CORINTHIAN JACK

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"A STAR IN THE EAST," "THE EYES OF ALICIA,"
"THE CRIMSON MASCOT," "STIRRING DEEDS OF
THE GREAT WAR," ETC., ETC.

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CHAPTER I

A "Mill" in the Moonlight

It was absurd. So Squire Simon Halstead might have confessed when he was cool—if he ever confessed anything or was ever cool. He had fallen out with his stepson, Jack Ralstone, and about nothing. Forty-nine people out of fifty would at all events have said it was nothing. But when Simon Halstead was contradicted anything was good enough for a quarrel and he was readier to quarrel with Jack than with anybody in the world. Maybe Jack had lost his temper also. He certainly had not been sufficiently respectful, but the Halstead blood did not run in his veins and possibly the fact inclined him to rebellion.

"The impertinent jackanapes," spluttered Simon, his red face purpling under the effect of rage and rum, after preparing the way for the rum with a good dinner and a couple of bottles of port. "What the deuce does he know about milling? But it isn't so much his standing out against me as that he should go agen his own county and his own city where he was born and where I was born and my father afore me—good old Bristol city."

Undoubtedly this was the offence, but there were other grievances with which Jack had nothing to do.

The Somerset justices, of which body Simon was one, had decided to prohibit the prize fight between Bill Neate of Bristol city and Tom Spring of London being fought within the boundaries of the county. The justices of Berkshire and Wiltshire had been similarly un-English, and the sporting world, which in 1823 included all classes of society, from the noble Corinthian to the coalheaver, was at its wits' ends to find a place suitable for the Homeric fight.

When the Bristol J.P.'s took their unpatriotic step, Simon told them plainly what he thought of their molly-coddling spirit. Had Squire Halstead been a gentleman in his manner and ideas more than one representative of old Somersetshire families would have asked him to back his opinion with duelling pistols.

But Simon was not a man to be treated as a gentleman. As a matter of fact he was very much the reverse of one. His thick-set clumsy figure, his rolling gait, acquired in early youth from his life aboard ship, his full-bodied language, his love for rum and curaçao, a taste which he brought with him from the West Indies, were not prepossessing. Apart from this there were ugly stories about life in Barbados on his sugar plantations. Slavery, in spite of the efforts of Clarkson and Wilberforce, was in full swing, and Simon it was said was a hard taskmaster.

There were worse things than this attached to the name of Halstead. His father and grandfather had been Bristol shipowners, and it was whispered that not contented with trading in "black ivory" from Africa, to feed the plantations in the West Indies, they did not object—at a price—to traffic in white men for the same purpose. Bristol had an evil reputation in the eighteenth century

for exporting queer cargoes. Simon did not often allude to his bygones, save when in his cups. Sometimes on these occasions allusions slipped from him which pointed to experiences not unlike those of his forbears.

However this might be, there was not the slightest doubt of three things—one was his enormous wealth, another his prodigious meanness, when he was in the humour, and thirdly, his pride in his stalwart stepson, Jack Ralstone.

Jack was to make amends for the shortcomings of his stepfather. Jack was to be a gentleman; Jack was to marry a lady of title—this was an indispensable item in Simon's programme—Jack was to enter Parliament; he was to jump into a comfortable sinecure governmental post and in due time he was to have a handle to his name. The last was to be managed through the kindly offices of the Duke of Endsleigh.

Jack had not been consulted about a single thing—not even about the projected marriage between himself and Lady Barbara Dacre, the daughter of the aforesaid duke. Not that he cared much. He was quite content to do as he liked—when out of Simon's sight—and spend his allowance to the uttermost farthing, and a little beyond, as speedily as he could after receiving it through the family lawyer.

The young man—he was twenty-two—had a great capacity for enjoyment. Life had gone easily with him, and as far as he could see would continue to do so. The marriage with Lady Barbara did not trouble him. Lady Barbara was a glorious specimen of Somersetshire beauty in the full flush of womanhood. What more could any reasonable man want?

But to-day fate had chosen to thrust its interfering fingers into his life. He had quarrelled with his stepfather over a trifle. He was as conscious of the absurdity of the whole thing as Simon Halstead ought to have been. Perhaps it was not so much the quarrel itself which ruffled him, as Simon's overbearing air of authority, and rather than utter retorts, which would have widened the breach, Jack had walked out of the dining-room heedless of the "Come back, ye dog," that the Squire hurled at him.

With his hands in his pockets, a cigar—or "segar" as the word was spelt in those days, the accent on the first syllable—between his lips and a puckered brow, Jack Ralstone strode into the soft spring air. It was the beginning of April and the western wind brought with it a pleasant tang from the rolling Atlantic. Jack stood on the raised terrace fronting the entire length of the rambling old house wondering how to amuse himself and calm his perturbed spirits.

He was certainly a son of whom any father might be proud. Six feet in his stockings, deep rather than broad chested and with a mighty development of muscle about his shoulders and back, thin flanked, and straight as an arrow, he would not have discredited the gladiatorial arena. He was much more powerful than one who had never seen him stripped would have suspected. His perfectly fitting coat—one of Stultz's masterpieces—concealed the broadness of his back and the elaborate cravat which swathed his throat to his chin did not allow his brawny neck to be seen.

For the rest, his well-shaped head was surmounted by a mass of curly hair, lightish brown with a dash of red; his eyes blue, gleamed from beneath dark brows;

the mouth was firmly cut, and only his square prominent chin betrayed the temperament of the born fighter, while a certain look in the eyes told that if need be they could flash with anger and harden with determination.

Had Jack in his early boyhood had much to do with his stepfather, he might have imbibed some of Simon's truculent bullying spirit. As it happened he was a baby when Halstead set out to develop his West India plantations and he was twenty when the old man returned. Virtually Simon Halstead had deserted his young wife, a widow with one son, when she married the planter. Their short spell of marriage had been a stormy one, and Simon went off in a hurry after making provision for the lady. When she died he wrote his instructions to his lawyers for Jack's education and maybe thought no more of the lad until he returned to his native Bristol to spend his last days as a Somersetshire squire, and found a handsome, high-spirited lad of fourteen awaiting him. Jack Ralstone filled up a vacancy in Simon Halstead's heart, of which the hard-grained man had not been conscious until he returned to England and found English life so different from that in the West Indies.

Jack had just the looks and disposition the planter delighted in. Bold, fearless, active, revelling in outdoor life and exercise, the boy promised to develop into a splendid man physically, and animal strength was what pleased Simon Halstead most. But he was not blind to other qualities. Jack's father was of gentle blood, and his runaway match with the companion of old Lady Ralstone, his grandmother—a fashionable beauty in her youth, and a confirmed gamester and domestic tyrant in her old age—was nothing to his discredit though it cost the for-

tune which the venerable dame would otherwise have left him.

Of humble origin himself, Simon "dearly loved a lord," and he determined that Jack should he brought up as a gentleman, and so cast the reflection of rank upon himself. He consulted his lawyer, a man of the world and as a result Jack was sent to Eton and in due time to Oxford. His acquirements were neither more nor less than those of the average undergraduate of the period, and he probably spent more time on horses and athletics than on the classics and mathematics. But he spent money and he rubbed shoulders with aristocrats, and Simon Halstead was satisfied.

"I suppose the old man'll come round by the time we meet again," Jack was muttering as he paced the terrace. "I'm not going to give in. Why the devil should I? I've as much right to my opinion as he has to his. Dashed odd nobody about here's of my way of thinking. But they don't know—they don't know. Besides I've backed Tom pretty deeply—it's as well that I didn't tell *this* to the old man. If I lose——"

The broad shoulders heaved, but with defiance, not with apprehension. He was in the mood just then not to care for anything and if the difference he had had with his stepfather and the hot words they had exchanged deepened into something serious, well it must be so.

He sauntered round to the stables, idly kicking the pebbles as he went. He wanted to talk with some one and he was glad to hear the ring of a horse's hoof on the cobble stones and the hiss of old Stephen's breath, the necessary accompaniment to "rubbing down." He entered the stable yard and the groom looked up as the young man's

shadow, cast by the lantern on a hook in the wall, fell athwart the stones. Stephen suspended operations and his finger went to his forelock.

"Coom to have a sight o' th' 'osses, Master Jack? This 'ere one be a rattlin' good bit o' stuff. Me an' the squire give a 'undred guineas for 'un at last Weyhill fair an' he be worth every farden. Way ... ay theer! The nag's a bit fresh—the squire doan't gi' 'im enough work. I've told squire so but what be the use o' taakin'? Squire doan't think anybody knows anything but hisself, squire doan't—a beggin' your pardon, zur."

The horse, a black hunter, tossed his head and lifted his legs restlessly, with a great clatter.

"By gad, you're right there, Steve," laughed Jack. "I had to tell him as much not a quarter of an hour ago."

"Noa, did 'ee?" said Stephen, staring at his young master as though astounded at his audacity. "Warn't a bit o' good, I reckon. He didn't give in to 'ee, main fond as he be of 'ee."

"Not an inch. See here, Steve, you could use your fist very prettily when you were young, I'm told."

"Aye—sure-*ly*," chuckled the old groom. "There warn't many at my weight as I couldn't down. I fought at ten stun six, or thereabouts, an' I mind a merry little mill on Stonebridge Common when——"

"Yes, I've heard of that Stonebridge Common affair," put in Jack remorselessly, cutting short a threatened flood of reminiscences. "I know you're up to every dodge where the ring's concerned and that's why I want to ask you something. What do you think of Tom Spring's chances against Bill Neate?"

Steve spat on the ground and waved his currycomb to

emphasise his opinion.

"Bill Neate 'll eat him. Spring wunna last half a dozen rounds. Once Bill gets one of his hammer blows in, Spring'll drop like that."

And down went the currycomb.

"That's your opinion, is it. Well, I don't agree with you."

Stephen fired up instantly. He was Bristol born and bred, and he had more than once stood a pot of ale to the redoubtable Bill Neate. What better credential could Bill have?

"Master Jack, 'xcuse me a taaking the liberty, but what I says is as 'ee don't know nothin' about it. Dang it, I were fightin' afore 'ee was born or thought of. Tom Spring be a clever boxer, I don't deny, but he couldn't make a dent in a pound o' butter. Boxin's one thing, fightin's another."

Jack didn't like this. It was the old difference with the squire over again. His voice took a sudden sharpness.

"So it may be, but Spring can do both. Have you ever seen him box?"

"Noa, but I've taaked wi' them as has. Mike Devenish, the guard o' the Bristol Highflier, knows him well. Mike's had many a pint wi' him at Tom Belcher's house 'The Castle,' Holborn, and seen him have a set to at the Fives Court. Why, he's called the 'ladies' maid fighter.' What do 'ee think o' that, Master Jack?"

"It's a lie and a slander," retorted Jack angrily. "I've had the gloves on with Spring and when I asked him jokingly to give me a real punch, he broke through my guard and I went down like a ninepin and lay like a log for full five minutes."

"What of it?" growled Steve. "You're not Bill Neate."

The discussion grew hot, but quarrelling with Stephen was very different from quarrelling with his stepfather. Steve didn't lose his temper but argued purely on technical and pugilistic grounds. Failing to convince Jack how certain it was that Tom Spring must be beaten, he wound up with:

"Have your own way, Master Jack. I only hope as 'ee havn't rattled the squire. I know as he's put a 'undred or two on Bill Neate an' if he don't bring it off there'll be the devil to pay."

This was news to Jack, but what did it matter. Squire Halstead could well afford to lose a thousand or two, let alone hundreds. The only thing was that if Spring was the victor, it would add to the difficulty of a reconciliation.

The talk, or rather discussion, with Stephen having dribbled out, Jack cast about for something to occupy his mind and calm his ruffled nerves. Stephen had finished grooming the black hunter and was leading him back to his stall a picture of symmetry and strength, when an idea struck the young man. He was in the mood for something daring, something which demanded audacity

"I say, Steve, is the black fit for thirty miles or so to-night?"

"Aye, if need be. He bean't done more'n a couple o' mile to-day. A bit o' stretchin' won't do him no harm."

"Right. Then clap a saddle on his back. I'll be with you in five minutes or so."

"What mad game be this?" muttered the old groom, when he was left to himself. "Black Ivory"—this was the name Simon had given to the hunter—"wants a lot o'

knowin'. All right when you *do* know, but it's the first time Master Jack's put his legs across the nag. If the two of 'em bean't o' the same mind look out for mischief."

Jack came back booted and spurred and clad in a tight-fitting coat that reached to his heels and a low crowned hat with a broad brim. He looked the dashing horseman from head to foot and Stephen nodded approval.

Black Ivory seemed to scent the pleasure in store for him. The feel of the saddle told him as much. He was pawing the ground impatiently and when Jack introduced himself by patting his neck and addressing him as an old friend, he tossed his head in acquiescence.

"We shall get on all right together," said Jack.

"Aye, it du look like it. But don't 'ee use the whip. 'E wunna stand it."

"Just like me," rejoined Jack lightly.

He placed his foot in the stirrup and vaulted into the saddle, Steve standing at the horse's head the while, though there was no necessity.

"I don't know what time I shall be back, Steve, but you needn't bother. I'll stable him."

Black Ivory needed neither spur nor whip. Jack rode him out of the yard with a light rein. The first thing to do was to put the animal on good terms with himself, and by the ready way in which he broke into an easy gallop, it was clear that this first step was accomplished.

The young moon was rising and old Stephen stood at the stable gate watching the fast receding figures of horse and rider until the clopperty clopperty ring of Black Ivory's hoofs on the hard road ceased.

"He be a taakin' the Bath Road," muttered the old groom. "What's in the lad's mind? Wenches or cards?

It's all one to hot blood. Aye—aye. I weer the same myself at his age. He—he!"

And with a chuckle Steve went back to his horses.

It was just the night for a ride. There had been no rain for at least a week and the road, like others in those days, not too good, though the highways to Bath were the best in the kingdom, was fairly hard and even, for the ruts of winter had been worn down by the ponderous wide-wheeled wagons.

Jack felt he was astride a fine roadster and maybe Black Ivory had an equally good opinion of his rider. Anyhow a certain sympathy had sprung up between man and horse and Jack let his steed take his own pace.

The first three miles were covered in less than a quarter of an hour. The country was open, low hedges separating the road from wide spreading arable land. At first Jack was conscious of little else besides a sense of glorious exhilaration. The keen air, the rushing through space in the exercise of muscular power were sufficiently pleasurable. Then came the deep shadows of a wood on either side and the horse of his own accord dropped into a gentle canter.

There may have been something in the sudden blackness which sent Jack Ralstone thinking. He was recalling his quarrel with his stepfather and the more vivid the remembrance of the scene became, the more he wondered at his own restraint, for the old man's overbearing manner and offensive words were as much as flesh and blood could bear.

Human nature instinctively leans towards the principle of compensation. Let the balance be upset and one's desire to restore things to their normal level must be

satisfied at all costs. Jack considered he had not been treated justly, and the more he brooded over it the more he yearned to have it out with something or somebody. Half a dozen stinging retorts came into his mind, which if he had only thought of at the time would have given him at all events a verbal victory.

"Instead of that I slunk off. Of course I know very well that if I hadn't there'd have been a devil of a row, but that isn't what old Halstead believes. His idea is that when it comes to a push I daren't stand up to him. If I was of his flesh and blood it would be different, but as I'm not —well, we'll see."

And unintentionally he emphasised his words with a smart blow on Black Ivory's flank. Instantly the insulted animal reared, and Jack, taken unawares, was nearly thrown. He also narrowly escaped smashing his head against a low overhanging bough. The horse evidently was very nervous and sensitive. Jack could feel him quivering from head to foot; it was as much as he could do to calm him. The slightest thing would have sent him bolting, and the chances were a hundred to one he would end by butting himself and his rider into some tree.

At last by dint of exhortations and coaxings Black Ivory condescended to proceed like a reasonable animal, and the mingled din of twigs crashing beneath hoofs, of snorting, and of Jack's loud-voiced remonstrances died away. The end of the wood was not far off and the rest of the road was traversed almost in silence, the soddened leaves of winter furnishing a carpet soft enough to muffle Black Ivory's tread.

Just as the horse emerged into the open the silence was broken by a cry of pain. The voice was a woman's.

Jack halted and listened. It came again. He seemed to distinguish the word, "Help!"

Stunted hawthorn, holly bushes, tall withered bracken and brambles extended some little distance beyond the wood and then stretched an expanse of common on either side. The cry came from the right hand and he could see a yellow glare through the thickets. He rode on. The glare issued from the open door of a travelling caravan. On the ground about a yard from the caravan he could see two dark forms in violent movement. One was that of a man, the other a woman. The man had a riding whip in his hand with which he was mercilessly belabouring a woman who was vainly struggling to release her arm from the fellow's grasp.

Jack's blood boiled at the sight. He dashed on to the common, reined in his horse and shouted:

"Stop that, you coward!"

"Mind your own business," the fellow retorted, with a few ornamental oaths thrown in.

"It *is* my business. I'll make it so."

The next moment he had leaped from his horse and was striding towards the ruffian. At last his chance of getting rid of his bad blood and making things square between himself and the world—otherwise his stepfather—had come.

The fellow ill-using the woman was stiffly built, with a head round as a bullet and a neck like a bullock's. His sleek hair was cut short and his prominent straight square chin and thin lips indicated obstinacy and cruelty. He had the high cheek protuberance of the pugilist, and his small, glittering eyes were deep in their sockets and well protected by an abnormal development of the

lower part of the frontal bone. He was clean shaven save a fringe of whisker descending from his hair as far as the lobe of the ear.

Jack Ralstone rapidly noted these characteristics. To his mind the fellow looked like a bruiser; he might be an ugly antagonist if it came to fisticuffs. Bruiser or not, Jack went for him. The whip descended more savagely than ever, as if to give a practical reply to a stranger's threat of interference. Ralstone seized it, and with a dexterous jerk of the wrist—a lesson learned in the fencing school—wrenched it from the ruffian's grasp before it reached its mark, and hurled it half a dozen yards through the air.

"Curse your meddling. Take that," roared the bruiser, with a volley of imprecations.

Flinging the girl aside, he sent in a straight blow, which, if it had found Jack's face, would have felled him as by the kick of a horse. But Ralstone expected something of the kind, and he ducked in the very nick of time. The fellow's arm went over his shoulder, and he was able to reply with a vicious hit on the point of the chin. The man staggered. Jack's fist had caught him on one of a boxer's vulnerable points.

The man stood for a moment motionless, as if amazed at the failure of his attack. Then, thrusting forward his head with a jerk, his arms straight down, his fists clenched, he glared savagely at Ralstone, like a tiger defrauded of his prey.

"Oh, you want a hammerin', do you?" he growled. "Then we'll peel, and you shall have it in style. Theer won't be much o' the swell left in you when you're knocked out. It'll take your mother all her time to know

you after I'm done wi' you."

He tugged at his muffler, stripped off his thick coat and tucked up his ragged shirt-sleeves. Jack saw he was in for a real "mill," and he followed suit, throwing his long coat over Black Ivory's back. The horse was profoundly indifferent to his rider's coming ordeal, and was quietly nibbling at the short grass.

It was the first time Jack Ralstone had fought with his bare knuckles since he was a lad. He had had, however, a good training in fisticuffs at Eton, and was reckoned one of the best at the game, and when he fought a bargee lad, two years older than himself, and taller and stronger, in a meadow bordering the Thames towing path, and beat him, he was the acknowledged champion of the school.

It was strange that, while his nerves were "jumpy" when he was in the wood, fretting and fuming over the scene with the squire, now that he was in danger of a "hammering," as the fellow put it, they were as taut as tightly stretched whipcord. His brain was cool, and he had perfect command over himself.

During the process of peeling he had time to run his eye over the "points" of his enemy. The pale moonlight fell upon the man's face and revealed puffy cheeks and watery eyes, which told of strong ale and gin. Jack also noticed that elsewhere he was not in the pink of condition. There was far too much fat in the region of the waistcoat. This decided the tactics he meant to adopt.

The two combatants presented a strong contrast. Jack was quite four inches taller and much longer in the reach. He was as lithe and active as a deer, but he had not exchanged half a dozen blows before he realised that he should need all his activity, for the other was as tricky

as a monkey, and had no scruple in abandoning the rules of the prize ring. He was bent upon knocking out the "swell" by fair means or foul.

Jack went at him at first a bit too hurriedly, trying to smash him up right off. A heavy fall, he knew, would wind the fellow, and that would be worth any number of blows. However, at first he had to hit where he could, and, seeing an opening for an upper cut where he had struck him before—on the point of the chin—he went for it. But as he led off his antagonist bobbed like lightning to one side, and Jack's hand slipped over the man's well-greased poll like a pat of butter across the bottom of a hot frying-pan, and Jack got an awkward dint in the ribs that made him wince. It was evident that his opponent knew the game, and was not to be caught a second time.

The man saw he had got home, and made a rush to repeat the dose. Owing to his inferiority in height and reach, body blows were easier than attempts at Jack's head, well thrown back as it was. Jack pulled himself together, and began to keep away, making the best of his superiority at out-fighting and watching for an opportunity to retaliate. Meanwhile it was all dodging and foot work, and he was dancing about so as to tire his man. As they were not within the confines of a twenty-four foot ring, the effect of being kept constantly on the go soon had its effect on his antagonist, whose want of condition was beginning to tell upon him.

He was starting to breathe heavily. He had to labour to keep up with Jack; he was getting weak on his pins, and, one foot chancing to slip on a hard and slippery bit of turf, Jack saw his chance and got in a fierce one on the solar plexus, known as the "mark," close to the midriff.

The man was bent with pain, and before he could recover himself Jack had hurled him to the ground. He pitched on to his head, and there he lay like a log.

At the same moment an old hag who, unseen by Jack, had been standing at the door of the caravan watching the fight all the time, rushed to the prostrate man, and between her revilings of Jack Ralstone for "killing" her "boy" she raised her voice in a violent screech for "Mike!"

Jack, seeing he was in no further danger, looked round for the woman for whom he had fought. He could see her on the other side of Black Ivory near the horse's head. As a matter of fact, she was holding the bridle. He ran to her.

"Thank you, sir—oh, thank you," he heard her say breathlessly; "but I almost wish you hadn't done it."

"What d'you mean?"

"Jerry'll half kill me if he gets hold of me again. But I'm not going to stay. Thanks to you, I've got the chance to get away, and I'll take it."

She turned as if to run, but Jack caught hold of her shawl. It had slipped down to her waist. The upper part of her bodice was torn and the contour of her shoulders and bust was revealed. The lines were finely cut and as full of harmonious curves as those of a piece of old Greek statuary.

She was little more than a slip of a girl. A wealth of black hair, slightly coarse in texture, streamed over her face and back, and through its entanglement gleamed a pair of large lustrous eyes, dark as midnight. The rest of the face was hardly distinguishable.

"You want to get away, my lass, do you?" muttered Jack between his set teeth. "By the lord you shall. Up

with you. Quick! You're but a featherweight. My horse'll take the pair of us."

She understood him. A toss of the head, a swift glance of her big eyes, which seemed to go straight to his heart, and one of her feet was planted in the stirrup. He held out his hand for the support of the other foot as she sprang upwards, a swish of her scanty skirt, a momentary glance of a slender shapely ankle, and she was on the horse's back. Jack instantly vaulted into the saddle.

"Arms round my waist," said he rapidly. "Clip me tightly, and away we go."

So in pillion fashion they darted off, Black Ivory as keen as his riders.

At that moment came a flash amid the gorse, the sharp report of a gun was heard, and a whistle followed, close to Jack's ear. It was the rush of the bullet from the fowling piece of the poacher whom the old woman had summoned.

"All right, my girl," laughed Jack. "A miss is as good as a mile!"

CHAPTER II

Vanished!

Another shot came—wider of the mark than the first. The fowling piece was evidently double-barrelled and doubtless faulty, or the poacher was a bad shot. The matter was not of the slightest consequence, for Black Ivory tore along at his hardest. In a few minutes he was out of range.

