of the crowd shook the very rafters, and Darleigh smiled grimly as he acknowledged the compliment.

Old Will Warr recognised his visitor, and called for freedom of passage for him.

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"By your leave, gentlemen, all; way for the Corinthian sportsman, please," he called in a voice husky with excitement. The crowd about the passages opened a little, and Darleigh quietly walked through into the dining-room. It was filled with many intimates, though not so crowded as were the public rooms. The noise of cheering outside had heralded his coming, and the forty or fifty men who were in the heated dining-room were standing, waving their glasses and cheering as he entered. They were all more or less excited with drink, and betting had been ruling high. Alone, almost, in that throng, Gentleman Jackson remained perfectly sober. Amongst others already introduced to the reader were Fletcher Reid, the Hon. Lumley Savage, Sir Harry Tempest, the Hon. Cavendish Bragshaw, and Sir Vernon Hawk. But there were dozens of Corinthian sportsmen, all notorious in their way as wealthy men about town, ready for any gaming hazard, and capable of paying the price of their follies. The appearance of Darleigh raised the excitement and imparted added warmth to the heated atmosphere. Jests and light badinage were thrown about from mouth to mouth, and inquiries after the condition of Firby were many and pointed. All wanted the straight tip for the fight that was so soon to take place. When the excitement was at its height the dining-room door opened, and Captain Trevelyan, wearing a heavy coat, strolled quietly to the centre and began to greet his friends.

"Sir John, Sir John!" Lumley Savage called.

"Aye—aye; Sir John, Sir John, let's see Sir John Dering," they cried in chorus, and the words were

caught up outside in the passages, and called from room to room.

At the appearance of Captain Trevelyan, Colonel Darleigh turned slightly pale. He wondered whether Trevelyan knew anything of the events of the day, and what his attitude would be.

The cries of the crowd increased. They wanted to see Sir John Dering and receive a personal assurance from his lips that all was right with the Game Chicken.

Burly John Jackson pushed his way to the centre.

"Gentlemen," he said, "Colonel Darleigh has reported his man fit and well, and guarantees Firby will be in the ring to-morrow. We had all hoped to have had Sir John Dering here to-night, to give us a similar assurance." He looked at Harry with a direct meaning in the glance of his clear bold eyes. "Everyone here would welcome a report from the Chicken's quarters," he added.

All eyes were fixed on Harry Trevelyan, who allowed himself to be pushed to the centre of the room. The doors of the dining-room were open, and as many of the crowd outside as the room would hold, came tumbling in, while those who could not get inside remained without, raising a constant cry for Sir John Dering.

Harry waved his hand, as if to command order, and Gentleman Jackson, at his elbow, raised his big voice and craved silence for Captain Trevelyan.

"Gentlemen," Harry said, speaking loudly with the practised confidence of the naval officer, "Sir John Dering sends his compliments, and regrets he cannot be here to-night. He has decided to stop

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Mock groans of disappointment greeted this statement, but Harry raised his hand once more, and secured another silence.

"He has deputed me to act for him, and to appear here to-night on his behalf," Harry continued. "I have been to the 'King's Head' to-day."

Colonel Darleigh hung upon the words of his rival's friend.

"Both Sir John and I are satisfied with the appearance of Pearce."

"Three cheers for the Game Chicken," called Cavendish Bragshaw, and a roar followed his invitation.

"When I left head-quarters for London, at four o'clock this afternoon, the Game Chicken was as fit to fight as any man who ever stepped into the ring, and we have every confidence he will do justice to any support you may have lent him."

Another hullabaloo followed this statement, and the news went travelling through the old inn and set all the tongues wagging once more over the men's respective chances.

As Harry referred to the condition of the Chicken at four o'clock, a great wave of relief thrilled through Colonel Darleigh's tense nerves. The news of the events of the day had not travelled to town. His game was entirely safe.

From his place on the edge of the crowd, Colonel Darleigh forced his way to the central group. Cool, sinister, harsh, unsympathetic as he was, the crowd, slightly repelled, made way for him. He stood face



to face with Trevelyan, bowing with as much dignity as the turmoil about him would allow.

"As you are acting for Sir John, permit me to offer you my compliments and to thank you for your frank statement. Perhaps Sir John commissioned you to state his views on the state of the odds, and to act for him."

Captain Harry bowed with equal gravity.

"I am commanded by Sir John Dering to act with all discretion in his interests."

"The Chicken is again at evens to-night," Colonel Darleigh shouted in his rasping voice. Curiosity was dominating his mind. He wanted to gauge the extent of the faith of Sir John in his champion's chances. "Perhaps Sir John will offer the slight odds of his original bet to a thousand or two," he added, and there was something almost like a sneer on his thin lips.

He was somewhat astounded by the answer, given instantly by the man he was only baiting.

"In this matter," Harry said nonchalantly, "I and Sir John act together. I already carry half of Sir John's risk. We believe our man cannot lose, such is his condition. I am prepared to lay the original wager once again—offering twelve thousand five hundred pounds to ten thousand pounds. Sir John was openly regretting at noon that he had halved his first risk."

Colonel Darleigh started as if he had been shot. Here was madness unaccountable. The Dering party had evidently taken leave of its senses. For a moment the warning thought struck his mind—how much did Harry know? Mentally and quickly he

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reviewed his chances. If Trevelyan had left at four o'clock he could know nothing. But the weight of the proposed bet staggered him, and his crafty face blanched.

Gentleman Jackson, at Harry's elbow, pulled on his coat sleeve.

"Don't be rash, Captain Harry," he urged, "such bets as these demand thought."

Captain Trevelyan, confident, and obviously free from excess, turned upon the arbiter of the ringside.

"I am obliged, Jackson," he said coldly, "but in these matters I presume we are men of honour and not babies. I would also point out that the challenge came from Colonel Darleigh. We are prepared to accept, and offer the odds to the extent named."

"And I take them," snapped Darleigh, his sinister eyes lighting, "on one condition only."

"State it," Harry replied, challenging the gleam in Darleigh's eyes with the quiet confidence of his own.

"That the full amount wagered be staked in negotiable securities by both parties to the wager. I choose the Committee of the Corinthian Club to hold the amounts for both sides until the winner claims the lot. The deposits should be made within the hour," he added, with a malignant smile on his thin lips.

A dead silence fell upon the company immediately around the two principals.

Gentleman Jackson's voice was the first to break it.

"Come, come, Darleigh; the condition is un-

reasonable. Both Sir John Dering and Captain Trevelyan are men of honour. You cannot treat them like shady adventurers."

Darleigh measured Harry with his eyes.

"The amount is large, and I insist upon the condition. Rumour is very busy with Sir John's affairs at present."

For a moment Harry clenched his fist, and would have crashed it into Darleigh's malignant face. So menacing did he seem that Darleigh cowered, and Gentleman Jackson placed a restraining hand on the young man's shoulder. Then suddenly a shaft of clear reason flooded the young man's mind. The Lord had delivered the enemy into his hands—bound hand and foot. Better that the money should be tabled. The scandal would out to-morrow, and Darleigh, foiled, might fly and burk the inquiry, leaving the wager unpaid.

Without a moment's hesitation he turned to Darleigh.

"Hasty thoughts bid me to resent your insolence. Second thoughts warn me. Your reflection is cast on Sir John, who will meet it personally. Myself, I agree. Our securities will be tabled before half-past one with the Committee of the Corinthian Club."

Without another word Harry Trevelyan turned on his heel and walked from the One Tun Inn. He left the crowd seething with excitement. The much-desired message went round that both men were fit and well, and would do battle on the morrow.

The betting took its character from the big wager publicly made, and the Game Chicken remained a slight favourite with the sportsmen assembled at the

One Tun Inn. In the night-house the air grew hotter and hotter, the jangle of voices louder and louder, and passion mounted higher and higher. Shouting the odds, taking them, singing, dancing, quarrelling one moment, making it up the next, the followers of the ring settled down to make a night of it. The innocent pigeons, plied by alcohol, fluffed their feathers with a pride amazingly uncontrolled, while the hovering rooks plucked them one by one, and reaped the golden plumage. Inside the passage stood old Will Warr, once a champion, now a publican and, perhaps, something of a parasite. He rubbed his hands, with their big knotted, jointed fingers, closely together until the knuckles seemed to crackle, and smiled on the fierce inferno. To him these sights were part of the good day's round, and added glory to his better nights. The game was afoot, and the frenzy of the fight, which he had excited in his day in the ring, and now batted on in his house—the home of a thousand follies—meant a glorious harvest. Will Warr rubbed his hands and smiled.

Over at the Corinthian Club, in the great assembly room, with the noble Lord of Downshire in the chair and two hastily summoned members of the Committee, a group of a dozen men were assembled.