Jack felt strangely elated. The "scrap" with the "bruiser" had strung up his sinews and tested his nerve and skill as a boxer, and he had come through the ordeal triumphantly. He interpreted the pressure of the girl's arms, the close contact of her supple, yielding body, as a fitting reward for his prowess.

For the first two miles neither spoke. The clatter of the horse's hoofs made too much noise for talk to be heard, and somehow the singular combination of his first essay as a knight rescuing a damsel in distress savoured so much of romance that his brain was bewildered. The Waverley novels were all the rage. Jack's tastes were not wholly confined to sport, and he had devoured Sir Walter's picturesque descriptions of besieged castles, tournaments, hand-to-hand fights and mediaeval bouts gen-

erally, with delight. At that moment in imagination he was Ivanhoe, or the Knight Templar; he did not care which. The point was that he was carrying off a girl, where to he did not know, nor did he trouble.

One thought certainly did haunt him more than the rest. What was the girl like? He had only seen her eyes and the tip of a rounded chin. The head was shapely and the hair abundant, while her form—well, all argued in favour of beauty, but who could say? Supposing she were pock-marked, too frequent a disfigurement in those days, or had but one eye or was possessed of a pug-nose, and maybe had lost a front tooth or two? But all this was impossible, so he contended, and he dismissed the disquieting supposition with scorn. He was filled with the spirit of chivalry. At the same time he could not help wondering whether he would have interfered so heroically had she been old or ugly. He hoped his conduct would have been the same.

Black Ivory had exhausted his "breather," and had dropped into a canter to get his second wind. Jack allowed him to take his own course. He was moving softly over a long strip of grass by the roadside. The going here was easier, and the bumping over the ruts had not been too comfortable, either for the gentleman in the saddle or for the lady riding pillion.

"How are you doing?" said he over his shoulder. "Pretty snug? A rough ride, wasn't it? You were jumping up and down like a parched pea in a frying-pan."

"I couldn't help it. I hope I don't inconvenience you. I shall never forget your bravery and kindness," he heard her whisper in his ear.

Her head was very close to his. But that was not of

the slightest consequence. Indeed, he rather liked it. She had slightly loosened her arms. He wished she hadn't. It was a novel sensation to be conscious of her heart-beats. The rapid movement, the oscillation, the bumping, had sent the blood galloping through her veins and through his too.

"Bravery—oh, there wasn't much in that," he rejoined in a careless, slightly boastful tone. "I was rather glad to have a chance of seeing how I could manage my fists in real earnest. As for kindness—well, I don't see what was to be done other than what I did. Suppose we talk about the next step. I reckon we're now about eight miles from Bath. What are you going to do when we get there?"

"I don't know."

"Got any friends there?"

"No."

"Well, I can't plant you in Bath without any idea as to what is to become of you, can I?"

"Oh, you needn't trouble about me any more. You've done quite enough. Please put me down now."

"What for? Would you rather not go on to Bath?"

"It doesn't matter much where I go."

"Doesn't it?" thought Jack. "What a queer thing to say. She speaks well—like a lady. How the deuce did she come to be mixed up with these tramps?"

"Then you may as well go on with me to Bath," said he aloud.

"As you like. Only I warn you that when we get there we must say good-bye."

"So we will when the time comes. We haven't reached the good-byeing point yet."

They relapsed into silence. Jack Ralstone did not want

to embarrass her with questions, though he was burning to know more about her. Besides, the strip of grass had come to an end; Black Ivory was once more plunging amid the ruts and the bumping had begun again.

In half an hour the lights of Bath were just visible. Nothing more than a faint glare, for gas had not then been introduced into the city, though the new illuminant had been made use of in many of the main London streets.

There were two high roads between Bristol and Bath. Jack had taken what was called the upper one, and for a particular reason—it entered Bath bordering the Barton Fields, an ornamental enclosure overlooked by Royal Crescent, an imposing row of stone houses in the Italian style, favoured by the Prince Regent and his architect, Nash.

In Royal Crescent, Lady Barbara Dacre was lodging for a course of the waters, recommended by her London physician, which in her case meant balls, routs, masquerades, concerts, the theatre, card-playing and the like frivolities.

Jack drew rein at the quiet-looking inn in the outskirts. He was parched with thirst, partly the effect of his strenuous encounter and partly due to his gallop. Black Ivory had to be watered, and he did not doubt that the girl would find some stimulant welcome. He shouted and an ostler came to the head of the horse.

The man cast a glance of surprise at the rider and his burden. The contrast between the two justified his look. A fine gentleman—there was no doubt about this by Jack's air of authority and the imperious tone of his voice—and a poorly dressed girl not much better than a

vagrant. The ostler would have been reminded of King Cophetua and the beggar had he known the story.

Jack sprang to the ground and helped the girl to dismount.

"Thank you kindly, sir," said she; "and now please we'll part."

"Will we? Don't be in a hurry, lass. I——"

He stopped, hardly knowing what to say. The extraordinary loveliness of the girl had struck him spellbound.

Her figure was as attractive as her face. Although below middle height, she was perfectly proportioned and, slim though she was, there was no suggestion of scragginess. All was soft, yielding, harmonious. Spontaneity and grace marked every movement in a way that partook of the sunny clime of Spain and Italy. Anyway, Jack, when he had time to think over the matter, was sure that foreign blood was in her veins.

In some wonderful way, known only to women, she had arranged her hair—at least it was thrown back fairly neatly each side of her forehead, smoothed behind her head. She had probably found a chance to do it when Black Ivory was cantering over the strip of turf. Of course it had been hurriedly done, and a rebel tress or two had escaped and gave a wild picturesqueness to her beauty.

A face as delicately outlined as a cameo was revealed. The eyes were so large, so lustrous, that at the first glance one lost sight of the finely cut, full lips, the slightly aquiline nose, the round chin cleft by a little dimple, the sweeping line from the small ear defining the lower jaw. Pride and courage were written in the nose, the firm lips and chin, and the dark eyes looked as if they could flash

into anger as readily as they could melt into tenderness. The features were those of a girl born for adventure. It was impossible to associate them with anything humdrum or commonplace.

Jack was fascinated. He stared at the girl so fixedly that she cast down her eyes and her clear olive cheeks crimsoned.

"I beg your pardon," he exclaimed involuntarily.

"I don't see why you should. You've done nothing to offend me."

"I hope not. You see, I was so taken by surprise," said he, with an ingenuous confusion. "I did not expect ... well," he went on desperately, "we mustn't part like this. You forget I never saw you before an hour ago—didn't know you were in the world."

The ghost of a smile crossed the lips.

"All the more reason why you should forget me. You've done me a great service, sir, and I thank you sincerely."

She put out her hand, and he took it, but it was not with the intention of saying good-bye.

"I pulled up here to offer you some refreshment—you must need it. The house is a quiet one. I know the landlord. I often ride to Bath."

As he uttered the last words he felt the prickings of conscience. Lady Barbara Dacre came into his mind. It was to see her that he rode so often to Bath. This, indeed, was his mission to-night. Because he was betrothed, should speaking to other women be debarred him? But this was more than speaking—it was fascination. He had no business to be tempted by a beautiful face and to forget his betrothed. For Lady Barbara was beautiful too,

but in a style very different from that of this interesting stranger.

These scruples passed from his mind almost as soon as they entered it. Youth is not given either to make or weigh nice distinctions. It is impulsive, impressionable, or it is not youth.

"Some port wine negus—you must. Please."

He put his arm round her waist to urge her. She gently disengaged herself.

"No. I can't go into that place with you. I should disgrace so fine a gentleman. What would your friend the landlord think of you—of me? That I was some trull you had picked up on the roadside. It's impossible."

"I'm sorry," said Jack penitently. "Yes, I suppose you're right, but, you see, I only saw your face. I never looked at your dress. Forgive me. Anyhow you must have something. It's a chilly night, and you're none too warmly clothed—I apologise for again alluding to your dress."

"It doesn't matter. I'm used to what I'm wearing, and as I can't get any other, I put up with it. I know I look like a beggar."

Jack was of opinion that a more delightful figure in rags and tatters he had never seen in his life. The wonderful thing was that with all her shabbiness there was no suggestion of degradation. She seemed to be one of those natural daughters of Eve who have the faculty of adapting themselves to any kind of costume and always looking handsome in it.

"But the port wine negus," he rejoined obstinately, "and a biscuit. I'll bring them out to you here."

Perhaps with a view not to appear ungrateful, rather

than that she needed anything, the girl raised no objection, and he darted off and entered the snug bar parlour of the "Angel and Sun." Half a dozen men were talking animatedly, but in subdued voices, and when Jack came in they ceased their conversation and glanced at him askance.

In the centre of the group was the landlord, a burly man in shirt-sleeves and apron, with a face as expressionless as wood. He brightened, however, when he recognised his customer.

"Evenin', squire," said he, with his forefinger at the lovelock with which his forehead was adorned. "Boys, this is Squire Jack, as clean a fighter as ever stepped. I've seen him box. No going down wi' him to sneak out o' punishment."

"That'll do, Ben Stone. None of your flattery," laughed Jack. "I haven't come for that, but for some port wine negus. I've got a friend outside in the cold waiting for it, so be quick."

"You shall have it, sir, as soon as the fire can heat it. But I've got summat to tell 'ee. Danged if you haven't come in the very nick. There's no need to stop a ta-aking, neighbours. Squire Jack's one of us and what we tell him munna go no further. Squire, here's Tom Belcher comed straight fro' Lunnon, an' what about, think 'ee?" And Ben Stone nodded and winked mysteriously.

A glow of admiration went over Jack Ralstone. To be introduced to Tom Belcher, who, if not so redoubtable a hero as his brother Jim, was yet a famous fighter, to shake him by the hand was an honour indeed.

Tom Belcher was a Bristol man, and naturally swore hard and fast by his fellow citizen, Bill Neate. Tom

Belcher kept the Castle Tavern in Holborn, in its later days known as the "Napier." It was said that no man knew better how to get up a purse, make a match or back a man than Tom Belcher. He had come to Somersetshire on very special business, as Jack was soon to learn.

"Tom Spring's a rare good 'un I admit," said Belcher cautiously, "and it ain't for me to say a word against him, but I'm Bill Neate's man an' I back him thick an' thin. As Ben Stone stands surety for you, sir, p'raps you'd like to know as we've fixed up a place for the ring, and not so very fur away from here."

"What," exclaimed Jack joyfully, "in Somersetshire?"

"Oh, blow Somerset. Your Somerset bench o' justices are a set o' noodles. They're throwing thousands o' pounds away as 'ud have been brought into the county if they'd ha' let the fight come off in Bill's native place. No, we've pitched upon a likely spot in Hampshire, not more'n a mile from Weyhill."

Belcher dropped his voice almost to a whisper as he let out this important piece of information. The farce of stopping prize fights was sometimes gone through if direct information came to the ears of the authorities, otherwise, more often than not they shut their ears and their eyes too, to exhibitions of what was then believed to be the national sport.

"There won't be any hitch then," said Jack. "The Hampshire magistrates are not so pigheaded as our big-wigs. And the day, is that fixed too?"

"No, but Stone'll know it as soon as anybody. I take it, sir, you're putting a few guineas on Neate?"

"Well, no," rejoined Jack frankly, "I rather believe in Spring."

Something like a snort of contempt and incredulity went up. They were all in Neate's favour and prepared to back their favourite.

"Then, sir, with all due respect to you as a gentleman, I won't say as your judgment mayn't be right, but I'll make bold to assert as you're in a fair way to lose your coin."

"I'll take the risk of that, Mr. Belcher," rejoined Jack cheerfully, "and I'll go further. I'm open to back Spring at this moment up to any reasonable amount. How's the betting in London?"

"Five to one on Neate."

"Good. Is any gentleman willing to take me five to one in tens?"

"That'll suit my books," said a tall, wiry man whom Jack knew to be a wealthy grazier of the neighbourhood. "What d'ye say, Mr. Ralstone—up to fifty pounds?"

"I don't mind, Dillnot," returned Jack carelessly, and booked the bet.

"Who's the youngster?" whispered a wizen-faced, high cheek-boned man of mean appearance despite his good clothes. "Is he good for paying up?"

"Good for paying up," growled Dillnot, to whom the question was put. "If he bean't, his stepfather, Simon Halstead be. Simon's rolling in gold they say and dotes on the lad, though he bean't his flesh an' blood. Young Ralstone can't do no wrong in the old man's eyes."

"If you're still on, sir, I'll take you up to one hundred," he said.

"And who may you be?" said Jack coldly. He did not like the look of the man. "I don't care to bet with strangers."

"My name's Weare, and my address is Lyons Inn. As for money, if that's your doubt, I can satisfy you."

He thrust his hand within the breast of his coat, pulled out a pocket-book and opened it with a flourish. It was stuffed with bank-notes. He replaced the books, put his hand in his breeches pocket and produced a leather bag. On untying the string it was shown to be full of guineas.

"Is that evidence enough that I shall pay my debts? They're as good gold as was ever minted."

He shook out a handful and rang one on the table ostentatiously.

"What about that sound? Something like music, eh?"

"You're a fool, Mr. Weare, to flash your gold and notes about like that," remonstrated the landlord. "It'll get you into trouble one of these fine days. Gentlemen of the High Toby game bean't stamped out yet."

"Your highwaymen are not likely to tackle me," rejoined Weare contemptuously. "I never travel alone, and they daren't attack stage coaches nowadays. But about this bet, young gentleman? Are you on?"

"If you like," said Jack, shrugging his shoulders.

"Up to one hundred pounds?"

"Up to five hundred pounds. I don't care."

Jack Ralstone was netted by the other's boasting manner, and would have gone on to a thousand pounds if need be.

"No, a hundred's enough for me—with a stranger."

Jack's brow darkened, but he said nothing. He booked the bet and looked round defiantly.

The men clearly thought a pigeon had descended among them. and a few more challenges were thrown out and accepted. Jack Ralstone had plunged to over one

thousand pounds—if luck went against him.

"What about your port wine negus, Squire," put in the landlord. "It's been hotted five minutes and more."

Jack started. In his enthusiasm over Tom Spring, and in the excitement of betting, he had clean forgotten the girl who was waiting in the cold. He was horribly angry with himself, and seizing the tankard and a wineglass he hurried out.

She was not to be seen anywhere.

Joe, the ostler, was moving about with a stable lantern. Jack hailed him.

"She went off soon arter your honour wen' inside."

"The deuce she did. Which way did she go?"

"I dunno, sir The wench warn't aught to me, an' thinks I, the Squire'll be main glad to rid himself of her."

"You fool," shouted Jack. "I've a mind to give you a hiding for your stupidity. What business have you to think about what I'm glad or sorry for?"

He was intensely angry; stamped his foot and slashed his riding whip.

"She seemed a bit of a wagabone, an' I thought——"

"The devil take your thoughts. Which way did she turn? Come, you must know that."

"Noa, I doan't. If your honour had only told me, I'd ha' kept her. She raced away quite sudden like, wi'out sayin' good night nor nuthen. It were arter I told her your name. She asked me who you was. That's Squire Jack Halstead, I says. 'Halstead,' says she, wi' a sort o' squark, as if she was frightened, 'not the son of Simon Halstead?' The same, I says, and with that she swishes round and does a bolt like a mad filly."

It was strange, and the ostler's story furnished no solution of the mystery. Why should the mention of his stepfather's name produce so singular an effect upon the girl?

"What on earth made you say my name was Halstead, you infernal blunderer?" suddenly broke out Jack. "You know as well as I do that it's Ralstone, and that Simon Halstead isn't my father."

The ostler scratched his grizzled head. He hadn't any particular reason to give, excepting that his honour was generally called Squire Jack Halstead at the "Angel and Sun."

Jack Ralstone came to the conclusion that it would be a waste of time and temper to find any further fault with the man who was little more than a dull clod, and he strode back into the inn, emptying the tankard of negus on the ground on the way, so that he should have to give no explanation to the landlord.

It was due to him as a gentleman to spend some money for "the good of the house," and he called for a couple of bottles of wine, of which everybody had his share. Dillnot was not to be outdone by the young squire, and when the two bottles were emptied, he ordered two more. By the time Jack left the inn to finish the night at Bath, he was in the mood to be very jolly or very quarrelsome, according to circumstance. He decided that to walk the rest of the way, about a mile, rather than ride, would steady his nerves. So he stabled Black Ivory at the "Angel and Sun," and proceeded on foot to "Royal Crescent."

CHAPTER III

Two Men and a Woman

"Her ladyship's out, sir. She's gone to the Masquerade at the Assembly Rooms," was the footman's answer to Ralstone's inquiry for Lady Barbara.

Jack's temper took the direction of quarrelsomeness. What business had the lady he was going to marry to attend a masquerade without giving him the chance of accompanying her? She might easily have written. With whom had she gone?

His brow darkened. Until this moment he hadn't cared very much where Lady Barbara went, either with him or without him. The truth was he had given her very little thought. She always struck him as rather cold and haughty, and he'd never taken the trouble to attempt to thaw her iciness. Owing to the arrangement between Simon and the Duke of Endsleigh, there had been very little wooing on his part. He had been contented to accept the situation. There was something novel in the sensation of being engaged to be married, and at the same time retaining his freedom. He was rather inclined to laugh at the idea of a man being tied to a lady's apron strings.

But now? A curious pang had shot through his heart.

For the first time in his life he knew what jealousy meant. Why was he so changed? Lady Barbara had, he knew full well, gone to balls, routs and the theatre without him, and why not to a masquerade?

Jack could not explain why he had suddenly felt so angry, and he did not attempt to find an explanation. It might have been due to the effects of Ben Stone's heady port, but the reason was of no consequence. All that was plain to him was that he was in the mood for love-making, and he had looked forward to a few pleasant moments with his betrothed. He had had none up to the present—that is to say, there had been no sweetheart exchanges between them.

Had Jack Ralstone ever bothered himself about the psychology of love, he might have found a cause for his perplexity in some disturbance of the nerve centres, brought about by the sudden intrusion into his life of the fascinating dark-eyed girl, whose face still haunted him, despite his pursuit of Lady Barbara. Because he had fought in her defence she had been brought very near to him. Had he had the same opportunity over Lady Barbara, it might have infused that romance which would have made his engagement interesting. But he hadn't. Everything had gone on so placidly that he sometimes felt bored.

But not to-night. He had made the discovery that women were highly provocative, even when they did not intend to be. It was their way, but Jack Ralstone was too little acquainted with that way to realise what he was up against. Anyhow, his humour just then was to assert his rights. Lady Barbara was his, and as he had been vexed by the disappearance of a pair of black eyes, why

shouldn't he console himself with a pair of blue ones? So he strode away at a smart pace to the Assembly Rooms.

The approaches to this favourite resort of fashionable Bath were blocked up by chariots, family coaches, sedan chairs. Footmen jostled each other, coachmen swore at their rebellious horses, chairmen quarrelled, link-boys yelled. Crowds of humble folk had assembled to have a sight of the "quality," and the Assembly Rooms attendants and peace officers were busy in keeping back the rabble, so as to allow the fine ladies and their cavaliers to descend from their vehicles and, enter the vestibule in comfort.

Jack Ralstone easily elbowed his way through the crowd and passed in without question. He tackled one of the M.C.s in the ante-chamber outside the octagonal reception-room. He satisfied the official that he was of sufficient standing in county society to be admitted and disappeared into the room set apart for providing dominoes and masks. The rules as to dress were relaxed for masquerades, and he wore his riding hat. It went very well with his dark blue domino.

The festivities had not long commenced, and the reception-room was crowded. Not all the ladies wore dominoes, but every one was masked. The short-waisted dresses, if not so low cut in the corsage as in the days of the directoire, were yet sufficiently daring. Knee breeches had given place to trousers, in spite of Almack's lady autocrats who, some ten years previous, had denied admission to the Duke of Wellington because of his wearing the objectionable nether garments introduced by the Regent after much controversy, but they had not wholly disappeared. Jack's riding breeches and boots,

visible, despite his domino, were, however, inadmissible, and he was stopped at the entrance of the ball-room by one of the M.C.s, who, pointing to the young man's legs, politely but severely remarked that his dress was not suitable for dancing.

"Possibly I shan't dance," was Jack's answer.

"That makes no difference. I cannot admit you. The rules are rigid in such a case."

Jack knew this perfectly well, but it had not occurred to him until brought to his notice.

"What am I to do? I particularly want to see a lady who I know is in the room."

"I regret that you should he disappointed, sir, but it must he evident to you that the regulations cannot be infringed."

"I shall remain where I am until I see her."

"As you please. I'm not quite sure whether you ought even to remain in the reception-room dressed as you are."

Jack bit his lip, but he had to content himself with a protest.

"If I allow you to stay here, you must give me your word as a gentleman that you will not go an inch into the ball-room."

"Oh, you may have my word."

The M.C. bowed and walked away.

That day seemed bent on being full of annoyances and disappointments. Jack moved a little distance from the door, as dancers were going in and out. He paced up and down, now and again casting a glance at the gaiety in which he was not permitted to participate. The minuet, though maintained longer in Bath than in London, had been voted old-fashioned. The Scottish reel, fashionable

in the early days of the Regency, had died out; country dances had lost their popularity, and in 1823 the French quadrille was the rage.

With vexation and anger in his heart, contending one against the other, Jack Ralstone watched the dancers. The "setting to partners," the "*chassez croisez*" did not interest him. The caperings in the elaborate evolutions of "*La Trenise,*" otherwise the fourth figure in those days of the quadrille, when the gentlemen had to execute a *pas seul*, not a little embarrassing to the nervous performer, excited his contempt.

Gleaming shoulders, round arms, glimpses of white bosoms, disclosed by the loose, short-waisted dresses, the whirling of supple forms, more or less graceful, did not rouse his admiration. Women had, for the time being, lost their charm. He was at war with Eve. She was created for the irritation of man.

For all that he tried his hardest to distinguish Lady Barbara. He fancied he ought to be able to pick out her tall Juno-like figure, her rich auburn hair and swimming movements amid a thousand women. But he failed, and this increased his ill-temper.

The quadrille came to an end. The ladies were conducted to the rout seats ranged round the walls, to the ante-rooms for ices and negus and lemonade, and a buzz of talk and laughter succeeded the sliding of feet and the swish of skirts. A few couples were promenading. Two or three of the dancers, feeling the heat and choking from the dust and powder ascending from the well-chalked floor, had shifted their masks.

One couple was approaching the entrance. The lady was still masked. The gentleman had removed his. Ral-

stone had known this gentleman perfectly well in London. He was Sir Phineas Tenbury, a captain in the Guards. Tenbury had, as a subaltern, fought at Waterloo, and since then had made a reputation as a man about town. He was a notorious evil liver, was a reckless gambler, a crack shot and a skilled duellist. His intrigues were numberless, and it was perilous to a lady's reputation to be seen often in Sir Phineas Tenbury's company.

Sir Phineas's companion had the brilliant colouring and the wondrously clear skin characteristic of the Somersetshire women. She was tall and Nature had dealt generously with her figure. Her neck and bust were superb; her arms beautifully moulded. Her hair was of the tawny shade between auburn and brown, without the slightest tinge of the brick-dust hue. Jack Ralstone's pulses leaped. She could be no other than Lady Barbara. But with Sir Phineas Tenbury? Surely her ladyship would not descend to dance with so profound a profligate as "hell rake" Tenbury!

Sir Phineas was smiling and whispering. If looks could tell anything, he was beseeching a favour. He was gazing ardently into the deep violet-blue eyes, which, seen through the apertures of the mask, were delightfully entrancing. Jack had never known that soft, bewitching gleam in them which he now beheld.

The favour was granted. She shrugged her round shoulders coquettishly and slipped off her mask. She was then within a yard or so of the doorway. It was she —Lady Barbara Dacre.

Ralstone made a hasty step forward and also removed his mask. Their eyes met. His were blazing with wrath; hers suddenly went cold and steely. His presence clearly

was not acceptable.

"I fear I'm here at a wrong moment. I beg your ladyship's pardon," said Jack, bowing low.

"Not at all," rejoined Lady Barbara, flirting her fan haughtily. "How can you be? I see you haven't come to dance."

Her eyes went over his dress and he wished he hadn't spoken. He felt at a horrible disadvantage, especially, as with the corner of his eye, he had caught sight of Tenbury's sneering lip.

"Does that matter?" he blurted out.

"Hardly. Has anything happened that you should ride to Bath post haste, as I presume you have by the mud on your coat."

"A tussle with a foot-pad, maybe," put in Sir Phineas sarcastically. "A mouse under the eye suggests that Mr. Ralstone came off second best."

The evidence of the fight with the bruiser was another thing which Jack had forgotten when he presented himself for admission. No wonder the M.C. was scandalised, though he was far too polite to allude to the disfigurement. Sir Phineas had no such scruple. Apparently he wanted to lower Ralstone in the eyes of his betrothed. But Jack was not in the mood to pass over Tenbury's insolence.

"I shall be pleased to go through a similar performance with you, Sir Phineas. It will satisfy me if I serve you as I served my antagonist, who, you may like to know, was no foot pad, but was a fellow, I fancy, who knew something about a twenty-four foot ring."

"Then it was a mill," drawled the baronet, sticking his glass in his eye. "At a boxing match, I presume?"

"Whether at a boxing booth or at Castellani's, I believe I've managed to hold my own. You know best about Castellani's."

Tenbury's face darkened. Jack's reference to Castellani's fencing-rooms went home. Sir Phineas had had a bout at foils with the young squire, and through underrating the skill of his opponent had had his guard broken down and suffered "a palpable hit."

"If you gentlemen desire to quarrel, I'd better leave you to it," interposed Lady Barbara pettishly.

"There's no necessity. I don't quarrel before ladies," said Sir Phineas with a sweeping bow. "If Mr. Ralstone has any grievance against me, or imagines I have affronted—"

"There's no imagination," put in Jack quickly. "It's a question of fact. But, like you, I shouldn't think of wrangling before ladies, and, least of all, in the presence of Lady Barbara Dacre. If I want you, sir, I know perfectly well where to find you."

The altercation was overpowered by the orchestra striking up, and the M.C.s hurried hither and thither on the look-out for partners for disconsolate "wallflowers." At the sound of the music, a melody in a sort of swinging see-saw measure, Sir Phineas turned to Lady Barbara and offered her his arm.

"Our waltz. You promised it to me, you remember. I'm longing for the pleasure. There's nothing to detain you, I'm sure."

"No. Mr. Ralstone owes me an explanation and an apology, but both can wait," said the offended beauty coldly.

"Oh, you shall have the first and the second, too, if

need be," retorted Jack, whose rage was rapidly mounting to a white heat.

Lady Barbara shot him an angry glance. turned on her heel, and Sir Phineas bore her away triumphantly.

Ralstone stood for a minute or so quivering with passion. The sight of his betrothed clinging to Sir Phineas and being whirled about by him rapturously in the much-discussed German waltz, was not to be endured. Though the waltz had been naturalised in England for ten years, it was still looked upon with horror by strait-laced people. Byron satirised it with no effect. The feminine rulers of Almack's, headed by Lady Jersey, favoured it; the "fashionables," male and female, devoted their mornings to whirling a chair about the room to learn the step and measure, and Sheridan's quatrain:

> "In such pure postures our first parents moved,
> While hand in hand thro' Eden's bower they roved,
> Ere Beelzebub, with meaning foul and false
> Turned their poor heads and taught them how to waltz"

was quoted everywhere with much relish.

But to see Tenbury's arm round Lady Barbara's waist—a thing not permitted in any other dance, not even in a quadrille, where the arms were decorously crossed in turning, was for Jack Ralstone an intolerable torture. He rushed to the ante-room, threw down domino and mask, and rewarding the attendant with a generous "vail," fled from the building, doubtful whether the first step to relieve his outraged feelings should be breaking off his en-

gagement with Lady Barbara, or sending a challenge to Sir Phineas.

He walked quickly to the "Angel and Sun," ordered out his horse, and stormed at Ostler Joe for no particular reason other than to let off the steam, and partook of a stirrup-cup.

"If you go on backing Tom Spring, Squire," whispered the landlord, "you'll be landed heavily. There be two or three parties just coom fro' Lunnon by the mail, an' they be nuts on Spring. Now's your chance for hedging. Have a bit on Neate."

"To the devil with hedging and Neate too," growled Jack.

And flinging down his coin for the stirrup-cup—hot brandy and water, with plenty of the first—he strode into the cool night air, vaulted into the saddle, and, forgetful of Stephen's advice not to use the whip, gave Black Ivory a slash across the flanks, the effect of which was to send the horse off at a bolt. Luckily the road was clear, and Jack did not attempt to stop his insulted steed. The animal went at the top of his form for quite a couple of miles before he cooled down.

Like all young men of fortune. Jack had his body-servant. Purvis, his man, was sitting up, though it was past midnight. He heard his master stable the horse, and wondered what sort of mood Master Jack was in.

"If he's as crusty as the old squire, I'll have an ugly time."

And the fore-boding was likely to prove true, to judge by Jack's clouded brow and flushed face. But the young squire said very little. The fact was he was dog-tired. His strained muscles and sinews were beginning to feel the

effect of the bruiser's blows; he had had a fair amount of drink, and the amazing series of vexations of which he had been the victim had depressed his spirits terribly. Hardly had he thrown himself into bed than he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER IV

Blue Eyes or Dark Eyes

Meanwhile Sir Phineas was "making the running," to use his own phrase, with Lady Barbara Dacre. She knew his reputation quite well, but this did not alarm her. She was born to attract men, and roué or innocent made no difference. Sir Phineas Tenbury's mode of love-making flattered her, and flattery was to her second nature.

After the waltz which had so excited Jack Ralstone's ire, they retired to one of the ante-rooms for refreshment. Sir Phineas ordered champagne. They were on a settee which held the two comfortably. As if by chance, the baronet's arm fell behind her. It crept round her waist. She shifted her position, but there was not room to escape. She rarely forgot she was a duke's daughter, and Sir Phineas's sudden familiarity touched her pride.

"I'm afraid, sir, you imagine I'm a milkmaid," said she haughtily.

"Indeed, I've no such impression," he rejoined, not a bit abashed. "No milkmaid ever had your grace, your bewitching smile, your musical voice. Is it my arm that offends you? You did not object while we were waltzing. Why should you do so now that we are sitting? But I

want to please you, Lady Barbara. There!"

He removed his arm, and her disengaged hand—the other was busy with her fan—was swiftly imprisoned in his. She would have drawn it away, but he held it too firmly. An altercation was impossible with so many people about, and she had to submit.

She was not really angry, though she put on the pretence of being so. His masterful self-assertion was not unpleasant. Besides, she was rather curious to see how far his impudence would take him. He noticed with a covert smile how skilfully she hid the locked hands with a movement of her fan.

"I think you're very presumptuous."

"Possibly, but not, I hope, rude. Really, one would think you'd never had a lover, whereas a man of any sense could hardly look into your eyes and not lose himself in their depths."

"Is that meant to be poetic?"

"It's meant to be the truth."

"It sounds like a quotation from a fashionable novel."

"Well, it isn't. I never read the trash."

"Not even Sir Walter Scott?"

"Not even Scott, though I'm told he's quite the rage. But, Lady Barbara, surely we didn't come here to talk about novels?"

"What else should we talk about? It's very interesting."

"Is it the only subject you find interesting when you and young Ralstone are together?"

"I beg you not to introduce Mr. Ralstone's name into our conversation."

"By all means. So laggard a lover can well be left out

of our reckoning. I'll wager he doesn't often discuss the question of love. That's the difference between us."

"I don't care what the difference is," she retorted with rising anger. "I told you not to mention his name."

"And I haven't. I speak only in generalities. Ah, Lady Barbara, if you only knew——"

"Knew what?"

"How beautiful you are when you're put out. Your eyes have never sparkled as they do now—at least, I've never seen them. And your cheeks! I know a score of Court beauties who'd give their finger-tips to have your roses."

Lady Barbara burst into a fit of laughter. Her anger had melted before the fire of compliments.

"You're too extravagant," said she. "Hadn't we better go back? I can hear another waltz beginning."

"Enchanted," he murmured, and, relinquishing her hand after a tender pressure, he led her to the ball-room. The waltz was followed by another and another. Lady Barbara had the names of one or two other partners on her programme, but she ignored them, and Tenbury's fire-eating disposition and his prowess as a duellist were so well known that not one of the men to whom her ladyship had given promises dared dispute his right.

All the same, the young lady's pronounced preference for the baronet was the subject of comment, and the dowagers and chaperons were quite scandalised.

After the midnight supper the gaiety waxed fast and furious, hut it was kept within decent bounds by the vigilant M.C.s. Bath gaiety, even with all the licence of a masquerade, had nothing in it akin to the boisterousness of a London "bal masqué," as such functions were

beginning to be called.

The hour came for Sir Phineas to see Lady Barbara to her chair. By this time he had established his footing. Her ladyship had confided to him that she would be in town in a fortnight or so, and then they could meet often.

Undoubtedly Tenbury had a way with women which they found it difficult to resist. During the exciting moments of the dance he never lost an opportunity of darting into her eyes a glance of passion. Lady Barbara's brain was bewildered and her nerves tingled with sensations quite new to her.

Hitherto she had met no man who had gone beyond the sentimental philandering which then passed current for flirtation. If the age was not quite so artificially emotional as some ten or fifteen years before, when women, and men too, could weep on the slightest provocation, the fashionable part of the world was still fairly portrayed by the "high life" novelist of the period. In reality, her ladyship was not in the least bit sentimental, but she accepted sentimentality, and underneath her coldness she had an ardent temperament which had never been stirred until this eventful evening, and she listened, as Sir Phineas could see quite well, with secret pleasure to his half-veiled protestations of love.

"This has been a never-to-be-forgotten night," her cavalier whispered, as he conducted her through the vestibule to the entrance, where the chairmen were awaiting her. "I swear that you've captured me. I shall be all impatience until we meet again."

"Doubtless that's what you say to every lady," she returned with a swimming glance, followed by a swift drooping of the long silky lashes, which rested for a brief

space on her flushed face. Her bosom heaved, a gentle sigh escaped her, and she returned the ardent clasp of his hand.

"No, indeed, by Jupiter. I'm sick of the simpering, dressed-up, painted women of fashion. You are so different."

She made no answer and she stepped into the sedan, the door of which Sir Phineas closed. He stood at the window uttering soft farewells, while the chairmen at their posts waited for his signal. She put out her hand, and Sir Phineas pressed it to his lips. Then he remained bareheaded. The chairmen raised their burden; she leaned forward and darted a look at him, which revealed the warmth of her nature more truly than any expression he had yet seen in her eyes.

The baronet did not quit the entrance steps until the sedan was out of sight. Then a triumphant smile lit up his somewhat saturnine face.

"Faith! An easy conquest. A glorious creature—handsome enough to warm and tempt St. Anthony. But—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"She'll do *pour passer le temps*, while awaiting a more precious prize. Blue eyes—yes, they sparkle, but nothing more. They've no mystery behind them, and what is woman if not mysterious? Some cold-blooded fellows look for placidity, and what they call comfort—benighted idiots—men of flesh and blood prefer a plunge into the unknown. Still, Lady Barbara isn't without her charm. There's that young fool Ralstone. To cut him out gives just the spice to the game, without which it would be as tame as an egg without salt."

He wheeled round and walked meditatingly to the

ante-room, put on his long riding-coat and departed.

There was no moon, but the clear sky was studded with stars.

"Contrasts are everything in this insipid old world," he muttered. "I'd like to see how a pair of black eyes can flash, and, by Heaven, they *will* flash when I present myself. Passion in her voice, but no tears in her eyes, I swear. I'd like to make 'em come. Maybe they will. Why not bring off the *coup* to-night. I'm in my native air. It always nerves me. Yes, I'll do it."

He strode to the hotel where he had put up his curricle, and rang the bell until a sleepy boots slowly opened the door.

"Stir your stumps, you rascal," growled Sir Phineas, "unless you want a clout of the ear to quicken your laziness. What the devil do you mean by locking, bolting and barring me? Didn't the landlord tell you I might be here any hour between midnight and breakfast?"

"Aye, your honour, but——"

"That'll do. Don't waste your excuses, you'll want 'em for somebody else. Rouse the ostler. I want my curricle at the door in five minutes. D'ye hear? Stay—bring me a brandy first."

The man scuffled away. He met the landlord, who, hearing the imperious summons, had huddled on a few garments. The landlord fetched the brandy, and, full, of apologies, hastened with it to the impatient Sir Phineas.

"Will your honour walk into the coffee-room? It's more comfortable there and——"

"Comfort be hanged. Is that scoundrel of an ostler of yours getting out my curricle?"

"Yes, Sir Phineas. I've told boots to wake him up."

Tenbury swallowed half the brandy at a gulp. The landlord watched him with anxiety. One never knew what dare-devilry Sir Phineas might be up to. His youth was a long record of escapades, as the villages between Bath and Bristol well remembered. The brandy, however, had apparently restored his good humour. Emptying his glass, he threw it behind him and inquired what was the latest news of the fight between Neate and Spring.

"I do hear the place be settled. A bagman tells me Tom Belcher be staying at the 'Angel and Sun.' He saw Tom this very night, and heard him say as Mr. Jackson had picked out a likely spot in Hampshire between Weyhill an' Andover. But it be all under the rose."

"Of course. And the day?"

"Ah, that be more'n I can tell, but I'll bet a guinea it bean't fur off. Can't keep them things dark fur long. The say Lunnon's gone pretty nigh mad. I know fur sartain as Bristol an' round about has. To-morrow them as be in the know'll be crowding into Andover, and in less than no time theer won't be a bed to be had for love or money."

"Is that so? Another brandy landlord, to drink good luck to Bill Neate."

Before the drink was brought the ostler appeared with the curricle, leading the horse, a wiry, strong mare and a magnificent trotter that had won many matches and put hundreds of guineas into his owner's pocket.

Sir Phineas jumped into the vehicle, tossed down the brandy, and dropped some money into the landlord's hand. Then, gathering up the reins, he set off at a smart pace in the direction of the upper road to Bristol.

The mare was fresh and needed no whip. In less than

half an hour she was a good way towards Bristol, and Sir Phineas guided her into a by-road some few yards beyond the second turnpike. This road led to the Den, a hunting-box belonging to the baronet, and the remnant of a large estate which had been left him by his father, and the greater part of which he bad been forced to sell to pay his gambling debts. Even the Den was mortgaged. It was situated in a wood surrounded by a ring fence, and the pleasure-garden encircling the building, as well as the building itself, had been utterly neglected, Sir Phineas contending that it was absurd to spend money for the benefit of other people, the mortgagees having long ago threatened to foreclose.

Sir Phineas had to alight to force open the lodge gate. The lodge itself was uninhabitable, and had it not been so the owner would not have gone to the expense of a lodge-keeper for a place which he only used for a few weeks in the year.

The bracken, the brambles, and the undergrowth of the wood generally, had invaded the narrow roadway, and Sir Phineas, leading the mare, had to struggle through the dense vegetation. A light in the distance, showing now and again where there was an opening in the trees, guided him.

He reached the house, a square building with a gable roof and a porch in front of the door. He knocked loudly with the handle of his whip.

A man opened the door and bowed low when he recognised the visitor.

"Glad you're about, Brownlow. I'm in the devil of a hurry. Where's Tim Goadby?"

"He's in the kitchen, Sir Phineas. We were having a

hand at cards. I'll call him."

"You needn't. The kitchen will do well enough for the orders I want to give him."

The house was divided by a passage, which ran from back to front. At the end was the kitchen, a brick-paved apartment, with a low-ceiling and latticed windows. A wood fire was burning on the hearth, and a thick-set man, with a forbidding face, who was sitting at the table, rose at the entrance of Sir Phineas and touched the roots of his closely-cropped greyish hair.

"Get the hooded gig out and put the mare from the curricle in the shafts. I want you to go a journey with me. Sharp's the word."

Goadby rushed away, and Sir Phineas, turning to Brownlow, who was standing in an obsequious attitude, said abruptly:

"While I'm gone with Tim, make the best bedroom fit to receive a lady. Light a big fire and air the bedclothes. If there's anything you think of to give the place a look of comfort, do it."

Brownlow, who was Sir Phineas's manservant, had taken part in too many of his master's Don Juan-like exploits, showed no surprise, but disappeared to execute his orders.

The clatter of the mare's hoofs and the grating of wheels announced that Goadby was busy. In a few minutes he entered and said all was ready.

Without a word Sir Phineas climbed into the gig, a clumsy, capacious affair, and Goadby led the mare to the lodge gate and then climbed into the seat by the side of his master, who took the reins.

Once more on the high road to Bristol, and at the com-

mon where Jack Ralstone had distinguished himself as a knight-errant, the gig halted and Sir Phineas threw the reins to Goadby.

"Be on the look-out for my signal, Tim. I shall whistle. We may probably go back with a lady passenger," said he grimly.

He strode across the common towards a flickering glimmer. A gipsy's tent and caravan behind disclosed itself as he drew near. He did not announce his presence, but put his head inside the opening of the tent. The shrill shriek of an old woman greeted him.

The woman had started from her squatting position, where she had been watching the boiling of a pot and smoking awhile. A man in the gloom beyond, lying on a bed of dried bracken, never moved. He was snoring heavily.

"Mercy on me, master, how 'ee frightened me. I took 'ee for your ghost."

"I haven't come to that yet, dame. What news? Is all well?"

"Noa. It be ill—very ill—the worsest as could happen. I dunno how to tell 'ee."

"Eh?" thundered Sir Phineas, "what's amiss? Is the girl.... has she carried out her threat?"

"To make away wi' herself? No—not so bad as that."

"What then?"

"She's gone. Runned away."

"Run away! And you and Jerry let her go! You infernal blunderers. I've a mind to take it out o' your hides," he roared, his face black with passion.

He strode across the tent, and kicked the sleeping man savagely. The fellow awoke, started, and struggled with

difficulty into a sitting position.

"Who the——" he was beginning, rubbing his bleary eyes, when he recognised Sir Phineas. "Oh, lor—your honour——" he mumbled.

"Get up, you lazy brute," stormed the baronet. "What the devil do you mean by disobeying my orders. Where's the girl?"

"Ain't th' old woman told you, sir? We both on us did our best, and we didn't disobey no orders. I had a stiff set to wi' the chap as rode away wi' the wench. He knowed how to use his maulers if ever a man did. I haven't had such a basting about the ribs since I run a boxing booth. Dang me if I can move wi'out feeling a lot o' knives digging into me. Mother, tell his honour all about it."

Tenbury was not so blinded with passion as to be unable to see that the man had been badly knocked about, and he turned to the old woman for an explanation. She entered into a long-winded narrative, in the course of which she put her own conduct and that of her son, Jerry Winch, in the most favourable light.

"Mike Croucher was doin' a bit o' shootin' at the rabbits on the common, an' I shouted to him. He let fly twice at the gemman and the gal, but I dunno if any shot hit 'em. *I* never saw a hoss tear along as that theer hoss did."

"Who was the man who fought Jerry, and carried her off?" demanded Sir Phineas.

"I dunno him, but Mike Croucher says it wur young Squire Jack Ralstone."

"Damn Squire Jack Ralstone!"

CHAPTER V

Jack Kicks Over the Traces

Young Squire Ralstone indulged in an extra hour or so in bed the next morning. His thirty mile ride, his milling exercise, his potations, and his series of disappointments had left him stiff and off colour. Old Squire Halstead, on the contrary, rose early in spite of strong ale, port, rum, and curaçao, and after a hearty breakfast strolled round the kennels and the stables, chatted with Stephen, and cursed roundly everything which did not quite please him. Had he seen the blown and muddy condition of Black Ivory when the horse was led into his stall in the small hours of that morning, he would have flown into a towering passion. But old Stephen was wary. He had risen betimes, rubbed down the hunter, and the animal looked much the same.

On his return to the house Simon grumbled vastly at finding his stepson still in bed. Now that he was sober he was anxious to make up his quarrel with Jack, especially as a letter had arrived by a mounted messenger from the Duke of Endsleigh. His Grace wrote he saw no reason why the marriage of Lady Barbara and Jack Ralstone should be further delayed, and suggested that

arrangements should at once he made for their nuptials.

"Chudleigh, the member for Pocketon Magna wants to retire," added the Duke. "I've but to give the word, and he will apply for the Chiltern Hundreds, the seat will be vacant, and as the borough is practically mine, young Ralstone may consider himself already an M.P. I shall see about securing him a post, which will in time assure him a baronetcy."

Simon snapped his fingers, and his hard, coarse face brightened. He rang the bell, and ordered a tankard of cider, his favourite morning drink, to mark the occasion.

"An' look 'ee here, Robert, knock at Master Jack's door, and tell him to stir his stumps. Say as I've got some good news for him."

"John Ralstone, Esq., M.P.—dash my wig if it don't sound well. It 'ud be better if it was John Halstead. Can't be helped. What is, is."

He walked up and down the room, his hands deep in his capacious breeches pockets, and muttering to himself:

"Thirty thousand guineas—that's what I've promised the Duke the day Jack marries Lady Barbara. It'll make a hole in my fortune, but what o' that? The Barbados plantation's worth double if so be as I want to sell it. If I don't it'll go to Jack's son if he gets one. Seein' as how it cost me next to nothing I oughtn't to grumble. They say as ill come by ill comes. Do it? Not wi' Simon Halstead. Never had a stroke o' bad luck in my life, an' I'm too old to begin at that game now. He-he-he!"

Simon was laughing his grating, shrill laugh when the door opened, and in walked Jack Ralstone.

"Well, you graceless dog! What have 'ee got to say for

yourself, eh? Going down on your marrow bones to say you're sorry for rubbing me the wrong way yesterday?"

Simon's manner was bullying, and his voice loud, but it was all put on.

"Here—your fist, lad. Shake hands. Let bygones be bygones."

Jack couldn't refuse. Besides he did not wish to do so. He had no reason for quarrelling with his stepfather. His anger, too, had passed away. He held out his hand.

"Ye don't look in over good fettle," said Simon, after a keen glance at Jack's face. "What were 'ee up to last night? Where did 'ee get that black peeper?"

"Had words with a chap on the Bath Road. He insulted me, so I went for him."

"An' he went for 'ee seemingly. Who was best man?"

"I left him like a dead dog."

"No, did 'ee now. That's fine. Did 'ee give him that knock down blow I taught 'ee?"

Jack couldn't remember any particular blow belonging exclusively to Simon. If he had it had been driven out of his mind by what he had learned from Tom Spring and "Gentleman" Jackson, but he did not care to say so. He nodded, and sat down in front of a huge home-cured ham, carving himself a mighty slice.

"Did Robert tell 'ee I'd got some good news for 'ee?" went on the Squire after he had allowed Jack to eat in peace for some few minutes.

"Yes, sir, he said something of the kind. What is it?"

"I've had a letter from the Duke. He's as friendly as may be. Starts wi' 'My dear Halstead,'—that's pretty good from a nobleman of his high rank, eh?"

"Very good, indeed, sir," said Jack, and put back on

his plate the mouthful he was about to swallow. The Duke was the last person he was anxious to discuss. It brought to his remembrance his annoying meeting with Lady Barbara, and the direct snub he had received at her hands. Also Sir Phineas Tenbury, and the score he meant some day to settle with the baronet.

"How are 'ee getting on wi' your courting? Billing and cooing as sweethearts should?"

"Not much of that, sir."

"An' why the devil not? When I was your age I didn't let the grass grow under my feet when a wench was concerned."