"It is most irregular," Gentleman Jackson said to the chairman, the wrinkled, shrivelled dandy of an earlier generation—now nothing but a wizened upholder of a code of honour amongst gentlemen, and a last arbiter, out of a wealth of great experience, of its customs.

Lord Downshire wagged his white head.

"I would not have challenged the financial honour of Sir John Dering myself," he said, "but these things are matters of taste between gentlemen." He accented the word "gentlemen" with a cold sneer, which Colonel Darleigh noted and resented.

"Still both parties agree," said the Duke of Athlene, a second member of the Committee, suggested. "Let us see the securities."

Colonel Darleigh, white to the lips, placed his papers on the table.

Lord Downshire examined them carefully.

"Quite satisfactory," was his comment. "Absolutely sound."

Captain Trevelyan handed in a bunch of papers which were scrutinised by the Committee.

"Gilt-edged, bigad, gilt-edged," was the phrase by which Lord Downshire appreciated them.

"Let us understand the situation," continued the almost senile peer. "In the event of the Game Chicken winning, the whole of the amounts represented here pass to Sir John Dering. In the event of the man Firby winning, Colonel Darleigh has an unquestioned claim on the entire deposit? Is that so, Trevelyan?"

"As far as I am concerned—yes," Trevelyan answered.

"And you, Colonel Darleigh?"

"I agree that you estimate the situation exactly," Colonel Darleigh answered in his thin, rasping voice.

"Then the incident is closed. We hold the securities, and may the best man win." Lord Downshire pushed his chair back, and, feebly raising himself, tottered from the room.

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"And may the best man win," replied every man in that room, save Darleigh.

Colonel Darleigh was silent.

Captain Harry Trevelyan left the club with Gentleman Jackson. At the corner of Pall Mall they shook hands.

"Until to-morrow," Gentleman Jackson said. "My wishes are with you."

"Until to-morrow," said Captain Trevelyan, "and if I am not mistaken Darleigh's head is within a noose, which tightens every minute as the time grows nearer. The house of Dering is playing a big game, desperate to the point of danger, but our man will win and pull us through. If he does, we settle the feud of a lifetime for ever."

"In which case it will be 'exit Darleigh,'" Jackson said, bowing solemnly and turning to go.

"Yes, that is the phrase, 'exit Darleigh,'" Harry replied, walking towards his chambers.

## CHAPTER XIX

OLD Bullen bustled about the "King's Head" very early on the Tuesday morning. He came down before the fires were lit, in his gala attire. That is, he had already donned his riding-breeches of twilled cloth; his neat gaiters were buckled over his ample calves, while on his broad bosom the canary-coloured waistcoat shone resplendent. His first action, on rising, after assuming these outer signs of his inward sporting inclination, was to walk to the front door, throw it wide open, and step into the road.

He looked north, south, east, and west, scenting the early morning air, and expressed his opinion aloud to the whole world in general.

"Dang my old eyes, what a fine day for a fight."

As he spoke the words, Captain Trevelyan drove rapidly up to the front door.

"Well—Landlord Bullen; how goes the gout?" he asked heartily.

"Gout, bigad—gout. No man never had gout in these parts with a fight on at Epsom. Damn the gout."

"Then what's the news?" Harry asked.

"All good; all good. They got back safely last night, leaving the damned villains at Kingston in the hands of the gipsies."

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"And Miss Dering?"

Before he could answer, Harry heard her voice. She was singing as she put the last touches to her toilet, and her liquid notes trilled through the open window.

"Well and hearty, I should say," Bullen answered. "Well and hearty, judging by the sound of her. There's nowt living can sing like that with a heavy heart."

"And that's all the news?" said Harry.

"No—that's not all. The Game Chicken is a game chicken, and as fit as a fiddle too, if a chicken can be likened to a fiddle, so to speak. Most chickens squeak and so do fiddles, but we've got a chicken that will do no squeaking. He carries my bit for a year's rent."

"And good luck to it," said Harry, laughing as he got stiffly out of his vehicle.

He met Rosa in the hall.

"Why, there you are—wise man. Just in time for breakfast," she called gaily, as she descended the stairs to greet him.

"Yes—here I am. And how does my lady, after the dreadful adventure?"

"Never better, my own lord. Almost as fit as the hope of the house," she answered, and her voice thrilled with the gaiety of the morning.

Sir John joined them as she spoke, and the three went in to breakfast.

In the great kitchen, Henry Pearce and his trainers were sitting down to an ample meal. Bullen's old wife was hovering about the fire, superintending sizzling chops and slices of ham, while Stella was



rapidly serving the good things she prepared. Old Bullen was rushing about with his shirt sleeves turned up, apparently very busy, but quite as evidently doing nothing.

When he stopped in these hurried flights he usually halted before the Chicken, put his big hands in the air, and exclaimed aloud:

"Eh, lad, dang my old eyes, I like to see you eat. There's nowt like a good foundation for a big job, and I'll back my home-cured ham against anything."

Breakfast occupied some time, and then the house grew gradually busy. Outside, the world began to stir, and such as were on the road for Epsom made a point of calling at the "King's Head," on the chance of catching a sight of the fighter. The minutes slipped away as the two trainers and Pearce discussed the last details and made their final preparations. At a quarter to eleven, Sir John Dering's coach was at the door, the horses pawing on the bits, impatient to be off. Rosa, Sir John, and Captain Trevelyan, the last two carefully attired for the road, came into the inn kitchen. Paddington Jones and Belcher were hastily packing a few things into a carpet-bag.

"Now, boys, is everything ready?" Sir John asked in his hearty manner. "Despite interference we have secured conditions which will lead to a fair fight and no favour, and the original wager between Colonel Darleigh and myself has been doubled."

"Good luck to you, sir," said Jem Belcher. "No one will beat the Game Chicken to-day, and I am

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just hankering after a sight of Colonel Darleigh's ugly mug, when Pearce's hat goes into the ring."

"Yes, he'll look sideways for Christmas, I bet," Paddington Jones replied. "If I had to die for going, I'd be there to see him so chop-fallen. Backing a certainty, as he would be last night, I'll wager he's badly hit, if our man wins."

Belcher went to the foot of the stairs.

"Pearce—we're all ready, lad, and it's time to be off," he shouted.

They heard the Chicken's movement in the room above, and the tramp of his feet as he came down the stairs.

As he strode into the centre of the room there was a conscious pause, and the high-spirited badinage ceased. Pearce was ready. Partially attired in preparation for the battle he wore closely built knickerbockers of buckskin, laced in at the knee with streamers of his favourite ribbon. His stockings of white silk ended in a smart pair of walking shoes, and the spiked boots, to be worn during the fight, hung over his arm. His great torso was clothed in a heavy woollen sweater, under which one could see the heave of his mighty muscles as he struggled into his heavy velveteen jacket. Belcher held the great riding-coat, with the pewter buttons highly polished, and soon had Pearce into it. Himself, in the Belcher manner, he adjusted a big spotted kerchief about the Game Chicken's neck. Pearce stood there amongst them, a big man, somewhat taciturn and grim now that he was confronted with his task. All the same, his mild eyes had a glow in them seldom seen, and his brown face, refined by training,

looked rugged and strong in the morning light, and not a nerve betrayed a lack of self-confidence.

Sir John went forward and took him by the hand. As he did so, old Bullen hobbled in with a bottle of wine and glasses.

"I have to thank you," Sir John said, as Bullen filled the glasses, "for having made such a sterling preparation. I need hardly say you would not have got so fit, if you were not going to give us your best."

Sir John took the glass offered by Landlord Bullen, and raised it high.

"We have had many proofs of the pluck of the Game Chicken," he said to the small party assembled. "I ask you to drink in honour of a brave fighter—and may the best man win."

They drank the toast quietly, while the Chicken smiled somewhat awkwardly and closely examined his boots.

"You make me proud, sir, and ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I'm a pug, I am, and no fancy talker, and all I can say is, you do me proud. I'm a willing lad from Bristol, and you will see me do my best. No man can say fairer."

"No man ever will say fairer," Rosa said, with sparkling eyes, speaking the words proudly in her round and fluted voice. "I see you wear your lady's favour," she added, noting the Blue Bird's-Eye ribbons streaming from his coat lapel.

"Yes—there they be," Pearce answered, blushing and glancing at Stella—"just as she pinned them on last night. I'm going to strike a blow for every inch of ribbon in the lot."

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Stella smiled shyly back, a gleam in her dark, passionate eyes.

"Well—you must wear my favour too," Rosa said.

She took up his heavy fur cap, lying on the table, and, on either side of the peak, pinned rosettes of spotted blue.