"I dare say not. I can't fancy billing and cooing with Lady Barbara."

"The devil you can't. Lady Barbara's as fine a lady as ever stepped. Now, if I don't make a mistake, she's just that sort as likes bein' fussed over. It only wants pluck. Tender handed stroke a nettle and it stings you for your pains. Grasp it like a man of mettle, and it soft as silk remains. 'Tis the same wi' a woman."

"Maybe. Anyhow, it doesn't look as if there was going to be any grasping in this case. The fact is, Lady Barbara and I have fallen out."

"What? Fallen out wi' a duke's daughter? I'm damned."

Simon's manner changed. His face grew very red, and he seemed to swell out like a ruffled turkey cock.

"Fallen out, have ye? An' what over?"

"Nothing in particular—excepting that for a lady she was exceedingly rude."

"Oh, was she. An' what about you? I'll warrant it were six o' one, an' half a dozen o' the other. That's

nothing between sweethearts. You'll kiss and make it up afore many hours are over, and then you'll be deeper in love than ever."

"I think not, sir. I'm not in love with Lady Barbara—never was in love with her, and I doubt if I ever shall be."

"What does that mean, you blockhead? Bean't you going to marry her?"

"If you like to put it that way, no."

The Squire gasped for breath. He was speechless. His red face became purple, with here and there a yellow patch. The slaves on his plantation trembled when they saw him look like this. It was a prelude to savage flogging, to merciless torture. With a tremendous effort he restrained his rage. In a cold, constrained tone he said:

"It's you who put it. Let us two understand each other. Say straight out what's in your mind. D'ye mean to marry Lady Barbara Dacre, or don't 'ee?"

"Well then, as matters stand, I don't."

"Damn! What am I to say to the Duke? How am I to answer this?"

Simon brought his sledge hammer fist down on the letter lying on the table, with a force that made the crockery rattle.

The dregs of Jack's bad temper of the previous evening were stirred up.

"Answer it as you like, sir. It's your business, not mine. *I* never asked the Duke for permission to court his daughter. You did it all."

The floodgates of Simon's wrath were opened. The extensive vocabulary of ship-board obscenity, of slave galley and sugar plantations brutal abuse, was called upon. Simon Halstead had no lack of vulgar and blasphemous

epithets at his command to express his rage and disgust. Jack was horrified at the old man's outpourings. He had heard vague hints of Simon Halstead's strange experiences, but he never imagined his step-father could be so debased.

"I'd better leave you, sir, to talk to yourself. I don't see I've anything to reply to," said he, springing to his feet.

"Stop! Where are 'ee going?" thundered the Squire.

"I don't quite know. Anyhow, I'm not inclined to stop in this house much longer."

"Go and be damned. Don't 'ee darken my doors again. I've done wi' you."

"By all means. I hope I can look after myself."

"Can ye? You'll tell another story afore long. You won't be able to live the fine, easy life of a gentleman. You haven't been denied anything you had a fancy for. I've paid your debts, and you've never wanted for money. That's all over. Your allowance from this minute stops. I'll write to-day to Fauntleroy's Bank to close the account I opened for you there, and to transfer the balance to mine. Go and earn your own living."

"That's what I mean to do. Thank you for what you've done for me, and good day."

How Jack controlled his own hasty temper was a mystery to him. With a bow, the politeness of which exasperated Simon beyond endurance, he walked to the door, deaf to the execrations hurled after him.

He went up to his room. His man was brushing and putting away his clothes.

"Purvis," said he, "the Squire and I have had a fallout, and it'll be many a long day before we're friends. Perhaps never. I don't see how I can keep you any longer

in my service. You'll want your wages, and where the money's coming from isn't quite clear."

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Jack," said the man, pulling a long face. "I looked forward to being with you for many a year, sir. What'll you do wi'out anybody to look after you, sir?"

"Look after myself, of course. You'll have no difficulty in getting a good place. I shall speak for you."

"I know that, sir, but—begging your pardon, sir, I'd like to ask whether I mightn't stay till you're used to looking after yourself."

"You noodle. What's the good of that?" laughed Jack. "While you're with me, d'you think I'll lift a finger? It won't do."

But Purvis pleaded so hard, and looked so disappointed that Jack was talked into trying the experiment.

"It needn't be sudden death to-day, need it, sir. I'll just go on as before. What would you like me to do?"

"Well, pack up all my belongings, and don't for Heaven's sake forget my boxing gloves, my foils, pistols, and the Joe Manton I bought the last time I was in London. It's the best sporting gun to be had for love or money."

"Yes, sir."

Jack's programme of looking after himself was to sink back in a chair, light a cigar, and think over things, while Purvis moved noiselessly about the room packing up.

What was to be his next step? He went over his cash. Twenty guineas or so represented his stock of money. He had laid out bets by which, if Tom Spring pulled off the fight, he would win £500. Should Tom fail, he would owe £2,500—debts of honour which he was bound to pay

—if he could. But how? He had not a penny in the world. His twenty guineas would not last long.

"I've a mind to go on plunging," he soliloquised. "In for a penny in for a pound—may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. There's comfort in those musty old proverbs. I won't think about those that give the direct lie to these scraps of wisdom—penny wise, pound foolish—look before you leap, and the rest of 'em."

"How long will it take you to pack, Purvis?" said he.

"About an hour, sir."

"Good. I'll stroll over to the 'Dragon' and see about a post chaise."

And leaving Purvis to his work, Jack sauntered out of the room and jauntily descended the staircase, as though he had not a care in the world. He did not want encounter the Squire and did not leave the house by the main entrance.

The "Dragon" was a posting house about ten minutes walk, and Jack, who was well known to the landlord, was heartily welcomed. There was a subdued air of excitement about the place, which Jack did not fail to notice.

"Any news from London?" said he.

The landlord understood what he meant. There could be only one topic of news from London which could possibly interest Bristol and its neighbourhood—the forthcoming prize fight.

"The day be fixed for the mill," whispered the landlord, his finger on his lip. "It be the 20th."

"What! In less than a week? By Jupiter, that's pretty near. Are you sure?"

"Sartin sure. The guard of the Bristol mail brought the news early this mornin' and tells it to I as an old friend.

It bean't known in Lunnon yet. 'Gentleman' Jackson's knocker'll be goin' nineteen to the dozen afore many hours be over. Now don't 'ee go an' let it out. It'll get wind soon enough, and anybody as doesn't get a bed at Andover in good time'll have to sleep in a ditch."

"If this news should only be true," said Jack doubtfully.

"I'll take my oath it be."

"All right. Now what about a post chaise to Andover?"

"I might manage it for *you*, Squire. It's a good eighty miles to Andover and it'll cost 'ee a bit. Not less than ten guineas; then there's the boys' tips, the baiting and t'other charges. Can't be done under a couple o' days."

"No matter. Have the chaise ready at once. I want first to go to Bristol and we'll start fair from there."

The thing was settled, and Jack saw he was in a fair way for spending all his ready money. But he didn't care. Indeed, the plunge into the unknown rather suited his mood and he walked back to the Manor House in high spirits.

He looked in at the stables and found old Stephen with a very long face.

"What be amiss, Master Jack, atween you an' the Squire? He comed down here an hour agone in a storm o' passion and says I warn't to let 'ee have none o' the 'osses or dogs."

"The Squire might have saved himself the trouble. It's good-bye for me to the horses, dogs and rest of the live stock, including you, Steve."

"Mussy on me. What do it all mean?"

"I'm off to seek my fortune. I don't care if I never see Simon Halstead again. We two've had good times together, Steve—ratting, otter hunting, fishing and the rest.

I shall think of you when I'm in London."

"Goin' to Lunnon? But you'll be comin' back here some time?"

"I don't think so."

Jack held out his hand and Stephen gripped it heartily.

"What be 'ee a goin' to do in Lunnon, if I might be so bold as to ask."

"Haven't the least notion. But if the worst comes to the worst I can go into the prize ring."

"Eh? Ye'd be among the 'fancy' would 'ee? Not the trade of a gentleman, I'm thinkin'."

"Why not. What about 'Gentleman' Jackson? What about John Gully—a Bristol man he was, mind you, like Tom Cribb. D'you mean to say they're not gentlemen? Is there a word to be said against the 'Game Chicken' or Tom Spring? They fought clean and fair; they never gave in till they were beaten and they never soiled their lips with the vile words I've heard *some* gentlemen use."

A recollection of Simon Halstead's horrible language passed through Jack's mind, but he wasn't going to bring his stepfather's name into the discussion. Stephen was not convinced; he shook his head sadly, and Jack without another word strode out of the stables.

There was nobody else of whom Jack cared to take leave, and he spent the time until the post chaise arrived in looking round his rooms to see that Purvis had forgotten nothing that he might want. Simon, he learned, had gone to Bristol to look up some cronies at the docks, and was doubtless in for a heavy day's drinking. So much the better, thought Jack, and he set out without any hindrance.

At Bristol he deposited his luggage in the care of a

friendly innkeeper, and keeping the chaise waiting he went into a pawnbroker's shop and raised £20 on a diamond ring. Provided with funds he commenced the journey to Andover.

CHAPTER VI

"What Have You Done with the Girl?"

The "George" at Andover was crammed from floor to roof. Jack arrived four days before the day fixed, according to his information, for the fight, and he thought himself lucky to get a tiny attic for which he paid a high price. It was anything but palatial, but this was of no consequence. He only wanted it for its bed. His days were spent in the "George" coffee-room, in the bar parlour, in walks about the country, especially in the direction of Weyhill.

At the end of the second day—May 17th—he began to be worried. He could not find out anything definite beyond that Spring was training at Reigate and Neate at Marlborough. Still the people kept crowding into the tame and uninteresting little town, but they were mostly from the surrounding neighbourhood. Very few had come from London and it seemed ominous that no great man concerned in the arrangements—Jackson, Cribb, or Tom Belcher—had put in an appearance.

What if after all the spot had again been changed? Such mishaps are common enough in the history of the prize ring.

Now that the reaction from the excitement of the crisis which had suddenly come into his life had set in—a reaction accentuated by his inactivity and suspense—the memory of the two women who had been so strangely brought into rivalry came back vividly.

About Lady Barbara he was uncertain. Neither her temperament nor her beauty, striking though it was, had ever appealed to him. The first was too haughty and savoured of inordinate vanity; the second had an animalism which jarred somewhat on his romantic spirit.

But the dark-eyed girl—she had possessed him at first sight—even before she had completely revealed her face, which had so fascinated him. To his fervid imagination she had flashed upon him like a dream, and like a dream she had vanished. There was an unreality about the adventure which added to its charm. Would they ever meet again? Fate would indeed be too cruel if not.

With Monday the 19th came a change over the restless little town, which drove all thought of women out of his head. The uncertainty and restlessness ceased. The groups of men with nothing to do but to gossip and block up what traffic there was in the main street gathered in a big crowd in front of the "George," and farmers, tradesmen, yokels jostled each other in the wide passage-way over which the inn was partly built, and poured into the hotel entrance, eager to learn the news.

The cause of the pother was a post chaise, with horses dead beat, their bodies giving out clouds of vapour, and postboys reeling in their saddles from long hours of hard riding, which had crawled up to the "George." The occupants—more in number than the chaise would comfortably hold—descended, stretched their cramped limbs,

stamped their feet, and crowding into the inn shouted for the landlord. The latter, one Sutton, not remarkable for urbanity of manners, received them civilly enough when he heard that they had travelled at the devil's own pace from London.

The party wanted rooms for the night. The great event was to come off positively the next day and the spot was to be the expected one on the road to Weyhill. The fiat to this effect had gone forth from Jackson, the "commander of the milling forces," issued at his house in Pimlico, which all Saturday and Sunday had been besieged by patrons of the noble art anxious for information.

Alas for the gentlemen of the post chaise. In spite of their having brought the important news, they were too large a party to be accommodated. Sutton was willing to stretch a point for one, but not for all. The party declined to be separated. They cursed, they swore; Sutton lost his temper and almost refused to serve them with the refreshment they loudly demanded.

However, as the "gentlemen from London" saw the wisdom of apologising for their outburst, Mr. Sutton deigned to supply them with rump steaks and strong ale, and finally the party offered to pay the postboys liberally for allowing the chaise to be used that night as a bedchamber, and in comparison with later arrivals they had a right to consider themselves lucky.

The post chaise was, as the day wore on, followed by an unceasing stream of vehicles from London and the towns and villages on the way. The news had spread like wildfire, and the crowd of pedestrians starting from London was reinforced on the way down by country patrons. Spring carts, and carts without springs. wagons,

vans, carriages, post chaises, gigs, curricles, horsemen, on they came, blocking up the highway at various points and occasionally involving themselves in a state of confusion, out of which no amount of sultry words could extricate them.

By five o'clock in the afternoon not a bed could be had in Andover. Seething crowds and a jumbled up mass of vehicles were wedged in the few streets, wide and narrow. There was not the slightest room to house the horses; it was difficult to get them provender. Drivers, riders and passengers were in the same plight. Every particle of food was devoured as though a swarm of locusts had passed over the town. All the neighbouring villages were scoured and they too were cleared of everything eatable.

Jack enjoyed the bustle, the noise, the excitement, the growls and the grumbles. He went out into the street and elbowed his way through the crowd, and when tired of the pushing, the brawling, the foul tobacco and the equally foul language, he returned to the "George" for what he could get to eat. He had not much fear he should not be able to satisfy his appetite, the "George" taking care to look after those who were staying in the house.

He went up to his room to wash away the remembrances of the greasy, jostling crowd, and was surprised to find his door opened and a manservant coming out.

"Hallo, my good fellow, what are you doing in there? That's my room."

"Yes, sir, so I was told, but the landlord has let a portion of it to my master. He said he was sure you wouldn't mind."

"Did he? Then he made a huge mistake. I do mind—

very much. I've taken the room and the bed in it, and I mean to stick to what I've paid for."

"Oh, I don't think you'll be troubled, sir; my master is a gentleman."

"I don't care whether he's a gentleman or a vagabond. The room isn't big enough for one, let alone two, and the bed's so narrow it might be a coffin."

"I'm sure my master has no desire to turn you out of your bed. I thought of making him up a bed on the floor."

"Very good of you," retorted Jack, his temper rapidly rising.

By this time he was in the room and saw a big valise on the only chair. Without the slightest ceremony he hauled it off and bade the man take it away.

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir, without my master's orders."

The man's words were civil, but his manners were insolent, and his face was as insolent as his manners. A white-faced, sleek-haired fellow, with cunning eyes and a truculent lip, he had bully and rascal written upon him unmistakably.

"And who the devil is your master that he should give his orders about my room?" demanded Jack.

"Sir Phineas Tenbury, sir. Perhaps you don't know him."

"I know him sufficiently to treat him as I do his luggage."

With one vigorous kick he sent the valise flying into the passage.

"If you don't want to be served the same way, you'd better take yourself off."

"And what am I to tell my master?"

"Tell him what you like."

Jack looked so threatening that the fellow retreated precipitately. Leaving the valise where Jack had kicked it, he disappeared down the narrow staircase.

Jack slammed to the door and sat down on the little bed to calm down and to marvel at the irony of fate which had thrust upon him the company of a man he detested and with whom so recently he had nearly had a quarrel. Had Sutton approached him properly, he would have raised no objection to sharing the room with any decent person—but not Sir Phineas under any circumstances. He wondered what would be the outcome of the incident. Sir Phineas was not the man to take a rebuff lying down.

He was right. Hardly had two minutes gone by than there came a sharp tap at the door. Jack was not disposed to act the lackey to Sir Phineas, so he shouted "Come in."

Sir Phineas was much too fine a gentleman to act as his own porter. It was his man who knocked at the door and who opened it at Jack's response. His master was a couple of paces behind. His lips were white with passion, and his nostrils quivered. He was about to burst into a storm of imprecations, when he recognised Ralstone and his manner changed. He was noted for his great control over himself and he showed it now.

"Oh, this is capital," said he coolly. "It's as good a piece of comedy as Liston ever played in."

"I'm glad you find it so," retorted Jack, as cool as the other. "Your allusion to Liston in a comedy is extremely happy, with yourself, I presume, as Tony Lumpkin."

Sir Phineas was not prepared for this keen thrust. It went home, for at that moment all London was splitting

its sides over Liston and his inimitable Tony Lumpkin in "She Stoops to Conquer," in which at the beginning of the year he had made his first appearance at Drury Lane. For the moment Tenbury had nothing to say in reply. However, he soon recovered himself, but he had lost his sneer and his bantering tone. He was now grimly serious.

"Is it true, sir, that you sent an impudent message by my servant that you would serve me as you served that valise?"

"Quite true."

"Are you prepared to do it?"

"Yes. I am at your service, either with my feet or my hands. Milling is the fashion. Shall we anticipate Spring and Neate?"

Jack Ralstone at the moment looked particularly aggressive. Sir Phineas ran his eye over the athletic frame, the picture of muscular manhood. He had heard from Jerry Winch that "the gemman used his mauleys uncommon well," and Jerry's bruised body was sufficient proof of the statement. Sir Phineas was, like most of the "bloods" of the time, well up in boxing, but he knew he would not stand the ghost of a chance with Ralstone.

"Gentlemen do not settle their differences in that vulgar fashion," said he, biting his lip.

"As you please. Any kind of weapon will suit me."

"Is this a challenge?"

"Yes, if you like to make it so. My friend will wait upon you as soon as I get to London."

"The sooner the better. But our quarrel, so far as it has gone, is but a paltry affair. I don't want to be the laughing stock at Brooks's or Boodle's, It will be said that

Sir Phineas pinked his man because his valise was kicked out of an inn bedroom. If we do fight, let it be over the best cause in the world—a woman."

"What! Bring the name of Lady Barbara Dacre into this squabble? That doesn't strike me as very gentlemanly."

"I introduce no name. I'm not thinking of Lady Barbara, but of somebody quite different."

"Indeed, and who may she be?"

"The girl you rode away with on Blankstone Common, the night of the Bath Masquerade."

Tenbury's voice was hard and grating. He snapped out his words as though he was biting them. His lips tightened, but did not meet, a thin line of white teeth showing between.

Jack started and the blood galloped through his veins. His face crimsoned.

"I see you remember. What have you done with the girl?" demanded Sir Phineas with a burst of passion, his boasted self-control suddenly breaking down.

"I decline to tell you. It's no affair of yours," returned Jack coldly.

"I make it mine. You interfered in what didn't concern you and you shall pay for it."

"I always pay my debts, Sir Phineas. I don't intend to follow your example."

Another hit. Sir Phineas could always find money for something discreditable, if it ministered to his pleasure, but his legitimate debts he ignored, as many a tradesman knew to his cost.

"See here, Ralstone. We needn't bandy repartees. The point is this. The girl you laid hands upon is mine, and

neither you nor any other man shall have her. I await the coming of your friend. Lord Houston will act for me."

Wheeling round, he stalked away, leaving Jack in a mingled state of bewilderment and exhilaration. The prospect of a fight, even with so notorious a duellist as Tenbury, did not frighten him, and he had a curious sense of pleasure that the fight was to be over the dark-eyed girl whom he had found so fascinating, and about whom he had woven quite a web of romance, though there was no occasion for weaving, so far as he was concerned, for the circumstances in themselves were romantic enough.

But that which puzzled him not a little was the relationship between her and Tenbury. All he could decide was the certainty he could render her no better service than free her from the clutches of so callous a woman pursuer as Sir Phineas. It was a great comfort to him to think that she was at that moment out of the baronet's hands.

"The fellow, I expect'll choose pistols. They say he can pip the ace of hearts fourteen times out of fifteen at twenty paces. Not a pleasant prospect for me, but hang it, I'll take my chance."

He saw no more of Sir Phineas. He noticed the valise was gone, and this in itself was a triumph. Sutton was very grumpy over the affair, representing that the young man might have stretched a point to so good a patron of sport as Sir Phineas Tenbury. Jack did not enter into particulars, but laughed the matter down, and suggested that if the landlord was aggrieved he'd spring another guinea. This lordly way of settling things Mr. Sutton found perfectly satisfactory.

The night passed amid a perfect uproar outside. Jack might as well have been in the street. The drunken shouts, the brawls, the impromptu "mills," the tramping horses, made sleep almost impossible. Inside the "George" things were just as bad, nothing but noisy talking and laughing, and tramping up and down stairs. When dawn came he was glad enough to turn out and await what the day might bring forth.

The buzz and din were still going on, and the excitement grew to fever heat about nine o'clock, when the two heroes arrived amid stentorian cheers. Jack was in the bar parlour when Spring entered the "George," and he pressed forward to shake the pugilist by the hand.

"By George, Spring, I never saw you look so fit. Good luck to you. You're sure to win."

"I'll do my level best, sir, not only because of myself, but for the sake of my backers. Are you in at all heavily, Mr. Ralstone?" added Tom, sinking his voice.

"Well, if *you* win, Tom, I shall land £500 or so but if you don't I stand to lose £2,500."

"Long odds, sir," said Tom, looking serious. "You Bristol folk seem to fancy Neate, eh?"

"Rather. They're all Neate's men excepting myself. But I've seen you put your mauleys up, and they haven't. The knowing ones say you can't hit."

"Do they; well, they'll see."

"And that if Bill Neate gets in one of his sledgehammer strokes on the mark, you're done for."

"*If's* good, sir. He's got to do it. But Cribb's beckoning me. See you again, Mr. Ralstone, at the ropes. Wait a moment. I'll scribble you a word or two, and that'll make you sure of a good place. The ring-keepers know my fist.

Got a pencil, sir?"

Tom wrote something on one of Jack's cards and handed it to him.

"Thanks, Tom," cried Ralstone, flushing with pride. "I'll have this framed."

Spring smiled and passed on.

It was soon noised about that Weyhill was certainly the chosen spot, and somehow this did not have the effect of reducing the chaos reigning in Andover. The fact was the crowd feared another change, and refused to budge until they saw the combatants start. Things looked perilously near a riot, and the "George" was surrounded by an angry, hungry, swaying multitude of swells, tradesmen, farmers, and, of course, the great unwashed. The shopkeepers, in spite of the protection of the shutters, began to fear a general pillage.

Fortunately "Gentleman" Jackson was an adept at getting out of a hot corner. He decided that Hinckley Downs, a mile or so out of Andover, on the London Road, would be much better than a three-mile tramp to Weyhill. It meant a more rapid clearance of the town, and would intercept the ever-increasing arrivals from London. Directly it was known that this was a definite decision, the perspiring mass set off helter-skelter along the London Road, heedless of the rain which about eleven o'clock was pouring in torrents.

The place selected by Jackson was admirable. It was a big field on a slope at such an angle that the high ground on two sides of the arena could accommodate thousands well able to see the fight over the heads of those on the level. The approach was a race for the fleet-footed. Hundreds weary with a long tramp and sleepless night had

but little chance. The road was soon blocked up by two opposing streams of vehicles, one from Andover and the other from London. Yells and imprecations rent the air.

"Break down the fences," roared some one. There was a moment of hesitation, and the owners of the adjoining fields had time to realise the situation, and gave permission for gaps to be cut in the fences and hedges, providing they were compensated. The hat went round, shillings and coppers were collected by the score, and when the gigs, carts, post-chaises, curricles and the rest rushed in through the openings, everybody was satisfied.

The twenty-four-foot ring was in readiness, and the ring-keepers—sturdy, bronze-faced, broken-nosed "bruisers," most of them ex-members of the P.R., armed with whips—took care that no unauthorised person invaded the sacred spot. The privileged "nobs," patrons of Cribb at his hostelry in Panton Street, Haymarket, of Tom Belcher at "The Castle," of "Uncle" Burn at "The Rising Sun," Piccadilly, and other ex-P.R. publicans, were admitted within the ropes, and Jack Ralstone, thanks to Spring's autograph, was of the number. Surrounding the ring, the spectators were seated, some eight or ten deep, hundreds stood behind, then came jumbled rows of vehicles, and, lastly, the packed crowd on the crest of the slope. Many women, quite an unusual thing, were there, all enthusiastic supporters of the Somersetshire hero. The rain came down steadily, but no one heeded it. Excitement and suspense overcame every discomfort.