"There," she said, handing it to him, "I have pinned all our hopes on your cap, for there is scarcely a thought in our minds not bound up with you."

"You do me proud, lady," the Game Chicken answered. "I'll allow the Blue Bird's-Eye will not be disgraced."

"And now for the road," said Sir John.

Easy to say, but not so easy to do. Inside the inn were dozens of people, whose conveyances were hauled up outside—gentlemen, their servants, farmers, labourers, and humble sportsmen afoot. They had come to see the Game Chicken as they travelled north to the ring, and here was their opportunity. They thronged round the fighter and would have raised him shoulder high, but Belcher and Paddington Jones intervened. They followed in his wake as he made towards the coach, cheering, shouting greetings, and passing the prevailing jests of the day to him. Sir John's coach and his four famous chestnuts were at the door, and he quickly mounted to the box-seat. The Game Chicken followed, taking the vacant seat beside him, and Captain Trevelyan, Belcher, Paddington Jones, and old Bullen clambered up behind.

As Sir John flicked up his leaders, the crowd of men on the road raised a mighty cheer, but the

men on the coach, who took off hats and caps to wave them, as if in response to the salute, had no eyes for them. They were looking back at three women, standing clear of the crowd, in the doorway of the inn. Rosa, Stella, and old mother Bullen, whose care of the Chicken had been almost maternal. Rosa was waving a round, white hand, while Stella flaunted a huge Blue Bird's-Eye handkerchief.

"Come straight back and tell us the news," Mrs. Bullen screamed, shrilly. "I'll have some lovely Surrey chickens cooked by the time our lad has polished off that Young Ruffian."

The team strained on the traces as Sir John touched them up, and in a second were breaking into a steady trot, with their heads in the direction of Epsom. On this memorable journey we will leave them and approach the scene of the fight from the London side, by road.

Imagine a morning in the first week of May, and figure it dawning joyously over all the roads that lead from London to Epsom. In the early hours a chill had lingered in the air, but the risen sun had dispelled all the mists, and driven the raw nip out of the breeze. A typical, English, May morning, neither warm nor cold, fresh and full of blithe fragrance, jovially gay in the dreaming sunlight—a splendid morning for the fight, as hundreds said, uttering the words as a waking thought.

But during the night the Epsom roads had never been deserted. All through the quiet hours a stream of traffic had set in the direction of the downs. For the most part they were the vans and carts of showmen and rude caterers. The wayfaring people

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were ever the handmaidens of outdoor sport. Also, the indigent fight followers were early afield. Around every great prize-fight there assembled hundreds of men who could neither afford to own or hire a horse. On the morning of the fight between the Young Ruffian and the Game Chicken these folk were early afoot. Lingered in the taverns until the hour of three, or four, they had been vomited forth, but stupid with drink as they were, they set their faces resolutely towards the Epsom road, and staggering at first, sobered up, and walked more purposefully as the hours sped, taking occasional rest under the hedges. The rag-tag and bob-tail of sport, hangers-on to everything, coarse in their speech, unlovely in their humours, and often badly clad—they remained loyal to a tradition. A walk through the night and early morning was nothing to them, when the great game was on the move, and they were as ready to crowd towards the ring at Epsom, as they had been hundreds of times before to travel on shanks's pony towards any centre where fighting was to be seen—if only they got the office in time.

Early on the road was Bill Gibbons. He started from the One Tun Inn, with half a dozen satellites, his face rubicund with overnight convivialities, his hat slightly awry. He drove a couple of light ponies harnessed to a flat yellow cart, in which were the stakes and all the impedimenta of the ring, over the setting of which he had control.

But showmen and hucksters, travellers on shanks's pony, and blackguards who padded the hoof to make a bit by the ring-side, were not long to have the road to themselves. About every side street in the

West End of London, and even further east were signs of the coming fight. Outside the taverns, vehicles of every type began to appear, from the sporting publican's gig to the lordly coach, preparing to take parties, making the different houses their starting-places. Inside, the inns were busy as the sporting-men, heavily coated and shawled, liquored up before starting. By the time some of them got on the road, they were as jolly as they had been the night before in such sporting drums as the One Tun Inn. One by one these vehicles got away, and went to swell the traffic on the highway. As they came from different centres and converged on to the narrow trunk-road, the highway crowded up until it was one moving mass of vehicles and hurrying pedestrians.

The note of the occupants of the vehicles was one of boisterous hilarity. Every driver's whip was adorned by the colours of his favourite—they might have been the Blue Bird's-Eye of Pearce, or the primrose and blue of Firby—knotted round the shaft. Cockades of the same colours were worn on the hats of the travelling people, or in the button-holes of coat lapels. Hundreds of horses' hoofs rang on the roads; bugles and coach horns blared merrily; men shouted from one vehicle to another, or volleyed chaff at the villagers and wayfarers along the road; some sang popular catches, either solus or in chorus—ballads of other great fights, and doggerel verses lampooning unpopular politicians; all laughed loudly at the slightest untoward incident as they swept along the roads, a roaring procession, with one common goal in view and one underlying passion uniting

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them in their strange, exciting quest. In the little villages along the road, peasant children stood at the garden gates, fingers to their mouths, wondering; women held babies aloft at the cottage doors, to see the roaring stream of traffic; boys and girls scrambled for coins carelessly flung by the sporting wayfarers; while, in the fields, men condemned to labour, stiffly straightened themselves and watched the hilarious progress of the crowd, envious, and holding themselves accursed that they should be tilling the soil, when the great game called from afar along the winding road.

At Epsom, near the grand stand, a strange sight met the eyes. The ring had long been built on a slightly raised platform, the post firmly roped into a magic square. Outside this ring another had been marked out, staked and roped, to keep the crowd at bay. Inside this post, at half-past eleven, had begun to assemble the pink of London's Corinthian pride, and in the freer space they were able to meet, exchange snuff with elaborate flourishes, and make bets untrammelled by the disorder of the rabble, though in earshot of its noisy chaff. Along the ropes of the outer ring fifty stalwart men, the pick of the prize-ring, armed with clubs and whips, policed the sacred inner space. Their duty was to keep in check the surging mob on the other side of the ropes. Vehicles, driving up, were disgorging their occupants, and in the outer ring and outside of it the crowd, noisy and impatient, was constantly increasing. The people roared and swayed, and occasionally those in front and well up to the ropes were pushed through, when the closely packed mob



moved as an unanimous whole with much the same motion seen in yellowing corn, as the late summer breezes sweep across the million ripening ears. Unlucky the poor devil who was swept under the ropes. The police of the prize-ring set upon him, unanimously, with whips and clubs, and the swaying crowd roared with merciless humour as the belaboured wretch tried to force his way back into the solid and unwilling wedge of humanity on the safe side of the ropes.

Of sporting aristocracy, in the inner ring, there was an amazing crowd, and they were greeted, one by one, by plaudits or ridicule from the mass of humanity behind, according to their popularity. Everyone who counted in sporting London and the near-by counties was there, including the Duke of Clarence, soon to be King of England,—who had trundled down in Captain Barclay's drag. There was Lord Downshire, official head of his class, so feeble that he had to lean on his henchman, a burly footman who had once been a light of the ring. About the sacred space outside the inner ring, one might have found half the king's ministers, almost every member of the fashionable gaming clubs, all the latest young lordlings who had acres to mortgage, or expectations worth the attentions of a money-lender, and various showy rattles, sportsmen all, of fashionable pretence and no apparent means of income, though they kept their heads above water and out of trouble, and flaunted it with the rest. Here was a man whose verse was to remain a national heritage; there a painter whose landscape drawings are treasured in our national galleries to this day.

The peer, the military man about town, the reckless squire dissipating his broad acres, their intimates, hangers-on and parasites—coxcombs nearly all, pluming themselves in the sun—were there in fine fig and feather, and the centre of them all, wearing a purple coat with a wonderful shining hat, was the master of the ceremonies at all these gatherings—Gentleman Jackson.

It was half-past eleven. Colonel Darleigh had arrived in good time, with his man Firby, and the pugilist's attendants. Firby, surrounded by the curious, lay on a heap of straw in the corner of the ring. Wrapped up in a coat, nervously biting a piece of straw, his seconds—the Jew, Mendoza, and his bottle-holder, Bill Richmond, were massaging his huge limbs. Colonel Darleigh himself, a settled frown on his face concealing the approaching triumph which he believed was to be his, went in and out amongst his friends. Overnight, he had taken the slight odds offered on the Chicken eagerly and with confidence. Watchers of the game, knowing their man and his reputation, had followed his lead, and the price had shortened to two to one against the Chicken. Rumour, the hundred-tongued, had been very busy during the night, and already there were some, noting the recklessness of Darleigh's betting, who did not expect to see Pearce take the ring. Calm, in the face of his certain, approaching triumph, Colonel Darleigh strutted amongst his friends. Now and again he consulted his watch, concealing his impatience. Already the crowd were beginning to get irritable. Voices shouted, "Dering," "Dering," "Dering," ceaselessly. Others screamed out for a

sight of the Game Chicken, while behind, the murmuring rabble growled out curses, and suggested by their shouted phrases that this was another plant. There was a cynical gleam in Darleigh's eye, as he thought of the scene there would be when the watch had ticked the minutes remaining before twelve o'clock, and Gentleman Jackson, compelled by the flight of time, would have to declare forfeit, and deprive the eager crowd of its sport.

As the time grew nearer, Colonel Darleigh had increasing difficulty in maintaining his self-control and his attitude of calm indifference.

Gentleman Jackson, talking with Lord Downshire, who was already sniffing the air, suspiciously, and eyeing the horizon, himself began frequently to consult his watch. Already he scented danger in the increasing turbulence of the crowd.

Colonel Darleigh strode up to him, eagerness written all over his sinister face—holding his watch in his hand.

"Good morning, my lord. I make the time fifteen minutes to twelve."

Lord Downshire pulled out his watch and, holding it in his palsied hand, consulted the face.

"I make it one minute more," he said, in his thin, wavering voice.

Gentleman Jackson lugged out his own huge time-piece, and frowned as he looked on the dial.

"I agree with Lord Downshire—it requires fourteen minutes to twelve. There is plenty of time."

There was an anxious pause broken by Colonel Darleigh's voice.

"I shall claim forfeit to the minute," he said,

"and as your watches agree, I will accept your reading of the time."

Lord Downshire shrugged his shoulders.

Gentleman Jackson's face grew stern.

"The terms of the fight are, the men shall be in the ring by twelve o'clock. If the condition is not observed by Sir John, you are entitled to claim."

He shrugged his shoulders and frowned more than ever, while the crowd about the ring grew angry and filled the air with threats and taunts.

Colonel Darleigh, pale now, could hardly conceal his triumph. Thirteen more minutes and the verdict would be his. The thought sent the blood running wildly through his veins. It hammered in his brain. He could not help but think of the morrow—Sir John in his power, his mouth shut through fear of compromising his daughter, his career ruined. As he thought he bit on his under-lip grimly, and could scarcely look up.

And then the turbulent ring-side grew suddenly silent for a space of time that might have been measured by half a dozen heartbeats. He was obliged to look up—compelled, as if Fate had grabbed him by the head and hoisted it to make his startled eyes sweep the horizon.

The heads of the crowd were turned away from him, looking south. They were gazing at a coach coming down the slight incline at a gallop, a hundred yards away.

Gentleman Jackson's voice broke the strange silence.

"They are here at last," he said in accents of

relief, as a man might express himself when freed from an unpleasant duty.

"In heaps of time too," said Lord Downshire. "In quite good time."

"I call you to compare watches again," Darleigh shouted to the two arbiters of his fortunes, his face turning a terrible grey. In a panic of despair, he seemed to think he could hurry time itself over the intervening ten minutes.

They looked at him with contempt and dislike in their manner of address.

"I make it twelve minutes from noon," Gentleman Jackson said. "And you—my lord?"

"I agree—there is no question of time. The margin is ample." Lord Downshire's voice, thin as it was, seemed to express a volume of personal pleasure.

The crowd, magically restored to temper, was cheering wildly. The coach was up, and the expected party had arrived.

Even then, Colonel Darleigh could not believe the situation had gone against him. He saw the crowd opening up to let the new-comers pass. It parted quickly, and leaping over the ropes of the outer ring came Jem Belcher. He carried a fur cap decorated with the rosettes pinned on it that morning by Rosa. This he swung wildly in the air, so that everyone could see it; with one last sweep of the arm he skied it, and the cap flew in an ascending half-circle over the heads of the aristocratic company assembled by the outer ropes, and fell, to a roar of cheering, into the centre of the ring.

Speechless with rage, Darleigh watched the surg-

ing crowd, where it had parted to give access to the latest arrivals. He was still hoping against something in his heart telling him he was betrayed, that the Game Chicken would not walk within the range of his straining vision. It was a hope forlorn enough. With hat off, a smile of pride on his face at the joyous reception of the crowd, the sunlight lighting his silvering hair and fine blue eyes, Sir John Dering walked slowly forward, greeting his friends, as if he were passing into the *salon* of some stately hostess. Behind him, willing and eager, the fighting spirit beginning to flame in his usually quiet eyes, smiling on Paddington Jones who strode at his elbow, came the Game Chicken. He had already doffed the big great coat; his fur cap was within the ropes, and he was tugging at the Blue Bird's-Eye handkerchief round his neck, as if he were anxious to free himself of all impediments and unduly eager to leap into the ring and fight.

Colonel Darleigh, ashen grey, seemed to have shrunk. The cup of triumph he had prepared, outraging every healthy sense of honour, had been dashed from his lips ere he had scented its bouquet. His one hope now hung on the spirit of a single brave man whom he had not thought to corrupt. Firby carried all Darleigh's chances of humiliating his rival—unless, unless he still held Rosa.

Sir John was steadily greeting his friends in the surrounding uproar. Nothing in his manner showed either anxiety or anticipated triumph—anger or mental unrest. Urbane, debonair, he sauntered from group to group, and in the course of his walk came opposite to Darleigh.

"Ah! Colonel Darleigh," he said, and his aristocratic face was as expressionless as a mask. "A fine morning for the fight. I hear your man is well."

There was something chilling in his calm politeness. Colonel Darleigh forced himself to speak, and the grudging words came unwillingly to his lips.

"A fine morning, as you say," he answered, choking down the bitterness in his heart. "And your man, Sir John?"

"In splendid feather," Sir John replied. "There is every prospect of a great fight, and may the best man win. The colours my daughter pinned on the Game Chicken's cap this morning, after a pleasant overnight journey from Kingston, lie with the Chicken's castor in the centre of the ring. You may have observed their flight."

With the ghost of a smile on his face, Sir John passed on, and for minutes the seething crowd swaying about Darleigh, the gay aristocratic figures passing before his eyes, faded from his vision, and he stood alone, while the great black wave of his discovered guilt rolled forward and engulfed him.

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## CHAPTER XX

As the hour for the beginning of the fight drew near, a great change came over the conduct of the crowd. The beating of showmen's drums, the cries of the spielmakers, and a hundred varieties of hucksters plying their trades on the outer edges of the crowd died away to nothing. The gambling-booths, shows, eating and drinking tents were deserted, and the full force of the crowd began to press steadily for points of vantage round the arena.

At the ring-side, some twenty thousand men were assembled, and the appearance of the Game Chicken had put them in a rare good humour. Now, there was no doubt about the holding of the fight. Excitement grew as the minutes sped, and the volume of noise was increased by the steady roar of men calling the odds. When the ring-goers first began to assemble, the betting was distinctly in favour of Firby. Colonel Darleigh's fierce overnight support of his champion had not passed unnoticed, and the air had been thick with the wildest of rumours. The most persistent had been the tip that, owing to some vague accident, Pearce would not be able to turn up. When his cap had been thrown into the ring and the Chicken, apparently in great trim, followed it by appearing himself, the roar of welcome showed how deep had been the fear of the crowd that no



fight would take place. Above the babel caused by the presence of a huge roosting mob, Sir John Dering noted, with grim satisfaction, that the betting-men were now frantically calling offers of even money, as their estimate of the Chicken's chances.

And what of Darleigh? From the moment of the Chicken's appearance his confidence had entirely gone. For days he had been thinking of the fight as an event which would never take place. His interest in his man Firby had been very perfunctory, and only once or twice had he visited his training-quarters. Now, he found the neglected pugilist had become the centre of his hopes, and that whatever chance remained of humiliating Sir John depended upon the game lad who was to do battle with Hen Pearce. Gulping down his disappointment, and making an effort after self-control, his interest shifted in the direction of the fighter. Scarcely able to conceal his anxiety, Darleigh walked to the corner of the ring where Firby was being put through the last preparatory touches by his second and bottle-holder. They were just being completed as he reached the group, and Firby, with a great-coat slung across his massive shoulders, had risen, and was going towards the ring.

Colonel Darleigh went up to his man and held out his hand.

"I want to wish you luck," he said, shaking Firby's huge fist, as if he were clinging visibly to a tangible hope. "Fight him, Firby; fight him to a standstill, and make certain of winning as soon as you can."

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this sudden cordiality—was indeed somewhat surprised by it. Colonel Darleigh had been sparing of his attentions throughout Firby's long preparation.