Jack Ralstone found himself amid a group of "bloods" from London, several of whom he knew. Among them was young Lord Walsham, who had not long before

come into his majority and a handsome fortune, which he was doing his best to spend. He and Ralstone were old 'Varsity chums. They greeted each other warmly.

"Glad you're here, Walsham," said Jack after a brief interchange of opinion concerning the event of the day. "I shall want your services when I get back to town."

"My purse is yours, Ralstone," said his lordship, a fair-haired, boyish-looking young man, whose fresh colour had not yet yielded to the effects of gambling nights and drinking orgies.

"Thanks, but it's not a question of money. I've a little affair of honour on hand."

"The deuce you have. Who's the fellow?"

"Sir Phineas Tenbury."

Lord Walsham's face became very grave.

"I'd rather it was anybody else. You know what his reputation is. He's not content with winging his man. He'd as lief kill outright as not."

Jack shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe two can play at that game. Anyhow, you'll act for me?"

"Of course. But I tell you frankly I don't like it. What's the row over? A woman?"

"In a way, yes."

Further talk on the matter was impossible on account of the clamour all around. A hot discussion had sprung up between the Corinthians round about concerning the respective merits of Spring and Neate. One voice dominated the rest.

"I know what I'm talking about, gentlemen. Spring hasn't a dog's chance. He's a soft hitter. His hands'll give out before he's fought a dozen rounds. Everybody

knows he's a 'light tapper,' a 'china man.' One fair blow from Neate's mighty fist and he'll go silly as an owl."

Jack knew the rasping, sneering voice. It belonged to Sir Phineas Tenbury.

"That may be, but he managed all the same to thrash Jack Carter, Ben Burn, Bob Burn, Josh Hudson, and Tom Oliver," retorted one of Spring's supporters.

"What about Ned Painter?" was Tenbury's reply.

"Ned's the only man who ever beat him, but when they fought a second time the tables were turned."

"Painter's not to be compared to Neate. When Bill comes on with one of his furious rushes, it's like a bull charging. Anyhow, I'm backing Neate. Anybody on?"

Sir Phineas was looking straight at Ralstone, as though challenging him. Certainly, this was how Jack interpreted his glance. An uncontrollable spirit of defiance and recklessness seized him. He had but a few guineas in his pocket, he hadn't the least idea where money was to come from if Spring failed him, and if so, he would be involved in debts of honour to the amount of £2,500, but the gambler's fever was strong within him, accentuated by his enmity against Tenbury, and amid the pause of silence which followed Sir Phineas's announcement, he shouted:

"I'll take you—in hundreds."

"I don't bet in paltry sums," rejoined Tenbury coldly. "Nothing less than thousands."

"Oh, by all means. In thousands. I'll lay £5,000 on Tom Spring at the latest odds—5 to 4."

"Are you sure you can pay?" rejoined Tenbury with studied insolence of tone and manner.

"Are you sure *you* can," was Jack's retort.

An ugly glint shot into Tenbury's eyes, but he made no reply, and booked the bet. Before he had finished the entry in his book, a little man, very neatly dressed, whispered something anxiously to the baronet. Jack remembered this man, with his small, cunning eyes, his unusually high cheek bones, and his little pointed, obtrusive chin.

"Do you know that fellow whispering to Sir Phineas?" said Jack to Lard Walsham.

"Yes—to my cost. He's a moneylender and a gambling sharp. His name's Weare. Lives in Lyons Inn. Goes in for shooting and coursing. Has half a dozen dogs at his place in town. Keep out of his clutches, Ralstone, if you don't want to be worried."

"I stand to win £100 from him if Neate goes down. He backed Neate 5 to 1."

"I see," laughed his lordship. "He's thinking that if you have to pay up to Sir Phineas, there may be a poor chance of his getting your £20. I hope to God you'll have luck. Deuced unpleasant for you to owe £5,000 to the man you're going to fight."

"Why? It will be unpleasant for him, I grant, because if he kills me he won't get paid at all. The thought of that may spoil his aim. The luck's on my side, you see."

Walsham was rather taken aback by Jack's nonchalance.

"You don't really mean that, do you?" said he.

"Whatever I mean won't alter facts. If Neate wins, why——"

But the rest of his words were swallowed up in a babel of sound. Gentleman Jackson, the "Commander-in-Chief," had entered the ring. He received an uproarious

welcome, but nothing compared to what followed within the next few minutes. Bill Neate, the Bristol "pet," arm-in-arm with his principal backer, was seen making his way through the enthusiastic crowd, and when he drew near the ropes he snatched off his hat and tossed it into the enclosure. The applause was deafening, but not more so than that which greeted Tom Spring. Not a muscle of Tom's handsome face moved. To look at him, so cool and confident, one might have supposed he had been taking a walk and had dropped in by accident. Sauntering up to the ring, he dropped his hat just within, sprang over the rope, and advanced to Neate, holding out his hand.

There were no looks of defiance on the part of either gladiator, no "biting of the thumbs," nothing melodramatic. It was all as simple and natural as well could be. The two athletes, who were about to bash each other's faces and thump their bodies to the best of their ability until one or the other was unable to stand, simply shook hands.

"I hope you are well," said Spring.

"I am very well, thank you; I hope you are," replied Neate.

Then the huge crowd, some 30,000 persons, prepared to enjoy themselves.

CHAPTER VII

How Tom Spring and Bill Neate Fought

Up to the time when Tom entered the ring, Bill Neate had been the one object of all eyes. Neate was a splendidly-made man, all muscle and sinew, but hardly the ideal athlete. He had enormous strength, but there was a lack of symmetry in his build. His rugged, somewhat repellent face indicated great determination, and that he was a sturdy boxer was shown by his terrific fight some time before with the dreaded "Gasman," whose punishing powers were something phenomenal. To look at the bosses of muscle around Neate's neck and shoulders and in the upper half of the arms, one could imagine what driving force he could put into a blow when it was added to by the impetus of one of his mighty rushes, for which he was famous. He was animal strength, but there was no grace in his movements.

On Spring doffing his "beaver" and vaulting over the ropes with the agility of a practised gymnast, a roar of voices hailed him, and the women's eyes glistened. They saw in Tom the perfect man—a combination of Apollo and Hercules. Not that his proportions were Herculean, but because his muscles were so equally developed and

his frame so harmonious that both would have satisfied the requirements of a sculptor. His face matched his body. He was handsome; he was intelligent. No one less like the traditional "pug" ever stepped into the prize ring.

As Tom walked across the roped enclosure to his corner, where Tom Cribb and Ned Painter (the only man by whom Spring was ever beaten), his seconds, were awaiting him, the light elastic tread and the perfect action of his muscles showed how well his strength was under control.

Any doubt Jack Ralstone might have had that Spring would not carry off the belt vanished when Tom, stripped for the fight, strode to his corner. He had never seen Tom in the buff, for when they had a playful set-to they had simply taken off their coats and waistcoats, and he was amazed at Spring's physical development. Moreover, he was in the pink of condition, neither under nor over-trained. Ralstone was not far from Spring's corner, and Tom, chancing to look round, caught his eye, smiled and nodded.

"I've backed you for all I'm worth and a little more," shouted Ralstone.

"Thank you, sir. I shall do my best, you may be sure," said Tom simply.

At that moment Jack felt a touch on his shoulder. He turned and recognised Dillnot, the Somersetshire grazier, with whom he had made a bet at "The Angel and Sun." The grazier looked uncommonly serious.

"Just a word wi' you, Mr. Ralstone," said the grazier in a low voice. "A queer story reached me about a fall-out atween you an' Squire Halstead. If it hadna' ha' been

that I got a bet on wi' 'ee, I shouldn't ha' bothered, but——"

"You're afraid you wouldn't get your money, supposing I lost, eh?" said Jack, cutting him short.

"Aye. Seems to me, young gentleman, you be agoing the whole hog. I heerd you betting with Sir Phineas Tenbury, an' to a pretty tune. If Neate wins——"

"If Neate wins!" repeated Jack contemptuously. "He can't win excepting by an accident. Don't worry, Mr. Dillnot, you'll be paid, never fear. By the way, you mentioned the Squire. The thing seems to have got wind, so there's no good in beating about the bush. Yes, we've quarrelled and I've nothing more to do with him. By the way, where is he? I expected to see him on the ground, but he's nowhere about."

"Aye, an' he's not likely to be. I told him as the mill was coming off somewhere near here, but he would have it Hungerford was the spot. You know how pigheaded he can be. It wasn't no good contradicting. so I let him have his way and away he's gone to Hungerford wi' a lot o' other fules."

Jack burst into a laugh. He could picture Simon Halstead's rabid rage on finding himself sold.

Further talk with Dillnot was impossible. Ominous growlings were heard from the crowd. They resented the favour shown to the nobs who were allowed to stand close to the ropes, pressing against them and obstructing the view. Gentleman Jackson was equal to the emergency. He knew that the roughs would show but scant ceremony when their tempers were roused, and he appealed to the Corinthians to draw further back. "No persons but the referee and the umpires can he allowed near

the ropes," he shouted in his clear, stentorian voice, "and I ask you gentlemen to retire to a little distance from the ring and to help keep the ground clear."

The word of the "General" was law. Many of the noblemen gathered round were his pupils, and highly respected him. They obeyed without hesitation, and the malcontents were satisfied.

Then came the tying of the combatants' colours—Neate's orange-yellow and Spring's blue—to the stakes, and all was in readiness. The yells, the shouts, the buzz of talk, the laughter, died away. A deathlike silence followed for a brief space, when the two combatants advanced to the scratch and gravely shook hands to show there was no ill-feeling.

A curious sound, like the sighing of a soft wind, rose from the huge crowd. It was the end of a long-drawn sigh of suspense. Not a soul was there whose nerves and muscles did not tighten in sympathy with the gladiators. who stood facing one another, eye fixed on eye as if measuring their chances. They remained thus, almost motionless, for nearly two minutes.

The curious thing was that neither man showed the excitement of the spectators. This excitement was the more intense because it was restrained, and betrayed only by tightly-drawn lips and in the fixed glare of dilated eyes. Who shall say what was the hypnotic effect of 30,000 minds concentrated upon the efforts of two men? Outwardly, at all events, they showed no signs of being conscious of any outside influence. It did not seem as if at that moment there was a single person in the world other than their two selves. They might have been statues.

But there was a difference in their expressions. Spring, cool and confident, was if anything the more serious of the two. Possibly he felt that the issue depended on his science, his skill as a tactician, his activity of body. Neate, on the other hand, though an accomplished boxer, had not the resources possessed by his antagonist. He relied upon his attack, upon that mighty hit of his with which he did such execution in the terrific fight with the famous "Gasman," one of the most formidable fighters who ever hurled his beaver into the prize ring. There was just the semblance of a smile of contempt on his hard face. It was known that he had made certain of victory, and maybe he was thinking of how he should punish the presumptuous Spring for his temerity in challenging him for the championship and the belt.

And so the two long minutes—to the spectators an intolerable time—passed, and then suddenly Tom's left arm shot out, quick as lightning. The opening he sought for had not come. Neate avoided the blow but did not retaliate, and once more came an ominous pause as long as the first one. The real fight began when Neate let fly one of his tremendous lunges. But Tom was ready. He timed the blow with amazing accuracy, and Neate's fist never got home. The pent-up emotion of the crowd burst out at this pretty exhibition of skill, and shouts of applause resounded. Again Neate attempted a furious rush and again failed, Spring nodding and smiling as much as to say, "I expected this sort of thing."

"What the deuce be Bill Neate doing?" growled Dillnot angrily. "Tom's got his hands down and Bill's losing his chance."

"Perhaps he knows better than you, Dillnot," whis-

pered Jack. "Can't you see that Spring wants him to come on?"

Probably this was so, for Tom had laid himself open to attack, but Neate declined the challenge. Both men spurned mere slogging, and the scientific set-to which followed the momentary cessation of hostilities is said to be one of the finest ever seen. Spring's attitude for administering punishment was that of a model boxer, and Neate was hard put to defend himself, but he did it, to the huge delight of his supporters. Then came a succession of exchanges, and Spring dispelled all notions that he was not a hard hitter. One blow which reached his opponent's head was delivered with such force that the impetus turned the striker round.

The fighting became intense. Neate was working for all he was worth to get in his favourite crusher, and Tom was busy with feet and hands. In retreating he was forced back into a corner, close against the stake, and it looked as if he could not escape the sledgehammer fist that was awaiting its opportunity. It was a critical moment, and Tom Belcher, Neate's second, yelled out excitedly:

"Now's the time!"

And it certainly was if Neate could only have got through Spring's guard. But this he found impossible. Tom frustrated every attempt, and was fighting his way out when Neate, in despair of using his favourite stroke, closed with his adroit opponent, and for a minute or two nothing was seen but a couple of writhing, struggling bodies. Neate was the heavier man and a fine wrestler, and his adherents, making sure that he would throw Spring and fall upon him with his whole weight, cheered

him to the echo. Neate, indeed, nearly got Tom off his legs, and the Spring-ites began to look glum, when the unexpected happened. The crowd held its breath, It saw Neate suddenly lifted from the ground, turned over in Tom's arms, and thing heavily to the ground, and Tom falling upon him. It was an amazing piece of dexterity, and the betting at once rose to 7 to 4 on Spring.

The first round was over. It had lasted nine to ten minutes, but it could not be said that great damage had been suffered on either side. Of the two, Neate had had the worst of it. Tom's tactics were evidently to weaken him, and the Somersetshire man's supporters began to be restive. Why did he not inflict some of those tremendous hits for which he was famous? It was an unreasonable question, and those who asked it forgot the reason. They had not reckoned with Spring's extraordinary skill.

Meanwhile Jack Ralstone had managed to book a few bets at the new price. His mind was fixed on Spring's victory, and he refused to believe that anything else could happen. Once, indeed, he cast a glance at Sir Phineas, and he exulted when he saw his enemy biting his lips and scowling. At the same time he wondered, supposing he won, whether he should get his money from the spendthrift baronet. But there was the duel to be reckoned with first.

The second round commenced with the backers of Spring in high spirits. As before both men were cautious, and a long pause followed, Neate evidently seeking an opening. But he found none. Tom stood in an easy attitude, and his handsome face wore a look of the utmost confidence. Then Neate seemed to lose patience and darted out with his right. It fell short, and Spring's

reply was a smart tap over his opponent's eye—so smart, indeed, that the blood followed.

"First blood, Neate," was heard in Tom's voice all over the ring, and Neate, who had staggered under the blow, scowled savagely and, recovering himself, again tried one of his heavy lunges, but again he failed to get home. Quick as thought Spring retaliated and with such vigour that Neate reeled and was within an ace of falling. His party showed such dissatisfaction with their man that some of them indulged in a prolonged "Yah." Stung by this, Neate dashed in blows desperately and wildly. Tom met the attack with the utmost coolness, and with a succession of skilful hits sent his man to grass with the utmost ease.

The utmost consternation reigned among the Neateites. They never expected anything like this. When the rival party yelled, "It's all up. Neate hasn't a chance!" they remained glum and silent. Two to one was offered on Spring in a hundred places, but there were no takers. As for Spring, he was jubilant.

"It's as right as the day," said he to Ned Painter, his second, who was preparing him for the next round. "He can't hit me in a week."

Clearly the idol had been knocked from his pedestal. As a boxer Neate was not in the same rank as Spring. He could now only rely on his luck. Luck goes for a good deal in a prize-fight, and so Bill discovered, but it was bad and not good luck. In the third round he restored the drooping spirits of his backers by his cleverness in turning aside a heavy blow, and they applauded him, and Tom, with the chivalry of one who, sure of victory, could afford to be generous to an opponent, called out, "Well

stopped, Neate."

After this there was more caution, and the two were so close that their toes touched. If Neate ever had a chance it had come now, but he could never get past Spring's unbreakable guard. But by pertinacity he managed to land a heavy one on Tom's ribs and a spasm of pain went over Spring's face. His answer was a clutch, and after a stiff bit of wrestling they fell, with Neate underneath.

The fourth round showed that Neate, to use a modern phrase, had had some of the "stuffing" knocked out of him. His only chance was to attack, but for some reason he did not do so. The experts standing round were sure that to attempt to fight Spring scientifically was the way to be beaten. He ought to have gone in for heavy hitting, regardless of punishment, and his supporters groaned aloud when Tom treated his blows, delivered from a distance, as though they were they blows of a child. One or two of Neate's efforts were so palpably useless that derisive laughter, the most galling sound that a boxer can hear, burst out in more than one quarter. The round ended in the usual wrestling rally, and was ended by Neate being thrown with terrific force, Spring of course adding to the severity of the fall by hurling his weight upon the prostrate man.

The fifth round was little more than a farce. Neate made no attempt at leviathan blows; indeed, he seemed rather inclined to fall rather than meet Spring's steady, workmanlike onslaught, over which Tom showed not the slightest hurry. From Neate's demeanour it was pretty evident that something had happened which was not in the programme. What that something was disclosed itself in a few words uttered by Tom Belcher, who,

with a serious look on his face, came to the side of the rope and spoke to Mr. Jackson.

"Neate can't go on," said he in a low voice. "His arm's fractured."

"I perceive it," was Jackson's reply, "but I shall not notice it to the other side."

The last three rounds were tame enough. Neate struggled on gamely and tried to get in some of his deadly blows, but Spring stopped them almost contemptuously. Perhaps he suspected what was amiss with Neate, but it was no business of his; so long as Neate stood up to him, so long he would have to fight. Anyhow he treated his opponent tenderly, and contented himself with avoiding Neate's futile efforts for a "knock-out." Long before the eighth round had ended by Neate being struck down and unable to come up to time, all interest in the fight was over. A growl of disappointment burst from Neate's supporters when the Bristol man rose and shook hands with his conqueror, but the growls were checked on Neate announcing, almost with tears in his eyes, that he could fight no more, for his arm was broken.

"You've pulled it off, Mr. Ralstone, an' I'll pay 'ee," grumbled Dillnot. "Dang it, but you be main lucky. If Bill hadn't had that mishap, he'd 'a' pounded your man to a jelly afore the fight was over."

"That isn't what Cribb and the P.R. men say—Neate's backers among 'em," retorted Jack. "Tom had Neate well in hand before the fourth round, and it wasn't till then the accident happened."

"Well, it doan't much matter, do it? What's done's done. Here's your money. Don't fling it in the London gutters as too many of you young Corinthians do. An-

other bit o' counsel. Keep out o' old Squire Halstead's way. He'll be fit to knock your head off if he sees you. He said a few ugly things about 'ee as I wouldn't like to tell 'ee."

"I can quite believe it. Anyhow, we're not likely to meet."

Dillnot untied a greasy leather bag and took from it five hundred pounds in gold and notes. Jack stuffed the five hundred pounds in his pockets without counting it.

"Ye don't vally money, young Squire," said the grazier pityingly. "Take care as ye don't coome to want it. An' if I was you I'd look after Bill Weare. He's a slippery card."

Ralstone was inclined to be of the same opinion, and seeing the money-lender, after exchanging a few hurried words with Sir Phineas, squeezing his way through the crowd in company with a big, burly man, he went after him and clapped his hand on his shoulder. Weare turned round in affright.

"Sorry to detain you, Mr. Weare, but it's the rule for bets to be paid on the nail. I'll trouble you for one hundred pounds," said Jack coolly.

"Eh? Oh, yes," faltered Weare, "but I don't carry the Mint about with me."

"I didn't ask you for the Mint, but only for a trifling hundred pounds."

"By thunder, Weare," said the big man at his side with a loud strident laugh, "the young swell had you there. Pay up, old cock. Faith, it's the best joke I've ever heard. I'd walk twenty miles to see a miserly money-lender part with his coin and get nothing for it."

"What are you talking about, Jack Thurtell." exclaimed Weare whiningly. "You know as well as anybody that I

never carry much money about with me."

"That's not true," cut in Ralstone quickly. "You had plenty when you made the bet with me at the 'Angel and Sun.'"

"That's right, young gentleman," cried Thurtell boisterously. "Stick to him. Shall I search his pockets for you? Maybe he's got a secret one he never shows in public."

The burly man brought his hand down on the small of Weare's back with a force which made the moneylender jump.

"Thank you," said Ralstone in a polite but distinctly hostile tone, "but gentlemen don't collect their debts like footpads. I prefer to trust to Mr. Weare's honour."

"More fool you," said Thurtell with a truculent look.

Jack Ralstone instinctively disliked Weare's friend Thurtell. He had a hard, strong face, which bore the indications of evil ungovernable passions. Jack did not want to have anything to say to him, and he turned away abruptly. But Thurtell was not to be put off. He had been drinking heavily and was in the mood to force a quarrel upon anyone.

"Here, you," he shouted, "are you one of the stuck-up nobs that talk like parrots about boxing, but don't know their right fist from their left?"

Ralstone measured the abusive bully. He was tall and very strongly made, and doubtless could fight. Jack was in no humour to box a ruffian. There was no glory in getting a black eye from such an antagonist or in giving one either.

"I don't think I am," he retorted quietly.

"I don't care whether you are or not. You've insulted

my friend Weare and I'm going to take it out of you. I'm Jack Thurtell of Norwich, and as I've had a turn up with Ned Carter, you'll take it I know how to use my fists. Put up yours and let's see who's best man."

The bellicose, half-drunken Thurtell threw himself into a pugilistic attitude, and Ralstone saw there was nothing left but to fight. He had hardly time to raise his hands before Thurtell was upon him. A straight blow aimed at his face Jack neatly caught on his elbow, and he let fly with his left, catching Thurtell just below the ear. Thurtell had ducked his head, but not quickly enough, and down he went full length. He sprang to his feet, but being a heavy man and out of condition, he had not recovered himself sufficiently and Ralstone planted, a hot 'un somewhere near the midriff. Thurtell was doubled up with pain, and he sent out a volley of oaths in lieu of blows.

Ralstone was ready to administer more punishment when his arm was tightly grasped. Lord Walsham was at his side.

"Don't be a fool, Ralstone," he remonstrated. "What's the good of fighting that blackguard?"

"No good at all," panted Jack. "But I had to do it. He was going for me hot and strong."

"Well, you've given him a lesson. Now come away. That rascal's bound to have some of his friends near. You'd better look out for reprisals."

It was clear Thurtell had no fight left in him. He was still writhing on the ground. When he saw Ralstone going off with Lord Walsham, he yelled out:

"We've got to settle this score some day, damn you. Jack Thurtell's not the man to let a stuck-up Corinthian

ride rough shod over him. I'll spoil your beauty for you yet."

"Who's the ruffian?" said Ralstone.

"No good. Gets his living by his wits and his bullying. I'm told he's known as 'Terrible Jack.' He's been mixed up in more than one shady affair. He and his friend Weare, the money-lender, are just now as thick as thieves. Wait till they fall out."

The mention of Weare brought to Jack Ralstone's mind the money-lender's debt. The "scrap" with Thurtell had driven all other things out. He looked round. Weare had seized the opportunity to escape.

"No matter. I've his address—Lyons Inn."

"Humph, if you think Weare will pay his debts of honour," said the young nobleman dryly, "you're living in a fool's paradise. Men like Weare don't know what honour is."

"Very likely. And what about Tenbury. He's mizzled too."

"Oh, Tenbury'll pay if he can borrow the coin. As you're going to fight him, he'll do anything rather than not meet you on equal terms. He's that sort of fellow. He boasts of not being under an obligation to any man in the world, barring money-lenders, Jews, and tradesmen, and they don't count. They're not worth his notice."

"Well, he can do as he likes. The end of the duel may be that it won't matter to me whether he pays up or not. Anyhow, for the moment I'm more interested in scooping up my gains than in anything else. I'll tell you why later on. Luckily the men who are in my debt are not all Weares and Tenburys."