"The Chicken is a hearty buck, as those who have seen him know," Firby answered slowly. "I'd consider it an honour to take his number down, and as long as I can see, I'll fight him for all he is worth. I'm glad it has come to a fight; I thought, somehow, I was not going to meet him."

"What are your chances?" Colonel Darleigh asked, eagerly.

"Just what the betting says. It's an even chance. I am as good as he is—no better, no worse—but that should be good enough for any true sportsman."

"Well, make it a slight shade better, and put him out, and I'll give you a thousand pounds," Darleigh said, almost hissing the words.

"If I can put him away for the love of the thing, I will," Firby answered. "I'd like to earn the extra thousand too, but I wish you'd made the offer sooner. It would have put heart into a man. We've been training believing the whole thing was going to be a cross." Firby looked his patron in the eyes as he said the words, and for a moment Darleigh's glance fell before the fighter's steady gaze and direct accusation.

"There has never been the suggestion of a cross," Darleigh answered.

"No—but those who know the game have felt you were not much interested in this mill as a fight. Isn't that so, Mendoza?" asked Firby.

"It is, shentlemen! it is; blow me tight, if it ain't."

"Well—lads, you were mistaken," said Darleigh heartily. "I'm standing to lose twenty thousand pounds on this fight, and if you do well for me, I'll do well for you. Now, you do your level best, lad; it's time you were in the ring."

It wanted two minutes from twelve when Firby stepped through the ropes, followed by Mendoza, the Jew, and Bill Richmond, the black, who carried the water, sponges, and towels—the symbols of his office. A great cheer greeted the fighter, and Firby, standing alone in the centre of the ring, acknowledged the welcome with a smile. As he drew off his coat, the roar of approval mounted higher. Firby was a fine figure of a man, highly popular in the London ring. His title of Young Ruffian was not meant to convey the idea that he was a low and coarse person of disorderly habits. Indeed, a more honest, amenable man never entered the ring. His nickname, the Young Ruffian, had clung to him since one of his early fights, which had been the roughest mill remembered by the ring-goers for a generation. It reflected his reputation as a hard-hitting, hurricane fighter of proved courage and skill.

Standing there, waiting for his opponent, Firby looked what he was—a good-humoured, even-tempered giant. Well over six feet in height, he remained in the centre of the ring, almost as still as a statue, and the gaze of the crowd dwelt upon his great chest, the muscles which rippled heavily over his shoulders, the strong round loins, and the lean arms bulking with sinews as hard as steel, which everyone knew hit with the force of a blacksmith's hammer. He was no low-browed, animalised ruffian,

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but a fine, open-faced, upstanding man, and the smile, playing about his face, showed his mettlesome courage. There he remained, in the centre of the ring, a minute or more, surrounded by the cheering crowd, until the unceasing roar swelled to a greater volume, and told him his opponent was coming to the fray.

Firby curiously watched the coming of the man who was to test his mettle. Through an avenue of heads the Game Chicken made his way, easily distinguishable by his freckled, smiling face, set on the big white shoulders, which contrasted oddly with the shoulders of the bucks and dandies about him, clothed in various hues. On the way to the ring, Pearce stopped before Sir John Dering, and Firby saw the patron and the pugilist exchange greetings.

"Any orders, sir?" Pearce was saying, although Firby did not know this.

"No, Pearce," Sir John said. "Win or lose, I rest my chances on you, and am quite satisfied to do so. You'll win, if you can, and if we go down, we shall not be disgraced by our champion. The best of luck, Pearce."

Sir John shook the pugilist's hand.

"Never you fear, Sir John," Belcher said, in his hearty manner. "He's a coming champion, and will fight like a world-beater. If he doesn't, he'll never get a cut from our mutton when we get back to Wardour Street."

Old Bullen, a privileged spectator, came up to the little group. Old Bullen, suddenly grown young again, walking as if the world never held such an enemy as gout, was a different man. Horses and

fighting-men were the joy of his life, and the sight of either lightened the burden of his advancing years, until it seemed to slip away from him.

"Eh, lad, you're as pretty a pug as ever pulled off a shirt. Go and knock my year's rent out of him, my covey, and the old 'King's Head' is yours for the rest of the summer."

"Aye, will I," answered the Game Chicken. "You'll see your home-fed ham fighting in a minute. My compliments, Sir John; you do me proud. I'm a willing lad, and I'll do my best—fairer than that no man can say. And now for the Young Ruffian."

Firby, standing in the centre of the ring, saw him coming. As the Chicken swung on the posts and mounted the platform, Firby rushed to meet him, and held out his hand to assist his opponent into the ring.

The Chicken seized it, and using it as a lever swung himself on to the raised platform, Belcher and Paddington Jones following him. The two fighters retained their grip on each other's hands and shook right heartily.

"Thank you kindly, Master Firby," the Game Chicken said, as they faced each other. "We'll be at it in a minute; but you're a fine chap, and there's no man I would sooner fight in the world."

"The same here," said Firby, heartily. "Ever since I saw you mill Richmond, I've heard good accounts of ye, and I take it an honour to toe the line with such a promising piece of stuff."

"That's right," said the Chicken. "Win or lose, there's no bad blood."

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As the Game Chicken entered the ring, the crowd roared itself hoarse, and the sound of cheering grew wilder and stronger as the two men shook hands in the open ring. Meeting together, the gladiators gave the crowd the opportunity of making comparisons, and at first sight it looked as if the Young Ruffian had the advantage. He was undoubtedly taller, and appeared longer in the reach. He had also the advantage of weight, and from the muscular point of view bulked larger. If anything, the Chicken was a finer-drawn man, and though crowded with muscle, he moved with a lighter step, and there was more physical grace in his action. Again, Pearce had the advantage in condition and was younger than his opponent. Firby had been fighting in the London prize-ring for ten years, while the Game Chicken, though his country reputation was impressive, had only given the London fancy one slight proof of his quality, the morning he fought Bill Richmond, in the park. Time had taken away from Firby the first flush of conquering youth, but had given him, in its place, the equally precious quality—experience. The Chicken, on the other hand, looked quicker and more subtle; his great torso had that velvety sheen and pinky whiteness which betoken the athlete presented at the exact moment of his highest physical condition. And more, there was a calm confidence on his freckled face which betrayed not only liking for the game in hand, but a mind which had not yet considered the possibilities of defeat.

As the two men went to their corners, Gentleman Jackson took up his position at the side of the ring, and raised his hand to the shouting crowd. Bareheaded, cool, and confident, his curling hair stirred by the spring breeze, he looked a noble figure of a man, fit indeed to act as master of the ceremonies to such a turbulent gathering. The effect of his presence was magical. The roar died away and became an excited murmur—it was as if the angry sea had been quelled from riotous, crashing fury to a gentle ripple. The crowd, face to face with the fight, stopped shouting and roaring, and only an excited buzz of conversation rose from the ocean of moving heads.

Hen Pearce, in his corner, had just time to take from his coat the streaming ribbons which he had worn as favours during the drive to Epsom. These he tied round the post against which Paddington Jones was kneeling, and as soon as they were liberated the streams of ribbon fluttered in the wind. The ribbons of the Blue Bird's-Eye, rising and falling, made a dash of sober colour in the sunlight of that bright May morning. They caught the eye of Sir John Dering, who watched the preliminaries with an impassive face, and he, remembering the moving events that had finally led to the meeting, and the way the lives and fortunes of his house had somehow become bound up with the man to whom these colours meant so much, raised his hat to the ribbons as they first fluttered out the Chicken's defiance.

Seated on Paddington Jones' knee, Pearce was receiving his final instructions.

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"You're lighter than he is—see? That's for you to make the most of. You're shorter in the reach, and depend upon it, Firby will take full toll for that. The lad's a fast fighter at the beginning. He will go for you as quick and as fast as he can, at once. Let him, and wait, and whatever you do, don't hold him cheap, and don't let him hit to your eyes. I mind the time when he blinded the Old Ruffian, him he first fought in London, and took his name from, in five minutes, and it was good-bye to the old un's chances for keeps."

Pearce, looking grimly over Belcher's shoulder, could see his adversary taking similar final instructions from Mendoza. He measured Firby with his resolute eyes and nodded his head slowly while he listened to Belcher, as a sign that he understood.

"Time," said Gentleman Jackson, and the word carried with sharp distinctness in the clear air, and fell like a song of battle on the ears of the crowd. Every unit in it, electric, concentrated, and fiercely delighted, bellowed out a great cheer as the two men left their corners and came to the line in the centre of the ring—a cheer, which as quickly as it rose, died away. The crowd of twenty thousand men grew silent, eyes and minds intent on one issue—the fight beginning between the two superb men before them.