This was the fact, and for the next half-hour he was

busy in settling with those who had betted with him on the ground. When all was done he found that he had a respectable sum with which to start life in London. He could afford to wait for Sir Phineas Tenbury's money.

"We shall have a bother in getting to town. You know this country better than I do. What do you propose?" asked the young lord.

"It's no good trying to get a seat in the coach. There'll be something like a free fight for places. And I doubt if a postchaise is to be had at any price. We can't stay in Andover and be starved. They told me at the 'George' this morning they'd only got bones in the larder. Why not tramp it to Salisbury and take the coach there? Salisbury's out of the beaten track."

"How far?"

"Oh, twelve miles or so."

"Good. Then let's start. By the way, where are you staying in town?"

"Don't quite know. Maybe at the 'Tavistock,' Covent Garden. They know me there."

"A bit noisy, isn't it? Why not put up at my place in the Albany?"

Jack thanked Walsham for his proffered hospitality, but said that he'd made up his mind to go on his own.

"I shall have to do it sooner or later, and I'd better get used to the sensation."

Then he told his friend how he had quarrelled with his stepfather—a piece of news which made Lord Walsham shake his head.

"How are you going to live?"

"The deuce only knows. If I'm stranded I may take up boxing."

"Faith, a fine living you'll make at that game. All your future will be—a tavern. That's the only thing the retired pug thinks of. I fancy I see you drawing pints of heavy wet or quarterns of 'max' (gin) for the greasy mob."

Jack laughed but made no reply. There was sense in the young nobleman's words, as he well knew.

Then they set out at a good four-mile pace for their spin to Salisbury.

CHAPTER VIII

A Bombshell for Lady Barbara

"By gad, Barbara, I never saw you look handsomer. What's the gaiety to-night?"

"Almack's, of course."

Lady Barbara's tone was a little scornful. She hated being questioned as to her movements, and was rather inclined to snub her ducal papa, as daughters impatient of control are wont.

"Oh, of course," rejoined the duke dryly. He was quite conscious of the snub, but with the servants moving about he was not going to engage in an altercation with her ladyship.

He was dining *tête-a-tête* with his daughter. There were but their two selves, but the etiquette was as formal as though a score of guests had assembled. The ceremony was all the more noticeable because of the vastness of the apartment. The doors were of unusual width and height, to permit the comfortable entrance of the ladies of *ton* in the days of the second George, with their prodigious hoops and head-dresses of preposterous height. The ceiling was gorgeously decorated, Sir James Thornhill's sprawling nymphs and cupids display-

ing themselves with languorous grace amid blue clouds and gilt borderings. Portraits of past Endsleighs in the picturesque dress of the Stuarts, the full bottom wigs and ample skirts of the early Hanoverians, and the affected cravats and roll collared coats of the Regency, filled the panelled walls, against which were ranged buhl and console tables of florid design, gilt chairs and other furnitures of French design—the fashion which set in after the occupation of Paris by our troops following the battle of Waterloo.

The room would have been imposing enough could it have been properly lighted. But his Grace. like the Duke of Devonshire, hated lamps—no doubt they were smoky and smelly enough—and the new illuminant—coal gas—was far too vulgar to be thought of. Nothing but wax candles was endurable. A hundred candles would not have been too many; the candelabra on the table held but twenty. The expanse of white napery, the glittering cutlery, the polished silver and glass caught all the light. The servants moved about in the surrounding gloom like shadows.

The duke sat at one end of the table and Lady Barbara at the other. Anything like connected conversation was very difficult. But this did not matter much. Neither father nor daughter was inclined to talk. It was not until the dinner was over and the servants had quitted the room that his Grace, eyeing his glass critically, remarked:

"I suppose you're in no violent hurry. It's but eight o'clock, and I take it that the quadrilles and waltzes aren't in full swing until ten. If you're anything like me you won't care to be troubled by preliminaries. You'll

prefer to be on the top of the tide."

"I hate *ennui*," said Lady Barbara languidly.

"By all means. To avoid *ennui* is the one aim of life. But at the risk of boring you to death, Barbara, I want to talk to you. We can't shout at each other across the table. Come to the fire."

An arm-chair was on one side of the large fire-place and a settee on the other. His Grace took up a position with his back to the fire and pointed to the settee. Her ladyship, looking not over-pleased at the proposition, obeyed. She apprehended an unpleasant discussion and she folded her really beautiful arms, bare to the shoulder, defiantly, and pouted her full lips.

"I hope you won't keep me long, papa," said she. "I've not finished dressing yet."

"So I perceive," rejoined his Grace, a cold smile curving his thin lips, his eyes resting for a moment on the young lady's daring corsage.

The duke combined the punctilious courtesy of Lord Chesterfield with the insolence of a Brummell. What he lacked in heart he made up in superficial wit. He lived entirely for himself, and professed a sort of callous philosophy which made him indifferent to the opinions and feelings of others. He hated everything which was low, vulgar and ugly, and money he regarded as a means solely to procure him pleasure.

His Grace preceded what he wished to say by taking a pinch of snuff. He had an elegant precision—partly natural, partly carefully educated—in everything he did, and he prided himself on the way he held and tapped his snuff-box with his long, white, delicate fingers, and conveyed the snuff to his thin, aquiline, high-bred nose.

"Is it true, Barbara, that you've broken with young Ralstone?"

"No. We've had a few words, but the engagement's just the same, I believe."

"You believe. Don't you know?"

"Hadn't you better ask Mr. Ralstone?" said her ladyship disdainfully.

"Hardly necessary, if his father speaks the truth. The old fellow's a vulgar boor, but I fancy his word may be taken. Receiving a very vague and unsatisfactory—and I may add, illiterate—letter from him, I took occasion before I left Bath to ride out to his place. I discovered him in a beastly state of intoxication and smelling offensively of rum—a liquor which always makes me feel sick—but sane enough."

"I hope your Grace didn't go to see him on *my* account," broke in Lady Barbara.

"Why not?" inquired the duke blandly. "I trust I may be pardoned for feeling some solicitude in regard to my only daughter. But you'd better hear what I have to say. It seems that he and young Ralstone had had a few words about nothing at all, but the young fellow had got his back up, and on hearing the contents of my letter to Simon Halstead, suggesting a speedy marriage——"

"A speedy marriage? Between me and Mr. Ralstone?" burst out the young lady, "you'd no business to suggest anything of the kind. *I* am the one to decide that—not you. You never told me you had written."

"Please don't be so impetuous. Am I not telling you now? The upshot of the thing is that Ralstone refuses to fulfil his engagement."

At this bombshell Lady Barbara's face went scarlet

and her blue eyes blazed. She trembled with rage and her slippered foot beat a tattoo on the floor.

"It's an intolerable slight—a gross insult," she cried. "He deserves to be horsewhipped."

"If you had a brother probably such a punishment might be inflicted, or at least attempted, for I'm told Ralstone is remarkably handy with his fists. It's unthinkable that *I* can take such a step. I abominate a vulgar fracas. Of course, I might call him out, but I regard making oneself ridiculous as the greatest crime a man of my rank and position can commit. What is more to the purpose is the origin of the unpleasant imbroglio. I understood old Halstead to say that Ralstone thinks you have been rude to him."

"It's false. If I were rude, he gave me cause. He was abominably impertinent."

"I see. Bad temper seems inseparable from love. I don't recollect that I was ever guilty of such folly. My courtship with your mother went remarkably smoothly."

"I dare say. Neither of you, probably, knew what love was," retorted Lady Barbara hotly.

"Nor wanted to know, perhaps. Love's another name for folly. The case of young Ralstone, for instance. He's lost a big fortune——"

"A big fortune? Why, he hasn't a penny of his own."

"Exactly. He's now stranded—left high and dry. The old man's virtually cut him off with the proverbial shilling, and all because of you. I'm bound to say, however, from what Halstead told me, that the fellow stood up to his firebrand of a stepfather like a man. He wouldn't budge an inch, and so they parted in anger."

Lady Barbara's face changed. She hardly knew

whether to be pleased or sorry at Jack's misfortunes. Anyhow, it was all his own fault. There was no reason why he should have broken with her. If he acted through jealousy—well, that was in his favour. It showed her power over him, and what is so pleasing to a woman as power of this kind? Could she have been mistaken in thinking that he was a tame cat always ready to do what he was told? But she could not decide then. Her father was going on with his talk.

"The failure of this marriage, my dear Barbara, is a profound disappointment to me. Old Halstead was prepared to hand over a sum out of which I could have given you a substantial dowry, while the balance would have relieved me from my immediate difficulties."

"It would have made no difference. Mr. Halstead's money would have followed where the thousands you've thrown away have gone—cards."

"I'm not so sure. A run of ill-luck can't continue for ever. It's bound to turn if only I can weather the storm meanwhile. But suppose we leave my debts alone and turn to others infinitely more interesting—yours."

"Mine? What have my paltry debts to do with the matter?"

"Everything, I've a pile of your bills—silks and shawls and I don't know what from the mercer on Ludgate Hill, millinery from Cranbourne Alley, haberdashery, gloves, trinkets from Burlington Arcade, the dressmaker in Bow Street, the——"

"Pray don't be so monstrously ridiculous, papa," interrupted Barbara impatiently. "There's nothing in the list that I can do without—nothing that every woman of fashion isn't entitled to have. They're all everyday ne-

cessities. I've been exceedingly moderate. You ought to have Lady Amersham's bills to pay."

"Lady Amersham is an extremely handsome woman, and knows how to dress. I should be delighted to pay her bills if I had the wherewithal, and it would afford me even greater pleasure if I could pay yours, my dear Barbara. I think, in the way of beauty, you could give points, and you have the immeasurable advantage of youth. But the real point is that your debts amount to nearly five thousand pounds, and I haven't five thousand shillings."

"Let the shopkeepers wait," retorted her ladyship scornfully.

"I quite agree with you, and, saving the extremely vulgar and unpleasant letters I'm constantly receiving, I don't know that they can do anything very serious. I suppose they couldn't put you in King's Bench prison."

"Put me in prison? *Me?* Oh, really, you can't know what you're saying."

"Indeed I do. I hate musty law, and I abominate dried-up, long-faced attorneys; but both are sometimes useful. You see, my child, those debts of yours have been incurred since you came of age, and you're now twenty-two. You had a little money of your own——"

"It wasn't much, and it soon went."

"I knew it would. You haven't the Dacre blood in you for nothing. Anticipating some contretemps, such as now has happened, I took precautions. I instructed Benson to write to your tradesmen—I know them all from the bills I paid for you before you came to the years of discretion—ahem !—warning them that I was no longer responsible for your debts. The scoundrels, notwithstanding, have sent their bills to me, and I had last week to get

Benson to remind them of my repudiation of my liability, and that if they gave you credit they did so at their own risk. So, my dear, you see where you stand."

Lady Barbara was disgusted, and she showed her disgust in her expression, but she said nothing. She knew her father's egotism, his selfishness, his affected cynicism.

"But you needn't despair. You have your youth, your beauty, your superb health—three most valuable assets. Failing young Ralstone—who, by the way, is not quite out of the running, if you're not so foolish as to indulge in a sentimental passion for some handsome but undesirable *parti*."

"Jack Ralstone isn't out of the running, you say," returned Barbara, after a pause. "In what way?"

"His stepfather is still keen upon you as his stepdaughter-in-law, and he admitted that if Ralstone came round and made it up with you that he would be willing to let bygones be bygones. So you still have a trump. card in your hand. If you don't choose to play it, then you must angle for yourself. Whether any other father-in-law would be willing to help me is another matter."

"Oh, there's a road open to you for that purpose, papa. I wonder you haven't thought of it."

"And what is that road, may I ask?"

"Marry a rich widow. There's Mrs. Coutts—the richest woman in Great Britain, so the newspapers say. The old banker died over a year ago, and she's bound to marry again. I read the other day that her husband left her six hundred and seventy thousand pounds, and she has half the profits every year of the banking business. That

ought to tempt you."

"It does tempt me, but—but—Mrs. Coutts!"

"Well, she's not much more than forty, and really not bad looking even now. She's not to my taste, but that's nothing. I dare say I could make myself agreeable to her."

"Doubtless, but I prefer her as a hostess. Her dinners at Stratton Street are superb. She'll probably try the bonds of matrimony once more, but they won't enclose me."

"Why not? You're quite young looking for your age."

Barbara had risen and was standing in front of the duke, her well-formed, if somewhat large, hands resting lightly on his shoulders. Her large swimming eyes were fixed on his face.

"My dear Barbara, what an ass young Ralstone must be, if he ever saw you as you are now. But perhaps he never did."

"He has only himself to blame."

Her shoulders rose and her bosom heaved slightly. One might have thought she was thinking of the man who was so blind to her charms. The thought would have been erroneous. It was Sir Phineas Tenbury whose mocking face her imagination was picturing.

"Don't let us talk of Mr. Ralstone," she went on irritably. "I'm curious to know your opinion of Mrs. Coutts."

"My opinion is that she is a keen, masterful woman of business. Not to my taste at all. We should quarrel within a week. As to my age—she has had experience of one elderly husband; she doesn't want another. She'll possibly marry again, but it will be to some young fool with a handle to his name. That sort of woman generally does. Apart from that, the ugly story of her capture of

old Coutts—the secret marriage a week or two after the funeral of the first Mrs. Coutts—a marriage for which she herself obtained the licence from Doctor's Commons—the bribing of old Raymond, the actor, to be the only witness—the payment to the parson for performing the decidedly irregular ceremony and for forging two false entries in the register to hoodwink the vicar—no thank you. I'll leave Mrs. Coutts alone. Very pleased to put my legs under her mahogany, seeing that royal dukes condescend to do the same, but marriage—it's not to be thought of. Besides, she wouldn't have me. A fine tale to go the rounds of White's or Boodle's—the Duke of Endsleigh rejected by the widow Coutts!"

For once the real duke was seen beneath the society veneer. Barbara was struck by his tone of acerbity, the hardening of his smooth, clean-shaven face. She wondered whether her father had really tried his luck at Stratton Street, or was it a case of the fox and the grapes?

"Oh, no doubt you're right," said she; "but what's to be done?"

"It all depends upon you. I've told you what trumps you hold. It's for you to play your hand skilfully. Don't forget that Ralstone's still a fish to be played with. He's darted away like a restive salmon, but he's not off the hook."

And as a sign that the talk was at an end, his Grace walked to the table, poured himself out a glass of port, which he drank at a gulp. When he again turned towards the fire his daughter had vanished.

CHAPTER IX

An Infamous Plot

An hour later a carriage stopped at the entrance of Cranbourne Alley, Leicester Square, and the footman, springing from his stand behind, opened the carriage door, and a lady muffled in a cloak and with a hood drawn well down over her head, tripped lightly to one of the many milliners' shops within the alley. She rapped at the door impatiently. It was opened by a stout woman, with square shoulders and a pronounced bust, hard features and small, twinkling beadlike eyes.

"La! Is it your ladyship? I did not expect you. Will you please walk in?"

Lady Barbara passed inside rapidly and waited until the door was closed before she spoke. Then in a low, anxious voice:

"Have you a letter for me, Matthews?"

"Yes, m'lady. It came this evening about two hours ago."

"Give it me at once, please."

The woman disappeared into a room behind the shop and returned with a letter, of which Lady Barbara broke the seal in feverish haste. The epistle ran:

Dearest,—Unable to see you at Almack's until after midnight. Till then I am the most miserable of mortals. Your devoted admirer, P.T.

Lady Barbara's blue eyes gleamed for a moment, and then the lids drooped, and she gave a sigh of relief.

"I was fearful he might disappoint me. And I want to see him so much—so much," she sighed.

She folded up the letter and slid it within the bosom of her dress.

"Thank you, Matthews. That's all."

"Not quite all, I'm afraid. I beg your pardon for reminding you of your promise. I trust you will be able to oblige me with some money. I have my rent to meet and——"

"Yes—yes," interjected Lady Barbara irritably. "I know all about that. I've heard it before. I really can't be bothered about money to-night."

The woman's eyes had in them an ugly glint.

"I'm sorry to hear that. It would save you much trouble and worry if you could oblige me."

"It's quite impossible. I don't carry my purse with me when I attend a ball."

"Nor when your ladyship's not attending one either," rejoined Mrs. Matthews, suddenly becoming impudent. "I suppose I'd better speak plainly. I must tell you that unless you pay me fifty pounds by to-morrow night the consequences may be very serious for your ladyship."

"Whatever do you mean, Matthews? You'll have every penny I owe you, but you'll have to wait like other tradespeople."

Lady Barbara spoke angrily and haughtily, after the fashion of the Upper Ten, who in those days were in-

variably rude and imperious to the people who kept shops, even though the shopkeeper might be far wealthier than his or her customer. They thought it an intolerable piece of presumption to be asked for money. As a rule, the shopkeeper accepted the snubbings humbly, but not Mrs. Matthews, on this occasion at all events.

"I'm not going to follow the example of other tradesmen. I don't intend to wait," said she, planting her arms akimbo and sidling in front of Lady Barbara, so that the latter should not escape without hearing what she had to say.

"You're exceedingly impertinent, Matthews. You forget yourself," exclaimed Lady Barbara wrathfully.

"Indeed I don't. It is your ladyship who forgets. Do you suppose I'm going to allow my house to be used as a place of assignation and not be paid?"

Lady Barbara went very white.

"Of course not," she faltered. "But Sir Phineas—has he not given you money? I understood——"

"Sir Phineas has, like your ladyship, given me nothing but promises. I've told you what I want—fifty pounds. If I don't get it by the time I mentioned, I shall send the bill to the duke, and shall not forget to tell him what it's for."

Lady Barbara trembled. Not for ten thousand worlds would she have her indiscretion known to her father. Equally disastrous would it be if Mrs. Matthews opened her mouth to her gossips. Good-bye then to her chances of marriage with a rich man, either aristocrat or *parvenu*.

"Surely you'd not do anything so disgraceful," she returned in a choking voice.

"Your ladyship can easily avoid exposure," was the woman's cold reply.

"Cannot you give me a little longer time?"

"No. I must have my money before to-morrow night."

The unhappy Lady Barbara could make no reply. She was overwhelmed. Mrs. Matthews, having delivered her ultimatum, moved aside, opened the door, and the young lady, her head bent down, hurried to her carriage, and, once inside flung herself in a corner, her eyes filled with tears of rage and shame. Yet within an hour she was apparently enjoying herself immensely amid the exclusiveness of Almack's, so much so that the all powerful Lady Jersey condescended to compliment her on her attractiveness.

"You ought to make a conquest to-night, Lady Barbara," said the lady autocrat, surveying the young woman critically. "You're certainly the handsomest girl in the room."

Lady Barbara made a curtsy in acknowledgment of her ladyship's compliment, and murmured, as in duty bound, some words depreciatory of herself.

"Don't talk nonsense," returned the high and mighty lady patroness. "A girl in her first season should always make the best of herself. Then is her chance. The King was pleased to be charmed with you at your presentation. Is it true that you're engaged to Mr. Ralstone? I knew his father very well in my young days. His widow, I consider, disgraced herself terribly by marrying a sugar planter. I've never seen the man, but it's impossible he can be otherwise than a vulgarian. But I suppose he's very rich, and money, like charity, covers a multitude of sins."

And with a cold smile the arbiter of fashion sailed away.

The mention of Jack Ralstone's name sent Lady Barbara's heart cold. She was very thankful, however, that Lady Jersey had not questioned her about the position of affairs. She would not have known how to reply. It was very clear that the breaking of her engagement was not known in society, and for this also she was glad.

Ever since her talk with her father Lady Barbara had been torn by doubts and fears. Amid her tormenting reflections, self reproach, resentment, consciousness of folly, and the rest, thoughts of Ralstone occupied the first place. His defection, without a word of explanation to her, had wounded her vanity and piqued her self-love. It was an insult to her womanhood, for, as a philosopher has observed, a woman may forgive an injury, but a slight, never. She was burning to punish him. But how? The most fitting retribution would be to bring him to her feet and then laugh him to scorn.

The duke's suggestion of her power to tempt and conquer men had sunk deeply into her mind. She knew she had this power, but she had always been too proud to use it. Certainly she had never tried to use it over Jack Ralstone. It did not seem worth while. Knowing he was bound to her, she did not trouble about him. Now that he had thrown her over a revulsion of feeling had set in. She wanted him back. Not that she loved him. Sir Phineas had spoilt *that* emotion—at all events for a time. No, it was to humble him, if possible. But really, at that moment, with the expectation of seeing Sir Phineas hovering at the back of her mind, she was in such confusion she could not bring herself to a calm judgment.

To distract her thoughts she plunged wildly into dancing. She had no lack of partners. Her vivacity, the result

of over-strained nerves, amounting almost to hysteria, was in such contrast with the primness of most of the London *belles* that when not dancing she was the centre of a group of admirers.

When twelve o'clock was near Lady Barbara became very nervous. Her eyes were fixed on the door by which Sir Phineas was bound to enter, and lest she should miss him she begged to be excused, on the score of fatigue, the waltz she had promised. She then withdrew into one of the ante-rooms to collect herself. The doorway commanded a view of the entrance, and she had been sitting scarcely five minutes when she saw him come in and scrutinise the dancers. She rose to meet him, but resumed her seat on seeing him cross the ballroom in the direction of the ante-chamber. She became greatly agitated, and was fanning herself vigorously when he came into the room and sat himself down by her side.

"You look charming to-night, Lady Barbara," he whispered. "You are adorable."

"I feel neither the one nor the other," she returned a little pettishly, and found relief for her disturbed nerves in fingering the fringe of her fan.

Sir Phineas gazed at her with animalism pictured in his eyes. He certainly had not exaggerated his compliments. The haughtiness habitual to her had disappeared, and with it an affectation which made her beauty somewhat insipid. Emotion had given her expression, and there was something in that expression which was peculiarly agreeable to the temperament of the man whose eyes were fixed gloatingly upon her. To see women suffer was one of his pleasures.

The dress Lady Barbara was wearing became her de-

lightfully. It was of white muslin, with a deep ornamental border of gold edging the skirt. The waist came nearly to her armpits, and the puffed sleeves—if the cluster of material cunningly woven together by the dressmaker's deft fingers could be called a sleeve—it was really a puff intersected by ribbon—accentuated the statuesque shoulders above and her full, round arms below. White kid gloves reached to her elbows, and white satin dancing shoes encased her small feet. Her bright tawny hair, inclining naturally to curl, showed signs of rebellion beneath the gauze turban of light blue, and a rope of pearls encircled her neck and seemed to vibrate with life at every rise and fall of her bosom. The costume brought to the mind a picture of a wilful, capricious hoyden, and the suggestion of spoilt childishness imparted a piquancy to her charms altogether alluring.

"Why are you so late?" said she with an effort.

"You had my note."

"Oh, yes. It was horribly disappointing. I wish I'd not called for it. I wanted you so much. I hoped you would have been here earlier. I'm distraught. Such frightful things have occurred."

"Frightful? To you? What frightful things could possibly happen to my beautiful Barbara?" he returned with a quizzical smile.

"If you'll try to be serious I'll tell you. To begin with, I'm horribly in debt. I want fifty pounds at once."

"What, to-night?"

"To-morrow at the latest. It's to stop the mouth of that vile traitress Matthews. She has threatened to disclose everything to the Duke unless she's paid. You told me that you would satisfy her, and you haven't. It was

unkind of you, Phineas."

"Not intentional unkindness, dearest. It was a physical impossibility. I've been infernally hit over that fight at Andover. I backed Neate heavily, and the fellow was licked."

"I'm sorry. But fifty pounds—it's a mere trifle. You can let me have that, surely."

"Coax it out of his Grace. You can twist your father round your little finger if you care to do so."

"I don't care. It would be of no use. I had a most unpleasant talk with him this evening—I've got to tell you about that—and in the course of it he told me he'd no available money at all. Think of it! The Duke of Endsleigh penniless!"