As the men advanced towards each other, the Hon. Lumley Savage, wedged behind Sir John Der-  
ing, tapped him on the shoulders.

"Have you any tip for the fight, Sir John," he said, with his irrepressible chuckle—"anything from the stable?"

Sir John turned and met his eyes.



"I only know from proof received that our lad is brave and skilful. I am only certain of one thing—he will do his best. If you believe in pluck and honesty, Savage, back him. It is a matter of faith."

"I'd like him better if he had more weight," said Captain Barclay, critically.

"And I would prefer the experience," Sir Harry Tempest muttered, as he watched the opening movements.

But now the men were at it. When Jackson gave the sign, Firby came from his corner quickly, crouching instinctively as he moved. The Game Chicken, even tempered to the last, was smiling as he walked forward, though his honest eyes were thoughtful. And oddly enough, the last thing he remembered as crossing his mind was the vision of a tented fair-ground, a show with yellow wagons, and a brown-eyed gipsy who was to be its inspiration. From this he was awakened by Firby perfunctorily shaking his hand, dropping it, and standing quickly on guard. No doubt about it, the Young Ruffian was there to win. Before the yellow van and the dark gipsy had vanished from the Chicken's mind, Firby crouched, feinted, and went in with a rush. His hard, finely modelled arms flashed in the sun, and then he swung and caught the Chicken a clean hit on the side of the head which rattled him from top to toe. Belcher, watching, in the corner, bit his lip until it bled, and Paddington Jones swore softly. It was his way of praying.

For a second, the quiet eyes of Pearce blazed with a passion uncontrolled, as he watched the man dance

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out and away from his reach. That blow liberated something slumbering and uncontrolled—the fighting spirit which the good-humoured Bristol lad kept in careful leash. His immediate impulse was to throw discretion to the winds, and to go after the dancing figure which had struck him. And then the moment's rage flickered out. It was the game, he said, biting his lips, and Firby was playing it. He, too, would play the game, only as Belcher said, he would wait and would not hold his man cheaply.

What a round that first one was—and Firby's all the way. Twenty years after it was spoken of as a classic by surviving ring-goers. Firby went into it as if there was only five minutes of time left in the whole world. No sooner had he stepped out from that first blow than he came back, arms well up, body crouching low, his feet sliding along the platform as he carefully planted them with catlike accuracy. Again, the white arms flashed in the sun; again the feint drew the Chicken, and again, with a thud, Firby reached the body with the left and finished by rattling Pearce's head with his right. And then he was out and away, and the Chicken, breathing heavily after the hot rally, was beating the air, while, almost immediately after he had swung, Firby's fists came back with the same two blows to ribs and head, administered with the accuracy of an auctioneer using his hammer. He seemed to fill the ring, to be everywhere at once, and for a moment it looked as if he would hit the Chicken off his feet. Twenty times he must have struck the Bristol man, when in sheer desperation Pearce closed. For a moment there was nothing to see but two writhing

figures in a deadly embrace. Then, suddenly, Firby was slowly raised from the platform and thrown down with a force that made the boards rattle—cross-buttocked, he lay spread-eagled at the Chicken's feet.

It had been the Ruffian's round, and his supporters cheered themselves hoarse. Colonel Darleigh, standing in that crowd, with his eyes riveted on the men, felt something like a new hope stirring in his blood. Sir John Dering did not change a line of his expression, but that hurricane first round shook his faith. In Pearce's corner, Belcher, plying the towel and the sponge, was saying things, but they were said more with the idea of heartening his man than as lessons in tactics. Ring policy knew of nothing to stop such a fierce method, but patience and time.

The second round was almost the same. The deadly stillness of the crowd showed how keenly the two moving figures were being watched. Firby came along, crouching and sliding in with his crafty catlike approach, but Pearce had learnt something. The first rush he drew, and took the blows as they came. Immediately, Firby was back and applying the same method. An inspiration came to the Game Chicken like a flash of lightning. He began again to retreat, and then suddenly altered his plan. Leaping forward with the speed of a panther, just as Firby shot out his left for the body, he uppercut at the crouching figure, and brought his big fist against the point of Firby's chin. The sound of the blow was heard in the deadly silence, and when Firby backed away his mouth was bleeding and he spat

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out a broken tooth. The character of the fighting did not change, and the round ended with a clinch and a fall, Firby coming in as strong as ever—as if he could maintain the pace for hours.

Three or four rounds of this extraordinary fighting worked the crowd up to fever heat. Firby was doing all he knew as fast as he could think of it. Only the Game Chicken's quickness and condition enabled him to survive; but for that and his powers as a wrestler, Firby would have hit Pearce to a finish in the first ten minutes. Pearce, slow, cautious, and well in hand, would retreat as quickly as Firby could come in, and when the pace became too fast and he could not stop Firby's rushes, the Game Chicken usually took the blows coming to him and closed with his opponent. Each concluding wrestle was a severe test of both men's strength, but four out of five times the advantage lay with Pearce, who brought his man down with a thundering crash to the boards. At the end of every round, the swaying crowd roared its glee, and ascending with increasing menace came the sinister verdict of the betting-men roaring the odds—three to one on Firby.

In his corner, Belcher plied the towel and sponge with undiminished vigour. The figure lying back and breathing heavily in the precious half-minute of respite, on Paddington Jones' knee, was bruised about the face. Already a mouse had swollen on his forehead; his head was cut and bleeding; one of his lips had puffed up and was thickening, while, round the Game Chicken's ribs, were weals of ghastly blue, where he had received Firby's grim attentions. The two men seconding Pearce had but little to say,

except the things they thought were cheerful. Experienced ring-goers, they knew the game, and the game was against their man. Belcher, squirting water over Pearce, said as little as he could, but as he sponged his face the eyes of the two men met. To Belcher's great delight the Chicken remained as fresh and as confident as ever, and his left eye closed in a palpable wink which was full of grim humour.

"I'm glad you take it so well," quoth Belcher, flapping his towel, lustily.

"Never better, my lad; never better. This fight is only beginning. Firby is doing all he knows, and I am still living. He can't do more in the next five rounds, and if he goes on as he is, and I live through them, he'll beat himself. Cheer up, matey, and watch him; and let me know when he isn't coming it so strong, and I'll go after his goat."

"Time," called the stentorian voice of Gentleman Jackson, and once again the cheering crowd dropped into silence as the two men fell upon each other. Again there was a repetition of the first five rounds. Firby followed up one ugly rush with another, and each time appeared to get in and beat a devil's tattoo on ribs and face. At the end of the round one of the Chicken's eyes was closing, yet still he lay back and smiled, with growing confidence, on his seconds. So round by round they fought in that open square, with Gentleman Jackson watching; with Darleigh fuming, growing more impatient with every round, as his man seemed to be winning yet failed to make the readiness of Pearce to respond to time slower or more reluctant. And indeed, as time was called again, Firby suddenly chilled in his attack.

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He had fought at a pace which experience had taught him was fast enough to slow down any man, but at the end of each round, curiously willing and responsive, apparently just as fast and very fresh, back came the Game Chicken. Round by round they fought, Firby rushing in and using greater force, as if he were a set of tidal waves storming a rock upon the seashore. Sometimes he was repulsed; again, he scored, hitting his man where he pleased with blows that sounded with sickening thud and made the watchers shudder; and last, at the end and in spite of all, there was his man deliberately challenging for the clinch and ready—more than willing—to wrestle him for the throw with undiminished vigour.

At the end of the tenth round, when Firby went to his corner, his breath was coming in heavy sobs that shook him as he sat on Richmond's knee.

"God!—Mendoza," he said to his Yiddish second. "I'm fighting iron, a wall of it. I'm hitting him hard and often, and he comes and asks for more and seems to like it."

"You've got him beaten; you've got him beaten. Hammer the face off him every time he uncovers," Mendoza replied, encouraging his man.

"It ain't a face," Firby answered, recovering his breath and respiring more naturally. "It's iron—I tell you. I hit him hard and often, but he don't weaken for a second."

Pearce, in his corner, was taking the ministrations of his second as a matter of course.

"Firby has shot his bolt," said Belcher, more to hearten him.

"Don't I know it," answered the Chicken, who, despite the fact that he was badly punished, was breathing as regularly as a sleeping child. "I found that out the last round but one, and you will see me go after him from now onward."

Sir John Dering, standing quietly with Harry Trevelyan, had watched the fight through the first ten rounds with mingled feelings, but slowly he was realising one certain fact—though the Game Chicken was not winning, at least he was not losing. Time after time he had noted the ready willing nonchalance with which Pearce left his corner. Again Jackson called "Time," and again the roar of the crowd dropped to a tense, gasping silence. So silent were the multitude that one could hear the neigh of a distant horse, and the trill of an ascending lark singing its joy upwards to the splendid morning.