"Sounds bad, of course. But penniless noblemen seem to get on very well. Having no money is but an incentive to borrow more and spend more."

"That's nonsense. Anyhow, Matthews must be satisfied. You see that, don't you?"

"I don't see what harm the Jezebel can do you. Neither the Duke nor any one else would believe her slanders."

"Indeed, you're wrong. Slanders are the only things people *do* believe. Think of me—my reputation—"

"I'm always thinking of you, sweetest. But about the Duke. You were saying—"

"He refused to pay any more of my bills. A whole year's debts have accumulated. I owe I don't know how much, and all that the Duke can suggest is that I should marry a rich man."

"Excellent advice. Why don't you follow it?"

"Phineas! And you?"

"I'm out of the running—as a husband. I haven't a

stiver. I've never made any secret of that. Why don't you marry young Ralstone?"

Lady Barbara started to her feet. Her face had gone chalky white even to her lips.

"Do *you* tell me that? Have I then been simply your toy?" she flung at him in tones subdued enough but vibrating with intense passion.

"Sit down, Barbara, and let us talk out this thing quietly. It's no time for heroics."

His eyes hardened and he grasped her bare arm above the elbow with a savage pressure that told of his mastery over her. She obeyed tremblingly.

"I love you more than I've loved any woman. I've lost my heart, but I'm not going to lose my head. I confess that I wanted to cut out Ralstone, and I've succeeded. I know very well you're mine—"

"And you'd have me marry him! Your boasted love's a sham! I—"

Her voice died away in an excess of anger.

"My love for you is part of my life. You'll be just the same to me no matter whose wife you are and I'll swear I shall be the same to you. If you were married to that fellow Ralstone I should love you a thousand times more than I do now, if it were possible. I hate him. I've reason to. I've had a bit of my revenge. I've robbed him of you. I wonder how he'd feel if he knew it. But I shan't be satisfied until you're his wife."

"That will never be," cried Barbara with emphasis.

"Never! Have you given him his *congé*?"

"No. It is the other way about. He has refused to marry me."

"Because of me?" sneeringly asked Sir Phineas.

"I can't tell. I should think not. Save that abominable creature Matthews, who knows of our secret meetings? My engagement to Mr. Ralstone is broken off and so is his dependence on his stepfather. He won't have any allowance from him for the future. Of course I can no longer expect to marry him."

Tenbury's face became as black as a thundercloud. His complete revenge would have been to see Barbara Ralstone's wife and yet retain his hold over her. He had nursed this plan until he was sanguine of its success. It was this which prompted him to pursue Lady Barbara until he had absolute power over her.

The plot had failed if the marriage could not be brought about. The sense of discomfiture—for Ralstone had up to the present won all along—galled him to the quick, and he sat scowling, motionless and apparently oblivious of the agitated woman by his side.

"You jilted the fellow then?" he jerked out suddenly.

"No. He simply told his stepfather he didn't intend to marry me. He hasn't even deigned to acquaint me with his decision. It's an insult."

Sir Phineas relapsed into his fit of stony abstraction. He could only ascribe Ralstone's extraordinary conduct to one cause—some other woman had captured him. And the woman? She of the dark eyes, the raven hair? The Venus clad in rags? It was certain she had gone away with him. Since then all trace of her had vanished, in spite of Sir Phineas's efforts and the efforts of the agents always at his command whenever he chose to amuse himself with an intrigue.

"It seems to me, Barbara, that Ralstone hasn't given you up," said he, his manner softening. "Until he tells

you so himself all hope isn't lost."

"All hope? What have I to do with hope so far as Jack Ralstone is concerned? I've as little desire to marry him as he has to marry me."

"Oh, I can see you're a pair of simpletons. I have to say this to you—you *must* marry him."

Lady Barbara flushed angrily.

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Not even if he were to beg my forgiveness for his intolerable insolence. And let me tell you, Phineas, that I'm not accustomed to be told that I *must* do this or that."

"You'll probably have to get used to the process. You've had one lesson in discipline from your father and you're having another now from me. I repeat you *must* marry Ralstone. It's the only chance left to you to escape your embarrassments."

"There's but one embarrassment which really troubles me—the threat of that odious Matthews. You can save me from that. You have but to satisfy her."

"And if I don't choose to do so? What then?"

"You would not be so heartless—so dishonourable. The debt is as much yours as mine," cried Lady Barbara, her lower lip pouting and tremulous.

"The debt, yes. But not the consequences. I've no reputation to lose; every shred has long vanished. But you, Lady Barbara Dacre, the daughter of the Duke of Endsleigh! And in your first season too! It would be nothing if you had been hardened by the fire of scandal like many fashionable women I could name. It would be nothing if you were married. Women excuse wives who seek the consolation and amusement they don't get from their husbands. But they haven't a word of excuse

for the innocent débutante. The most terrible blunder a woman can make is to blunder at the start of her career."

"And that's your answer."

Lady Barbara's tremor of the lip extended to her whole body. She was suffering intolerable torture under the man's cynical callousness.

"That's my answer and it's given in your own interest."

"Oh, you men are monsters," she gasped. "I thought my father was cruel, but you're worse—a thousand times worse. I wish I'd never spoken to you—never seen you. I hate you."

"No you don't. You're just making a wry face and whimpering because you have to swallow an unpleasant pill. You're a beautiful woman, Barbara, but as yet you don't know how to make yourself fascinating. That knowledge will come. What is the whole duty of man? To be fooled by woman. It's her greatest triumph. To some it comes naturally. To others—well, they learn it by bitter experience."

"It's shameful to be compelled to sit here and listen to your atrocious sentiments."

"My dear Barbara, the truth often sounds atrocious, but it's the truth nevertheless. Just think. How many of the rich young fools, and old ones too for the matter of that, will look at you after our long *tête-à-tête*? Nearly one o'clock. We've been sitting here a good half-hour."

Lady Barbara started. The consequences of the compromising situation in which she had involved herself by her long talk with the notorious Sir Phineas Tenbury flashed across her mind. She had been so absorbed. The crisis in her life which had so suddenly arisen had taken so firm a hold upon her that the minutes had sped by

unnoticed. Couples had entered the tea-room and had departed. Dowagers and chaperons, eyeing everybody, could not have failed to notice her and her companion, and were bound to draw their own conclusions. The terrible thought that Sir Phineas had purposely invited scandal convulsed her. She cast a glance at his face. It was as hard as flint. She sat mute, a prey to agonising self-reproaches. She listened to her companion, unable to utter a word.

"I'll make you an offer," he was saying. "Win back young Ralstone. You can do it if you choose to fascinate him. The difference with old Halstead will then be smoothed over without the slightest difficulty. I know all about the dowry the old man had promised you. With Ralstone as your husband you'll have plenty of money to spend, and life will go as easily as an old tune. Do this, my charmer, and that harpy Matthews will trouble you no more."

"And you, Phineas? Do you fling me aside?" she forced herself to say.

"Not at all. We shall be just as we have been—just as we are now," he returned composedly.

Lady Barbara shuddered. She understood. It was an infamous bargain, but what was she to do?

"Well?" he asked, after a long pause.

"You are merciless," she faltered slowly. "I feel bound hand and foot. Have your way."

CHAPTER X

A Gala Night at the Fives Court

"What's to be done, Walsham?"

"Nothing but wait. You're not in a particular hurry, I suppose, to be killed or to kill your man."

"No, but I should like to get it over and done with. How long will Lord Houston be away?"

The young nobleman shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"An impossible question to answer, my dear fellow. Houston's gone off to Paris with a pretty dancer from the ballet at the King's Theatre, and won't be back while she continues to amuse him."

"Tenbury could appoint another second," said Ralstone, sipping his port slowly.

"Of course he could, but from what I hear he won't—that is, not while he owes you money."

"Is he so anxious to pay his debts of honour?"

"Well, that kind is the only honour he possesses. *Noblesse oblige*, you know. He told a friend of mine the other day that if he ran you through while the debt existed, it would be said he did it because he wanted to creep out of discharging it."

"H'm, he said that, did he?" responded Ralstone, musingly. "Looks as if he intended to choose swords when the time comes for the affair."

"It would be very unusual. Swords are out of fashion for duels, although they are still used on the Continent."

"Possibly, but I fancy a bullet can be as fatal as a rapier point."

"No doubt. But a chivalrous person can exercise his privilege of firing in the air if his man misses him. Whereas, all things being equal, when you're fencing you go on. You can't afford to be generous unless you're very much the better man and you can disarm your opponent. But what makes you think Tenbury will choose swords?"

"The first cause of offence was my beating him at a fencing bout at Castellani's. I don't say I handle the foils better than Tenbury—I should say there are very few things he has to learn that way—but he was devilish careless—made too sure, you know—and let me in. He's not likely to do that a second time."

Lord Walsham silently puffed at his "segar." The two were in the coffee-room of the "Tavistock," having steadily ploughed their way through mock turtle, cod and oyster sauce, roast beef, a bird, and apple tart—the orthodox hotel menu.

"It's no affair of mine, Jack, of course, but it helps a second to take the right line when he knows what his principal is quarrelling about. If it's only a trifle, you see, the door's open to a compromise. I see no sense in getting shot or pinked to satisfy a punctilio of honour."

"Nor I. I thought I hinted to you that the real cause of difference was over a woman."

"Yes, I've learned as much as that and no more. Are you in love with her?"

"The deuce only knows. I don't."

"Then it isn't about Lady Barbara Dacre?"

"No. So far as Lady Barbara's concerned, *that* affair's off."

"The devil it is. You made her jealous, I suppose, over—the other woman."

"You're wrong. The boot's on the other leg. Lady Barbara seemed disposed to play fast and loose, so I gave her her head, and we haven't seen each other since, and I doubt if we're likely to."

Lord Walsham permitted himself to indulge in a low, prolonged and decidedly plebeian whistle.

"That accounts for it then," said he, as though talking to himself.

"Accounts for what?"

"Why, for what Georgie Nye—Beau Nye he's called, you know—told me at White's this afternoon. Nye's so inveterate a retailer of scandal, and such an infernal liar. I didn't believe him. But it would seem that for once in his life he may have spoken the truth. He was at Almack's last night, and he swears he saw Lady Barbara Dacre and Tenbury sitting in the tea-room for over half an hour and they did nothing but whisper, quite blind and deaf to all that was going on around them. George thought from Lady Barbara's clouded face that something like a quarrel had happened. It couldn't have been very serious. Anyhow, apparently they made it up, for they waltzed together when they returned to the ballroom. Whatever the meaning, Lady Barbara seems to have been somewhat indiscreet. With any other man

but Tenbury it wouldn't have mattered a jot. Of course I shouldn't have told you a word of this if you hadn't said the engagement was broken."

Ralstone winced. Although he had ceased to think of Lady Barbara as his fiancée, it was not pleasant to hear how soon she had consoled herself for her loss. Yet it ought hardly to surprise him. She had shown a decided preference for Sir Phineas at the Bath masquerade, and Sir Phineas had not failed to pursue his advantage.

"It's no affair of mine," he growled. "She's at liberty to do as she likes."

"And you also. I imagine I ought to congratulate you. The Duke of Endsleigh's as poor as a church mouse and now that you expect nothing from Mr. Halstead, you don't want to saddle yourself with a woman of fashion with not a penny for her to dress upon and gamble with. I hope you've fixed your fancy on a rich heiress. Tenbury's not the man to bother about a woman unless she's wealthy and belongs to the *beau monde.* He recognises no other."

"My dear Walsham, there's no rule without an exception, but it's not a question of the *beau monde* in this case. To tell you the truth I haven't the slightest idea to what world the woman belongs. I've only seen her once, and I'd give the universe, if I had it, to see her again, but she's vanished into thin air."

"And you're going to fight about her?" asked Walsham, elevating his eyebrows.

Jack Ralstone nodded.

"Then all I've got to say is that you must be confoundedly in love with her."

Ralstone made no reply. He was staring moodily at

the crimson papered wall opposite him.

"You're damned quixotic, Jack Ralstone, and—if you'll permit me to say so—damned foolish."

"Add that I'm damned romantic, and you'll have the list of adjectives complete."

"Not bad credentials to start with. If you want to be noticed you must be talked about. Women don't mind a scandal attaching to a man. In fact, they rather like it. Corinthians are privileged, but you must do something out of the common to justify your existence."

"Knock down a 'Charley' and shut him up in his own box, for instance," said Jack ironically.

"That kind of notoriety's played out. It's a bit low. Your fighting a duel for a woman you've only seen once, and never likely to see again, is tip top. It ought to make your fortune. See here, Ralstone. Give me carte blanche to tell this love story of yours, with judicious embellishments, and a few mysterious winks thrown in, to give the thing the proper 'Castle Spectre' mystery, and I'll wager you'll have half a dozen women of fortune at your feet within a week. I'm not joking."

"So I should hope. The matter's far too serious for a joke. You'll oblige me very much if you'll keep your mouth shut. I shouldn't have told you if I thought you were going to carry it over the town."

"Of course, if that's the case, I'm mum. But what's your game? You've been flashing your coin as if you were living in 'Tip Street'—that's the correct cant term, I believe, for plenty of money—and as you've confessed to me you've no resources beyond what you won over Spring and Neate, you'll soon be at Point Nonplus. Tenbury's payment's very doubtful. Have you had Weare's

coin yet?"

"No—the scoundrel, and I doubt if I shall get it. But I'm not bothering about money just now. I'm going to the Fives Court to-night. Tom Spring has a benefit and I'm bound to support him. Will you join me?"

"With pleasure. And go on to White's afterwards for a flutter! What say you?"

"I don't care. Fortune favours the bold," rejoined Ralstone recklessly.

At that moment he was approaching perilously near the end of his resources. A month had gone over since he left Bristol, and he had been living in much the same manner as when enjoying Simon Halstead's liberal allowance. If anything, he had spent more. He had won a little at Ascot, and again at a cock fight in Tot-hill's Fields, Westminster, but it had gone almost as soon as he had pocketed it. With Tenbury's £4,000 he would be in clover, but this had not been forthcoming. Meanwhile, his tailor and his glover were beginning to be clamorous. But the anxiety of these gentry was not troubling him to-night.

The Fives Court in St. Martin's Street, Leicester Square, was but little more than five minutes' walk from the "Tavistock." Not worth while to take a hackney coach, and the two friends sauntered out.

"What's the matter?" asked Walsham.

Ralstone had not gone a couple of yards from the private entrance of the hotel in James Street when he stopped for an instant as though he had forgotten something.

"Go on," said he in a low voice, "but glance at the man opposite standing at the corner of the arcade. Don't let

him think you're looking at him."

Jack slid his arm within his companion's and the action brought Walsham slightly round so that he was able to direct his eyes across the street naturally.

"Well," said Walsham, when they had resumed their walk. "I've obeyed you. What then?"

"Have you ever seen the fellow before?"

"No."

"Would you know him again?"

"I think so."

"What does he look like to you?"

"A slinking-eyed, crafty scoundrel, ready to do any dirty work for a guinea."

"That's my opinion too. I've caught the blackguard waiting at that corner a dozen times or so. I've seen him at places where I've been—the theatres and so on, and I've a shrewd suspicion he's followed me more than once, though I can't swear to it—the beggar's as slippery as an eel. What does it mean?"

"How the deuce can I tell? If what you say is true, he means you some ill. You'd better keep your eyes open when you're going through the market at night. The place is villainously lighted and full of dark corners. As for the unwashed mob, men and women—and I'm not sure the women aren't worse than the men—always lurking about after dark, well, you know as much about them as I do. Let half a dozen set upon you and they'd strip you of everything and maybe leave you half dead before the watchmen are awake."

"I'm not afraid of the mob. I fancy I could give them as good as they gave, but this man's game isn't robbery. And the odd thing is that I'm sure I've seen him before

somewhere—I mean before I put up at the 'Tavistock.' It isn't so much his ill-favoured mug that's impressed on my memory, as a peculiar bend in his shoulders—the sort of bend that belongs to a sneak."

"I know what you mean—the cringing, crawling, snaky sort of chap. And you can't fix where you saw him first?"

"Not precisely, but I believe if I heard his voice it would help me."

"Anyhow, that's easy. You've but to ask him why the devil he's watching the hotel and you'd know."

"That would be a stupid blunder—that is, if he's really spying upon me, as I firmly believe he is. I shall let him have rope enough and when the time comes strike and strike and strike hard."

"I shan't give him much chance," said Walsham, laughingly. "The fellow doesn't look as if he were any good at fighting."

"It wouldn't matter if he were. It's not the scoundrel himself I want to get at but the people behind him. It's absurd to suppose a shabby wretch like that can have any grudge against me."

"Well, it's all to the good," remarked the young lord with an air of profound wisdom.

"All to the good? What the deuce do you mean?"

"My dear Ralstone, can't you see if anything serious comes of this mystery man, it'll help to bring you into the fierce light that beats upon people of *ton*. I'm bent upon marrying you to a rich woman and notoriety's the first step."

"I don't care a hang for notoriety nor a rich woman either. I've something else in my mind, though I doubt

if my dream will ever become a reality."

"It's a dream, is it? Then you're more foolish than I take you to be. But here we are."

A crowd of rough-looking, dirty-faced men, some with the broken noses, the high cheek bones and the square ugly chins of the born fighter, were struggling through the entrance to the Fives Court, bellowing for no particular reason save the effects of the gin and porter they had swallowed, and exchanging coarse chaff.

"Can't say much for your friend Spring's admirers. A greasy mob," whispered Walsham, with a look of disgust. The young lord had more fancy for cards than for boxing.

"Oh, they're not all Spring's admirers. A heap of well-known bruisers are here to-night and each one's got his crowd of backers. These P.R. men are little gods. It's a mixed entertainment to-night. Any man who's fought in the ring for over £25 can have a set to. Whether he wins or loses he'll have a guinea and a supper afterwards at Cribb's pub, Panton Street. Besides the admission money there'll be whatever sum we Corinthians. as we've been dubbed, choose to subscribe. You're not of the noble order of 'millers' Walsham, but here you are and you'll have to put your hand in your pocket, so I warn you."

"Very good. I'm not frightened," rejoined Walsham nonchalantly. "I won't even ask where the money's going."

"You may if you like. It's to pay for the guineas and the supper, and when those expenses are squared the residue is to purchase a presentation silver cup for Tom. Spring, you know, by beating Neate, is the champion of England."

"I've no objection. Spring's a decent fellow. But, Ralstone, are we expected to rub shoulders with those brass-throated ruffians? One fellow who gave me a shove as he squeezed by must have come from a Smithfield slaughterhouse. I declare I could smell the blood and fat."

"That's very likely. Jack's as good as his master here," laughed Ralstone. "I'll take you to the proper entrance for the swells."

The door was down a narrow passage and here stood half a dozen sturdy fellows on guard, in the event of any sudden rush of the dregs of the crowd eager to see the show without the trouble of paying. Jack was well known to the "fancy" and he and Walsham were received with the utmost respect, especially as each planked down a guinea for admission.

The Fives Court was a big building, circular in shape, with a platform in the centre for the boxers. It was packed to suffocation. The air was hot and stifling, partly from want of ventilation, partly from acrid tobacco smoke, but mostly from the foul clothes of the audience and the odour of stale drink. Beer cans were being freely passed about.

A place had been reserved for the "nobs" and Ralstone and his friend were warmly welcomed by the heroes Cribb and Spring. Bill Neate, the defeated one at the Andover fight, was also there, his arm in a sling, and he pricked up his ears when he heard Ralstone's name. He chanced to be close by.

"Excuse me taking the liberty, sir, but bean't you from the Holbrook Manor House—Squire Halstead's place?" said he, with his finger to his forehead.

"Yes, but I'm not living there now," said Jack.

"So I heered from Steve Carne, the Squire's groom. I had a glass wi' Steve about a week or so after the mill an' he bid me say to 'ee, sir, if so be as a comed across 'ee in London, as the Squire's been main queer since your honour left the Manor House."

"Oh? What ails him?"

"That's what's worrying Steve. The old gentleman's took it to heart your going away, but it bean't that, Steve says, as is the trouble. Something's happened but Steve don't know what. He lifted his right arm pretty often when you was no longer in the house—you know what I mean, sir—rum, that's his fav'rite tipple—an' he was a bit upset over my losin' the championship—had a few hunderds on me, though that oughtn't to hurt him, chock full as is his money bags—but it's something else as has changed him."

"Something else, Neate? What do you mean?"

"Can't tell 'ee, sir, cause Stephen didn't know. But it seems he went out for a walk and comed back lookin' very white and all of a tremble like. Mrs. Coombes, the cook and keeper, thought as how he was ill, an' begged him to send for Dr. Jevons, but he cursed her fur a fool up hill an' down dale, and shut himself up in his room wi' a bottle o' rum. He's been on the booze—saving your presence, sir—ever since, an' Mrs. Coombes says he never goes to bed wi'out a pair o' loaded barkers under his pillow. She's afeard as he'll do himself some harm wi' 'em some day. He bean't fit to handle firearms."

Jack heard all this with concern, but he wasn't surprised. His stepfather often had long drinking bouts when out of temper, and this doubtless was one of them. But the cause? Probably disappointment at the failure of

his scheme concerning Lady Barbara Dacre. If so, what could Ralstone do? Nothing. After what Walsham had told him about Lady Barbara and Sir Phineas at Almack's anything like a reconciliation between him and the lady was impossible. All he could say to Neate was that he was sorry.

"Steve told me," went on Neate hesitatingly, "that it were a pity your honour couldn't come down and see the Squire, as he b'lieves the old man 'ud make it up wi' 'ee if so be as 'ee didn't rub him the wrong way—askin' your pardon for sayin' so. I give my word to Steve to tell 'ee and so I have."

"I'm much obliged, Neate. I'll think over what you've said."

Neate's finger went up to his forehead and the talk ended. Jack wasn't much disturbed. He was not at all disposed to conciliate his stepfather because he knew it would have to be on conditions he was not prepared to submit to. The thing which puzzled him was the Squire's sudden fit of fright; for this was the only explanation of keeping loaded pistols in his bedchamber. Yet Simon Halstead was not easily frightened. Often and often, when in his cups and in his passion, he had sworn that he feared neither God nor the devil, let alone any man on the face of the earth.

Ralstone's thoughts were suddenly put an end to by catching sight of the man whom he suspected of watching him. The fellow was in the shadow, his back against the wall and his peaked cap drawn well over his eyes. Only the lower part of the face was visible. But it was the man. That peculiar, cringing stoop of the shoulders revealed him. Of course, the fellow's presence might be

merely a coincidence. Certainly he had a perfect right to be present if he were so minded. But all the same it was disquieting.

"You know most of the crowd here, Spring, I suspect," said he to the champion.

"Pretty well, sir. They're mostly the scourings of Tom Belcher's house. the 'Castle,' Cribb's place in Panton Street, and my own pub in Weymouth Street."

"What about that man with the cap over his eyes? Who's he?"

"Never saw him before. Doesn't look as if he'd ever had a turn up in his life."

"No—a sort of chap who's more used to being kicked."

"What's he done? Robbed you, sir? Pocket-picking's his lay, I'll bet."

"Very likely. But it's of no consequence."

Spring turned away. The fun had commenced. A couple of well-known boxers had stepped upon the platform amid the yells of their respective friends, and commenced to spar. Of course, they were not in earnest. It was but a show to amuse the crowd. A few rounds were fought, then the combatants gave place to another couple, who in their turn retired after a bout or two. And so the entertainment went on. Then came shouts for Spring. He and Cribb were expected to have a set to, but these accomplished gladiators were not able to display their accomplishment. Spring, who spoke to Lord Walsham's surprise with grammatical correctness and with a refinement of tone quite exceptional among the "fancy," explained that his hands were tender—it was his only defect as a fighter—otherwise he would have been glad to oblige.