Sir John Dering, as he watched the opening of the eleventh round, saw, with the crowd, that the plan of the wonderful battle was changing. Firby was not so quick out of his corner, at the end of the half-minute respite; Pearce came out rather slowly and deliberately, just as he had stood at the beginning of each of the rounds. But they had not faced each other in the centre of the ring before something quite unexpected happened. As soon as the two men came together, Firby, crouching for one of his mad rushes, Pearce sprang at him without an instant of delay. Firby was nonplussed by this unexpected change of tactics, and for an instant the game man wavered. In that fatal second he was lost. Crack!—the Game Chicken's mighty left

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swung unerringly, and landed clean between the eyes. The big fighter stood shaken and bending like a tree struck by lightning. A mighty roar came from the crowd, and then another moment of tense silence. Partially stunned, Firby swayed there, and the Game Chicken, not easing up for a moment, went at him again. A gruelling right over Firby's heart shook the man from head to heel; then stepping back, Pearce measured the tottering figure, and once again the great left arm flashed in the sunlight full upon Firby's right eye. His defence was gone. For half a wild minute, in a saturnalia of cheering, the Chicken propped him right and left, and then shot one more fierce left hit to the side of the head and knocked his man clean off his pins.

A change; a marvellous change came over the spirit of the ring. The roar of the betting-men called the Chicken's name, and the odds went up and up against Firby, until they clamoured offers of five to one. Colonel Darleigh, with a look of black despair, ground his teeth in impotent rage. Harry Trevelyan, whispering into Sir John Dering's ear, could not restrain his glee.

"Our fight, Sir John; our fight," he kept shouting, in a sort of unconscious ecstasy.

Sir John did not speak a word. He watched Mendoza and Richmond grab the fallen fighter and carry him to the corner, and, taking out his watch, glanced from the face of the dial to the corner in which the prostrate fighter lay. He saw the frantic movement of the towel and sponge; nodded approval with an air of strange detachment as they held up the lolling head and squirted brandy between the



clenched teeth. Glancing at his own man's corner, he noticed Pearce sitting upright, and Belcher only making a perfunctory effort over the toilet. Pearce, Belcher, and Jones were looking one way—into the opposite corner. Neither elation nor depression was on their faces. They simply waited for the half-minute, and the reappearance of the stricken figure from the other side.

"Time"—without any change of tone, pitiless, inexorable, Gentleman Jackson's voice rang out.

The Game Chicken moved to the centre of the ring, and in the opposite corner Richmond and Mendoza raised Firby bodily and stood him on his legs.

Slowly, he tottered to the centre of the ring, reeling like a drunken man, his head lolling forward, his legs giving at the knees. Blood was streaming from the forehead and the left ear. One eye had closed. It was almost impossible to believe the calm, confident fighter could be so pitifully reduced in one short round.

"Take him away, take him away," the crowd began to roar.

Darleigh, white with passion, struggled to Firby's corner.

"Take him away, be damned!" he shouted hoarsely. "He's not half beaten. Send him up, I tell you; send him up."

Pearce, with pity in his eyes, looked towards Gentleman Jackson.

"Must I?" he asked.

"Certainly—Firby is up to time," the referee answered, without a moment's hesitation.

Pearce went up and lightly struck Firby on the body. The blow was slight enough, but the Ruffian reeled, and crashed heavily to the boards, falling on his head. His seconds carried him to the corner once again. The crowd broke into a frenzy of cheering. The Game Chicken, upright, stood with his seconds, and waited once more while the fatal half-minute slowly dragged itself away.

"Time."

Pearce advanced again to the centre of the ring, but stood alone—and remained the centre of a veritable pandemonium.

Richmond and Mendoza were wildly disputing in the opposite corner, but their man did not move, and indeed could not.

"Send him up, you idots, send him up!" Colonel Darleigh screamed. "He's not half beaten yet."

"He can't move," Mendoza said, with an appealing glance.

"He must move; damn him! he must move." Colonel Darleigh's face was working in a paroxysm of wild rage.

"And damn you, sir, damn you, body and soul!" Mendoza answered, in the heat of that exciting moment forgetting himself and the respect due to a Corinthian sportsman. "Our lad's got all he wants to-day, and I'm no party to seeing a game lad murdered for any man's brass. Heave it up, Bill, heave it up."

With a wave of his arm, Bill Richmond skied the sponge, which fell at the Chicken's feet. The crowd broke forward towards the ring and began to clamber

into it, the men cheering wildly as they came. Gentleman Jackson marched steadily to the centre, and seizing Pearce's swollen right hand held it aloft.

"As Firby cannot come to time, I declare the lawful winner of this fight, by the rules of the game, to be the Game Chicken."

In the seething turmoil—the winners were now hilariously dancing and capering, throwing up hats and sticks, and singing in their glee—Belcher helped the Chicken on with his great-coat. Together they crossed the ring, where Firby was coming to himself and looking wildly around him. The full meaning of what had happened had just dawned on his scattered senses. Pearce pushed his way through the crowd and seized Firby by the hand.

"How do you feel about it, Master Firby?—better I hope," he said.

"Nicely—thank you—but devilish sore," Firby answered.

"I did you a bad turn in that round, but it's in the game," said the Game Chicken. "I'm proud to have met and beaten thee, lad. It's a great honour to meet the best."

"Fair's fair," said Firby. "If I cannot lick thee, I'd just as soon be beaten by a brave man. Never mind me; good luck to you. My turn will come some other day."

"With all the pleasure in the world," said the Chicken, and turned to receive the congratulations of his friends.

When Sir John looked round for his rival, he was nowhere to be seen. Without a word to his

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beaten nominee, without a sign of interest, Colonel Darleigh had hurried from the downs. It was Sir John Dering who drove Firby into Epsom town and made arrangements for his comfort until he had fully recovered.

## CHAPTER XXI

WITHOUT a thought for the man who had fought a gallant battle for him, Colonel Darleigh slipped unobserved from the crowd and made his way to his chaise.

Round the ring the sound of the cheering had not entirely died away. It still roared derisively in his ears. From the fair came the uproar of merriment. The banging of drums, the roar of hucksters' voices, and the laughter of the now moving crowd all appeared to mock at him.

"Home," he said curtly to the postboy in charge of the vehicle. Then, mounting the steps, he clambered within and lay as far back in the chaise as he could, as if he were desirous of escaping observation. The chaise immediately started, and in a few minutes was steadily rolling away from Epsom and on to the London Road.

Colonel Darleigh neither looked to right nor left. His eyes were fixed in front of him. His face was strangely contorted, and his mouth worked constantly, as if he were mumbling to himself. Now and again he beat his hands on the side of the chaise, heedless of the fact that one was bandaged and a centre of agonising pain, vulnerable to the slightest touch. The pent-up torrent of days seemed to be seething in the darkening mind; the appearance of

the white statuesque figure of the fighter he had tried to put away, had tumbled down the house of dreadful cards he had built upon his own malignity.

One cannot follow his nightmare thoughts through that dreadful journey—the workings of a disordered mind, in which the grim doings of the last few days seemed to take shape and prey upon him like so many leering, mocking phantoms. Only, it must be true—the calm, inscrutably smiling face of Sir John Dering haunted his mind most of all. His was the head which Darleigh had planned to bring to the dust, and when his reason had told him the end was all but achieved, the hateful presence he had deemed broken remained upright to challenge and defeat him. The smiling triumph of Sir John's presence seemed to travel with him, taking substance and form. When Darleigh in his madness struck out and beat his hands upon the panels of the chaise, it was an action he could not control—an expression of the insane, thwarted purpose of his mind, to strike down the figure of the man who filled his disordered vision.

Again, in that long ride, other black shadows must have preyed upon the mind of this baffled man. He had played a dangerous game, and by some freak of chance the dice he had loaded had betrayed him. The matter could not end with the fight and the verdict which had gone against him. The blow to his financial credit, heavy as it was, could be easily adjusted, but the fight and its *dénouement* had stripped the mask from his face—had showed the working of a rascal's mind to the whole of his world. Sir John would not be silent. The insult to his

daughter, the attempt to win the match by blackguardly means, would be matters for investigation before the Corinthian Club. Sir John would impeach him before the Committee, and to his accusations there was no answer. With Stuart in the hands of the enemy, and the discovery of the place of Rosa's concealment, Sir John had proof of the abduction, and the knowledge of Darleigh's intention to strike once more at the Game Chicken. And he had no answer, no way to meet the garnered weight of evidence against him; no method of minimising its significance, and placing himself in a better light. His fellows would hear the charges, appraise the evidence, listen for his answer, find him silent, and with contempt and loathing, scarcely softened by pity, would cast him out of their world.

The chaise swayed as it dashed towards London, and the horses' hoofs beat out a merry tattoo as they rattled on the hard dry road. Village children, seeing the gaily caparisoned horses as they passed, and hearing the roar of their hoofs and the grinding of the carriage wheels, smiled at a progress which was too gorgeous for them even to enjoy in fancy, and, after the equipage had gone, told each other of the wonders of life open to the brave gentlemen who could command similar resources. Of such intangible fancies are all our dreams. When the spectacle is apparently fair, we do not visualise the brooding shadow. Happy the children who looked on the gay equipage, and saw only the noble horses and the whirling vehicle; if they could have seen inside the coach; if they could have looked into the

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mind whirling through a dreadful maze of disorders of its own creating; if they could have understood the madness on the working face, the gayest sights along the road of life would have swung by them ever after, darkened by waving, funereal plumes.

Three o'clock was striking as Darleigh drove up to his grim house, off Pall Mall. Dismissing the coach without a word, he beat at the door-knocker as if he would break the panels. When the man who served him threw the door open, Darleigh went straight to the gloomy dining-room. His ancient servitor followed in his wake.

"Will you lunch, sir?" he asked.

"No—get out," Darleigh answered.

The man turned and walked towards the door.

"Stay—one moment. Bring the brandy," Darleigh ordered.

The man slowly opened a cabinet and placed a full decanter on the table, and after an absence of a minute brought a supply of fresh water.

"Now—leave the room," Darleigh commanded, "and do not let me see you for the rest of the day. Come to me at eight o'clock to-night. You understand? Come to me at eight o'clock to-night."

Darleigh's servant bowed and left the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

As Darleigh poured out the brandy, he noticed his hand was shaking. The mouth of the decanter clattered against the rim of the glass. He poured out half a tumbler of the raw fluid and gulped it down undiluted. He drank it with the manner of a man who has lost his sense of taste.

No need to follow him through the long after-



noon. For an hour he sat in one of the great chairs, glowering at space. The next hour he paced the room, and his actions grew violent as he walked. In his frenzy he cursed aloud, and scarcely remembered what he had been saying or thinking. When he came to himself and stood by the open window blood was flowing from his head and hands. He had been beating them against the wall without being conscious of the self-inflicted agony.

In that lucid interval Darleigh sat alone, and watched a dreadful panorama unfold itself. He saw things as they were—objects before his eyes. The weariness of his frenzy had worn him. He felt insecure and afraid of something in his brain which would not take shape. He decided to call for help, and put one trembling hand on the great bell-rope hanging from the ceiling. He thought awhile with the bell-rope in his hand, trying to put the vague, unformed issue uppermost in his brain into words. He remembered, as a man coming out of a trance, that he had told his servant not to enter the room again until eight o'clock, and did not ring. Instead, he loosened his grasp on the bell-rope, went to the table and gulped down more brandy. Then he stood by the window, and looked out on the last of that May day, a man whom passion had consumed and thrown aside as a spent, burnt-out shell, fearful now that the frenzy which had made his mind a blank would come back and sweep him away.

So the afternoon sped on. The light faded outside, and in the room where Darleigh stood the candles did not break the gloom. For long hours there was a strange silence—a pause which seemed

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stified with the presence of a nameless horror. The little noises of despairing quietness—the ticking of a clock, the movement of a mouse behind a panel, the creaking of woodwork—seemed to be whispering.

At eight o'clock the servant came from the basement and along the dark passage, his feet shuffling as he walked. He lit the lamp in the hall, and then paused for a moment, hesitating. The strange, uneasy silence had gripped him. The man knocked softly on the dining-room door. There was no answer. He opened the door very quietly, and, looking in, found darkness, impenetrable, confronting him. With a shake in his voice he spoke to the threatening shadows. "Do you require anything, sir?" were the words formed by his wavering voice, the echo of which frightened him. There was no answer. From the hall he took a taper, and one by one lit the six candles in the silver support standing in the centre of the table. As they flamed up and sent their light slowly through the shadows, the butler noticed the bell-rope was no longer in its place, and, glancing fearfully about him, found it hanging taut from the top of a great sideboard. The crumpled bulk in the shadow of the heavy furniture was his master, Colonel Darleigh—dead, strangled by his own impulse. The nightmare of phantoms shouting through the corridors of his mind had become an unbroken silence—the silence which purges memory of the unforgivable, and mercifully permits us to forget.

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So we come to the parting of the ways, and little need now be added to complete the tale of these

people who lived and had their day a hundred years ago. I could, in fancy, drive you back from that wonderful scene at Epsom after the Game Chicken had put the seal upon his fame, and record the fine compliments showered by Sir John Dering upon his champion, and the stolid manner in which the youth from Bristol took them. I could tell you again of the humours of the road, and the way the crowd cheered these sportsmen as they passed. In fancy, I see the arrival of the party at the old "King's Head," scene of so many adventures, and the joy of the lovers at the successful ending of all their vicissitudes. I might tell you also of old Bullen, who danced along the passages of his house and kept open tap and gave good cheer to all sorts of wayfaring people and vagrant men for a full three days. I could picture you the dinner mother Bullen served; the merry evening spent by the party concerned in the adventures of the Game Chicken, and how modestly Pearce comported himself when Rosa Dering toasted him, and the dark-eyed Stella kissed him publicly. Last, I might take you back to the town and show how the news of Darleigh's death was received in the night-houses of the West—how my Lord Downshire wagged his head and said, solemnly, that it was better so, and avoided a damned lot of unpleasant scandal; how Gentleman Jackson, displaying his calves before the fire in the One Tun Inn dining-room, pursed his lips and looked as if he had arranged the whole chapter of events; how very late at night, in this same wicked old haunt of pugs and their patrons, rooks and pigeons drank to the dead man in terms unspeakably gross

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and pitiless. All these things are not important to us now; they happened more than a hundred years ago. The gaieties, follies, madnesses, and tragedies they represented were the sands in an hour-glass which have long since run out.

Still, some of the things I always hope did happen may be recorded. I like to see Sir John Dering, as a man who took life with increasing seriousness and kept his pledged word never to follow the mad hazard to the extreme, after the winning of the great wager had recouped his fallen fortunes. He lived, I believe, to a fine old age, and did useful service for the gentlemanly party in the House of Commons, when the people, passing through troublous times, had often to look to their aristocracy for a strong lead, and never looked in vain. Captain Trevelyan married Rosa, and later fought with Nelson at Trafalgar. You will find the name still carried through the services by his descendants to this day. Old Bullen kept the "King's Head" until he died, and his son, back from the wars with only one arm, followed in his footsteps, and remained there as a model Boniface, until the house was pulled down. In defiance of all the facts, I am bound to add Belcher lived to fight several battles in the ring, and in the evening of his days had the company of his old friend and antagonist, Paddington Jones, and many a stirring tale they told for the admiration of a later generation. Firby, the fighter, forsook the ring, after his great battle with Pearce. He became a book-maker of great repute, owned race-horses, made a fortune out of the development of mines, and ended his life as a Member of Parlia-

ment. Captain Stuart was shipped abroad after an inquiry into his conduct, and no one ever heard of him again.

And last of all comes our hero—the Game Chicken. He netted a comfortable fortune out of the fight, thanks to the generosity of Sir John Dering, and married Stella, the gipsy girl, amid the brave ceremonial of the Romany tribes gathered on Epsom Downs. For years after he toured the country with his yellow vans, and his boxing show was a familiar sight on every racecourse and at every fair held this side of the Tyne. He had three sons who were just as fine fellows as he was, and the pride of his later years was to teach them how to put up a useful bunch of fives in the right cause, and to be willing, ready, honest men, and as good-hearted as himself. Stella remained a gipsy to the end and died in a moving caravan, after which Pearce settled down and kept a fine old coaching inn on a turnpike road until the end of the chapter of his life.

So one by one we replace our old friends and enemies back into the past. A hundred years ago these things did happen almost exactly as I have stated them. It is our fashion now, when we have nicer stomachs, to deplore these roaring days, and sometimes to condemn the full habits of our forefathers. Well—every man to his own humour, say I. It is not for me, as the teller of a plain tale, to weigh the past in the balance, but, speaking for myself alone, if I did, I should not find it wanting. I know we certainly pile up the “resources of civilisation” with a rapidity that is making us all dizzy. I also know many people who complain there is but

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little bite and flavour in our national life to-day. After all, when the Blue Bird's-Eye fluttered round the necks of the Fancy, our men did seem to live, and, turning the pages of history, one also realises, with a catch of the breath, how nobly they learnt to die.

THE END

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