Tom paid a compliment to Bill Neate for his gallantry in the fight for the championship, and this brought his old antagonist to his feet. Neate explained that his arm was broken some time in the third round, and of course thus crippled he could not be expected to win. Sympathising shouts greeted this statement, mingled with incredulous scoffs from two or three of Spring's devotees, who had dipped too deeply in the beer can.

Cribb at this point announced that while the receipts were ample to provide the necessary guineas, and the supper to follow, they did not suffice to purchase a cup worthy of the champion's acceptance. The cap would therefore go round. Cribb was no orator, but he went straight to the point, and as he knew the majority of the spectators wanted the money in their pockets for "heavy wet" and "max," he made a direct appeal to the Corinthians present.

"Bravo, Tom," shouted Ralstone. "Here's five guineas." The crowd yelled with delight. Lord Walsham followed with a similar offer. Renewed yells. The other "swells" were not behindhand and Cribb was about to announce the sum collected when there was a movement in the packed room. Heads swayed, bodies were jerked this way and that, it was like the stirring up of a muddy pool.

Presently a big athletic, black-haired, clean shaven fellow, his face flushed, his eyes bleary, his dress disordered, forced his way through the growling mob to the platform.

CHAPTER XI

A Fight not in the Programme

"It's Jack Thurtell," whispered a man next Ralstone. "What devil's game is he up to? Wherever he shows his head a shindy generally follows. He's out for a row. He's as drunk as drunk can be."

This was pretty evident. Thurtell was gripping the edge of the platform to steady himself. There was an ugly look in his deep-set eyes which meant mischief. His glance fixed on Ralstone.

"I believe you call yourself a Corinthian," he shouted thickly. "You——"

"No, I don't. You may call me one if you like," broke in Ralstone, answering the glitter in Thurtell's eyes with contempt and defiance written in his own.

"I'll call you something else if you give me any of your sauce," retorted Thurtell insolently.

Ralstone would have started to his feet, and something like a free fight might have followed, but Walsham pinned him down, and Cribb, eager to protect his noble patrons and preserve order, advanced to the edge of the platform.

"None of your insults, Mr. Thurtell. You ought to know

better. If you can't behave yourself, there's plenty here who can teach you. Now then, what do you want?"

"I'll tell you in two-twos, if you'll give me a hearing. I know how to behave myself in any company, from a Royal Levee to a boozing ken. If I've said anything to offend you, Tom Cribb, I apologise. You're one of the finest and biggest hearted men that ever stepped."

"Then don't forget that when you insult any of my friends you insult me. Now what *is* it you want?"

"Just this. The Tulips have planked down a paltry five guineas, led by their bell-wether. I'll double that and here's the brass."

He pulled out a handful of coin and counted out ten, each coin jumping a foot high as he rang them on the boards.

"Of course, I'm much obliged to Mr. Thurtell, but we'd ha' liked it better if he'd been a bit more polite," said Cribb, not over delighted. Thurtell, who ran a public-house in Long Acre, had a bad reputation, and it was doubtful if the money had been honestly come by. "I'm not sure whether I want your guineas. We've got enough to buy a good cup."

"Take the coin and buy a better one," roared Thurtell. "I know what's in your mind. Let me tell you it's clean money. Perhaps you don't know that I've won my action to-day against that thief Barber Beaumont and his swindling Insurance Company. A £1,000 damages! A cool £1,000! Isn't that so, boys?"

He wheeled round and hurled the question at the mob.

"Quite true, Mr. Thurtell," "Good old Terrible Jack!" and a few more affirmations, more or less strengthened by lurid adjectives, came from different parts of

the room. Thurtell had evidently brought a strong party with him. As a matter of fact he had been flinging his money about in the adjacent taverns ever since the jury had decided in his favour over a claim for the insurance of a house in his possession which had been burnt down—a claim which the company had disputed.

Tom Cribb did not argue the point. He picked up the coins, and handed them to another member of the P.R. who was acting as treasurer.

"Now then, boys," went on Thurtell in a stentorian voice, "would you like to see some real fun? You've had enough of the pugs. What about a set to between gentlemen? I challenge the young 'Pink' over there."

He shot his finger out towards Jack Ralstone.

"That's not in the list. I'm in the chair here," said Cribb, stolidly, "and I'm not going to have it."

Ralstone was on his feet in a flash, to the horror of Lord Walsham.

"I'd like to obey your order, Cribb," said he, very cool and resolute, "but I've been challenged, and if I say nothing it will be thought I'm afraid. Now, I don't care that, for Mr. Thurtell."

He snapped his fingers, and the shouts of applause shook the rafters. "He's a game 'un," "Let the swells have a turn"—"Two to one on the Pink"—"Three to one on Jack Thurtell"—were heard amid the babel of sounds.

Cribb talked for a few moments with Spring, and by their glances it was clear that Jack Ralstone was the subject of their conference. Meanwhile the raucous voices of the mob made everything inaudible. Spring came across to Ralstone.

"Are you in earnest, Mr. Ralstone?" said he.

"Of course I am. I had a little mill with the bully at Andover, just after you knocked Neate out of time, and I downed him. This is a planned thing to get his own back. All right, I mean to spoil the plan."

"But I can't quite make it out. How did Thurtell know you would be here?"

"He didn't know. It was coincidence. At least, I think so. But ..."

It suddenly occurred to Ralstone that Thurtell's presence might be due to the fellow whom he suspected of spying upon him. Here might be the key of the mystery. But it was not wholly satisfactory, and, in fact, only feasible on the supposition that the spy had been in touch with Thurtell all day long, and knew where to send to him after his victory, no matter where he might be carousing. It was not impossible, but certainly improbable.

"Well, what about it, Tom," went on Ralstone impatiently. "Has Cribb any objection?"

"He doesn't care for the exhibition, but he doesn't oppose it."

"That's settled then. See here, Spring, I'm not going to let that boasting bully's taunt about the subscriptions go unanswered. I shall give £10 more towards your cup."

"You're a thorough gentleman, Mr. Ralstone, and a thorough sportsman," cried Spring heartily, "and I thank you. But you've done quite enough without your generous offer."

"Say no more. Mr. Cribb—"

Tom Cribb crossed the platform at the sound of Jack's voice, and his eyes beamed with pleasure when he heard of the proposed addition to the fund.

"It's very generous of you, sir, and I shall be pleased to announce it. I was beginning to be sorry I accepted Thurtell's money. I should have felt ashamed if an outsider and a rogue topped the list over you Corinthians. You've scored a higher throw, and the thing's done."

"And the match?" demanded Jack eagerly.

Cribb's experienced eyes went over Jack Ralstone's vigorous, well-balanced body, noted the deep chest, the length of arm, the glow of perfect health, and the firm lips and bold chin, the fearless eyes, and turned to Spring.

"What do you say, Tom? Has Mr. Ralstone a chance? Thurtell's a hard hitter, I'm told."

"He can hit as hard as he likes, but he's got to get home," said Spring dryly. "I've seen Mr. Ralstone in the buff, and I've had the gloves on with him, and he's about as nimble on his pins as I am. It's Lombard Street to a chiney orange on Mr. Ralstone. And he's in fine fettle. too. He's practised every morning at Jackson's rooms since he's been in London. Isn't that so, sir, and you've had your bit o' fun at night, too. If you don't overdo it, letting yourself go once in a way doesn't hurt. Keeps you from training too fine, and being anxious. You want to keep the devil in you in readiness when you call upon him."

"That's a devilish good way of putting it, Tom Spring," laughed Jack. "Better to call upon the devil to come to you than go to the devil, eh?"

"That's a good 'un, sir," said Cribb, with a grim smile. "Look here, Mr. Ralstone, I've got an idee. Instead of your handing over your ten shiners free, gratis, and for nothing, s'pose I tell 'em that you'll give the coin if you win. Fightin' or sparrin' for love——"

"I'm hanged if it's love in the case, Cribb," interrupted Jack.

"Maybe not, sir, but the argyment's the same. What I says is that to fight in earnest you must have something to go after, just like a game o' cards. Cards is nothing without a stake."

"Have it your own way, Tom. But if the fellow says he'll give the same if he wins, what'll you do? You can't in fairness refuse."

This was a poser, and Cribb put on his considering cap.

"I s'pose that is so," said he at last. "Well, I'll tell you what I'll do if it's agreeable to you. I won't say a word about your ten guineas until the rounds are over. If you win I shall then announce the thing."

"And if I lose?"

"I shall keep my mouth shut, and you'll keep your money in your pocket."

"No, I don't like that. The money was to go to the cup in any case. You know what you said about your not wanting Thurtell to top the list."

"Aye, and I say it still. You'll win, take my word for it. I know a born fighter when I see one, but it'll have to be as I say. I'm the M.C. on this here occasion."

Jack saw that Cribb was determined, and he said no more.

Meanwhile the crowd was becoming restive. The desire to see a mill between "swells" had bitten deep into their souls. They would have much preferred it to be without gloves, but this wasn't at all likely. Thurtell was egging them on, and indulging in coarse pleasantry. He was standing defiantly, his legs wide apart, his hands in his trousers pockets.

"When you've finished giving the 'Pink' your tips, Cribb, I'm ready for him. How much do you and Spring charge for your lessons?"

There was a roar of laughter at this.

Cribb stepped to the edge of the platform, and stared at Thurtell.

"Mr. Ralstone will give you *your* lesson, Mr. Thurtell," said he, without moving a muscle of his stolid face.

Another burst of laughter, heartier and more stentorian than the former, and yelling, stamping of feet and sticks, and clapping of hands followed when the ex-champion invited Thurtell to step up on the platform.

"I suppose you don't mean to back out," Cribb added dryly.

"Back out!" roared Thurtell, his face aflame. "What the devil do you mean, Cribb?"

"You understand well enough, Mr. Thurtell, if you haven't forgotten your appearance in this here very Fives Court, and Tom Belcher."

A sudden silence fell upon the crowd. The majority knew what Cribb referred to. Thurtell had always posed not merely as a patron of the prize ring, but as a boxer as well. He had a certain amount of skill, but a much greater amount of vanity, and a few years before he had had the temerity to challenge Belcher to fight for £500 a side, and being flush of money actually deposited his stake. It was thought to be a bluff, and Belcher, a short time after, observing Thurtell at the Fives Court, mounted the stage, and asked for Mr. Thurtell's attention.

"I've given up prize fighting," said Tom, "but if Mr. Thurtell will come up here I'll set to with the gloves with him for anything he likes, and he that takes the gloves

off first shall be considered the loser."

Thurtell said not a word, and he lost his reputation for courage among decent boxers from that moment.

It was clear that Cribb's sarcastic reminder went home. For a moment Thurtell's truculent look vanished, but it soon returned.

"An idle tale," he retorted contemptuously. "Have you told that piece of silly gossip to put me off? If so, you'll find yourself mistaken, and yonder Tulip also."

And with that he vaulted to the stage, and striding towards Neate asked him to act as his second. Neate assented.

The preliminaries were soon settled. Two rounds and no more was the dictum, and the two combatants, stripped to their shirts and trousers, rolled up their sleeves, and their seconds fastened on the gloves. Neither observed the usual preface, the shaking of hands to denote there was no ill-feeling. Then they faced each other.

Tom Spring was Jack Ralstone's second, and had warned the impetuous young man to keep himself well in hand, and play the waiting game.

"He's a rusher, and an ill-tempered one into the bargain. It's your fight, if you keep cool and watch your chance. Directly he misses one of his heavy blows he's done for. See that he *does* miss."

The boxers contrasted strongly. They were about the same height, but Thurtell was the heavier. If it should come to a wrestle, and Jack was thrown with Thurtell on the top, as he would try to be, it might mean a broken rib. Ralstone was some years younger, and the model of youthful symmetry, but he looked a mere stripling by the

side of the burly Thurtell. Jack's attitude was perfectly correct. That of Thurtell was clumsy, and in the opinion of the expert he held his fists awkwardly.

The two advanced, circled round each other, Thurtell crouching somewhat, his fists low as if challenging Ralstone to strike at his unguarded face. Jack, however, was in no hurry. He wanted his antagonist to show his tactics. As a boxer with some smattering of professionalism, Thurtell probably had some favourite dodge or blow which would end the fight at an early stage. It is a failing which many boxers have, who think themselves cleverer than they really are. A trick, no matter how ingenious it may be, is still a trick, and once exhibited it becomes the property of the world. Another disadvantage is that every trick has its answer, and that answer is sometimes disastrous for the trickster.

Thurtell had a trick of which he was very proud. Spring knew all about it, as did other boxers, and he uttered a warning against what Jack was bound to expect sooner or later. Mindful of Spring's words the young man, while hovering round with the light, elastic tread of a cat, and ready to move quick as a flash in any direction, kept his glance fixed on his opponent's eyes. It seemed to him that they showed a lack of fire, that the man was not so confident as when he threw out his boastful challenge. Either the stimulus of drink was evaporating under the inevitable reaction, or Cribb's inconvenient reminder was still rankling.

Jack had no intention of attacking Thurtell's unguarded face. He preferred gradually to feel his way, and allow his antagonist to disclose his method. Thurtell, it was clear, was not a scientific fighter. He had not had

enough practice with experts, and he had not the necessary coolness and patience. But he was not to be despised on that account. The slogger can hit, and science doesn't always win.

Thurtell soon got tired of Jack's dancing round him, and having to turn constantly. What is to-day called "leg-work" did not suit him. To bring matters to an issue he suddenly lowered his head, and dashed within Jack's guard, so that the young fellow's length of reach should not be of much avail. Jack knew that the trick blow was coming, and instead of ducking his head as Thurtell evidently expected, he closed with his opponent and got his chin over the attacker's shoulder. Thurtell's intention was to administer a "hammer blow" beneath Jack's chin, but he was not quick enough to get it in before the target was well out of the way, and his fist met nothing but empty air.

Thurtell had put all his strength and weight into the blow, and the impetus almost threw him off his balance and forced back Jack's body slightly. Before Thurtell had recovered, Jack had broken away, and delivered his lightning blows left and right on Thurtell's ribs, one going perilously near the "mark." Thurtell did not attempt to guard himself—perhaps he did not know how—and though he was breathing painfully he followed his nimble antagonist with the intention of forcing him to the ropes, where he might possibly get another chance of "in fighting" with better results.

It was to no purpose. Ralstone got in another smart tap, still on the body, and swerved on one side before the heavier man could retaliate. This method of fighting did not suit Thurtell's supporters, who jeered and shouted

that the "Corinthian" hadn't the pluck to take punishment, but as Ralstone's idea was to "give" rather than to "take" he was unmoved by the outcry.

But it is always the unexpected which happens. Jack, exulting in the conviction that he had taken the measure of his man, recklessly ventured within reach of his opponent's fists on purpose to show his agility in springing aside. He succeeded cleverly several times, but, with the over-confidence of youth, did it once too often. His foot slipping, up came Thurtell's hammer fist and caught him, not on the point of the chin, but sufficiently near to stagger him. For one instant a strange giddiness seized him, and had Thurtell chosen to repeat the blow he must have been knocked out. But Thurtell rushed in and they closed in a wrestle. Thurtell hadn't the slightest doubt that his weight and muscle would tell, but he hadn't bargained for the Somersetshire grip in which Jack was proficient. To the amazement of every one down went the fellow with a thud which shook the platform. He had been thrown by a cross buttock and lay for a few seconds gasping.

The round was finished and in Ralstone's favour. Thurtell was up to time and renewed his old tactics, but the fire had gone out of his attack, and his blows not only had little strength behind them, but fell short. Ralstone had learned his lesson, and while not less agile, was more cautious. He was prepared for his antagonist's favourite coup, and keeping his chin well down he seized the chance when it came, feinted with his right, and suddenly changing his feet, sent in with his left as straight a blow as boxer ever delivered. It had in it the whole weight of his body and it caught Thurtell between the

eyes. The man went down like a bullock under the pole-axe.

Thurtell was lying like a log, Quite twenty seconds had gone over before he opened his eyes and stared stupidly at Neate, who was trying to bring him to.

"What's all this?" he muttered between gasps of breath.

"You've lost Mr. Thurtell. I told you not to rush." Thurtell made no answer. Apparently he did not quite realise the meaning of Neate's words. But they sank soon into his sluggish brain, and he made an effort to rise.

"I'm not done yet. We'll have another round. Then you'll see."

"Hold your tongue," retorted Neate roughly. "You're counted out, an' if you wasn't it 'ud be no good. It's all over."

Thurtell rolled his head. The tears started in his eyes. The mortification was too bitter to be endured calmly.

"Get me up," he whimpered chokingly.

Neate and another man raised him to his feet and he glared around for Ralstone. Jack was standing by Cribb's side. Cribb was addressing the excited crowd. The spectators were not all on the side of Ralstone. There were yells for another round.

"The set-to's finished 'cordin' to rules," said Cribb. "I've got something more to tell you. I want you to give a cheer for Mr. Jack Ralstone. He's fought fair and he's a game boxer. But he's more. He's got a good heart. He told me if he beat the 'Swell Yokel' he'd hand another ten guineas to the fund, and here they are."

Cribb dropped the coins from his right hand into his

left. The applause was deafening. Thurtell's face went ashen. This was a fresh humiliation. Neate helped him to dress. He was cheered as he was assisted to leave the stage, and was immediately surrounded by a number of his friends, most of whom, half drunk, had had at their hero's expense as many pints as they could swallow previous to coming into the Fives Court, and knew they would have more when they got - outside. They were an evil-looking lot, spongers all of them.

"You and the other gentleman had better keep your eyes open. Thurtell's got a 'string of onions' (low fellows) who'll stick at nothing if he pays them. They'll help him to get rid of his thousand pounds in less than no time. You'd better have a body-guard," said Cribb.

"Thanks, Tom. I don't think I want one. What do you say, Walsham?"

"After what I've seen of you to-night, Ralstone, I should say not," said the young nobleman with a glance of admiration and, possibly, envy.

"As you like, sir. I only warn you. I saw one of Thurtell's pals moving about the mob rather queerly. You can have half a dozen of my friends. They'd be pleased to do you a good turn for thrashing that bully."

"I won't trouble them. I'm not going to keep them from the good dinner that's waiting them."

So, shaking hands all round, Jack and his friend passed into the narrow passage leading into St. Martin's Street, and thence into Leicester Square.

The crowd was pouring out of the main entrance. There seemed to be little to justify Spring's warning, but Jack judged it prudent to cross to the other side of the Square, where there were but few people. As things fell

out this was a mistake. The oil lamps, smoky though they were, gave sufficient light to outline the figures of the two Corinthians, so different in dress and bearing from the rabble around, most of which had drifted down from the adjacent "Seven Dials."

A hoarse shout came from somewhere. Jack could distinguish the words: "There he is! That's the nob!" A confused tramp of iron-shod and hobnailed boots, and the mob surged towards them, the men yelling, the women screaming.

"Gad! Spring was right!" exclaimed Jack. "You'll have to use your fists, Walsham. A stinger or two'll take the fight out of them."

But he was wrong. By the time he had reached St. Martin's Lane he was in the midst of a score or so of burly ruffians, the scum of the "Dials," infuriated by drink, and attacking him in the hopes of getting more. At the rear were fellows shouting as much, and egging them on. The two foremost of his assailants Jack floored with a couple of blows right and left, but others took their place, and in the scrimmage he lost sight of his companion.

Had Jack Ralstone been in an open space with the country beyond, instead of in a street filled with a seething, swaying mob, with nothing behind him but a nest of vile courts and alleys—for Garrick Street did not exist then, and between St. Martin's Lane and King Street, Covent Garden, was a network of slums—he could, by taking to his heels have easily escaped, for he excelled as a sprinter. But as it was, his only course was to fight, though against so many he hadn't a dog's chance.

Setting his teeth Ralstone planted himself against the

wall of the nearest house and coolly fought on as best he could. He was holding his own, never heeding the blows that now and again reached him, and oblivious of the blood that was streaming down his face from a cut in the temple inflicted by a stone, when the pressure of the mob shifted from the front of him to the side. He was compelled perforce to move a pace or two towards the Charing Cross end of St. Martin's Lane. The pressure from the side increased. Again he had to give way, and suddenly he found himself no longer protected by the house, but opposite the mouth of a narrow alley and forced into the arms of a vile set of wretches streaming from the low gaming houses and taverns of ill-repute, which abounded in this quarter.

Soon he was forced into this alley, buffeted this way and that. He was like a cork in an eddy of froth. Brutality was rampant. Those who had first attacked him no doubt had a definite purpose in so doing, but the rest were out for sport, and to hunt a helpless man was as amusing to them as a dog-fight, a bull-baiting or a "main" in a cockpit.

Amid the shower of blows that rained on him from all sides he still retained consciousness. He fought wildly, mechanically, and the strangest part of all was that, after a time, he felt no pain. He had gone beyond that stage. He might have been a prize-fighter in the last round of a heavy slogging match. Further and further he was drawn and pushed into the vortex of vice and savagery. Then suddenly he had a dim sense of emerging into a fairly wide street and the clatter of horses' hoofs broke upon his ear. The sound was the signal for the ruffians to disperse. They ran in all directions like fright-

ened rabbits. Mounted soldiers galloped down the street, sweeping the human dregs before them. The frightened watchmen, fearing a riot and knowing they were unable to cope with it, had sent post haste to the Horse Guards, and a squadron had been ordered out.

But Jack Ralstone knew nothing of this, he was lying insensible, his clothes nearly torn off his back, in front of the door of a house in King Street.

CHAPTER XII

Recognition!

"Hadn't we better send for a doctor?"

"What for doctor? Massa's bones not broke. Quamina feel dem. Droppy rum, Missy Barlowe. Dat's de physic."

"Rum—'tis all these blackamoors think of," muttered under her breath the matronly woman in the print dress and apron standing by the couch, candlestick in hand. "I suppose I'd better get it. If Quamina flies into one of his passions—my goodness. But I'll see that not a drop goes into his ugly black mouth if I can help it."

She placed the candlestick on the table and bustled away.

Quamina, a full-blooded negro, his skin like polished ebony, bent over the prostrate form of Jack Ralstone, and crooned some outlandish lingo—neither speech nor song—in strange tones, half liquid, half guttural. It was probably an incantation, peculiar to his race and handed down from generation to generation. But he had not neglected more mundane methods. He had bathed and bound up Ralstone's cuts, he had gone over the body and limbs to discover internal hurts, he had massaged arms and legs; in fact, had he been attending to a prize-fighter

who had been "knocked out" he would not have done differently.

Presently the woman returned, with a short-necked stone bottle and a glass. The negro poured some of the spirit within the white lips. They quivered, the nerves of the arms twitched, the chest heaved slightly.

"Massa fine feller—strong feller," said he admiringly.

"Aye, and a gentleman. Common people don't wear fine linen, and if so be as his coat's torn, it's made of real good broadcloth. *I* know good things when I see 'em."

Ralstone's senses were slowly returning, but he was still in the world of nowhere. His rescuers had done all they could and were watching his unconscious struggle for the life which had so nearly slipped from him.

"It would ha' been a pity if so handsome a young gentleman had been left to die on our doorstep. It was a good thing, Quamina, as you went to see what the rumpus was about and found him. 1 didn't know you was so strong. You lifted him up by yourself and brought him in. I was that frightened I dursn't go out."

The negro, a tall, powerfully-built young fellow, the great bossy muscles round his neck and shoulders, which his open shirt disclosed, indicating enormous strength, grunted in reply. Mrs. Barlowe's complimentary remarks did not seem to affect him.

A silence fell upon the room. Ralstone slowly raised his eyelids and dropped them again. His bewildered glance had taken in his surroundings in a vague, visionary way, and his muddled brain wove them into the phantasma surging through his mind. The whole thing was a grotesque dream, which vanished as moments of oblivion occurred and reappeared when the brain recom-

menced working. He was lying motionless. Nerves and muscles were quiescent. It was a time of exhaustion, without pain, without any impulse to exert will-power. Nature demanded rest and was having her way. He was quite contented to remain where he was undisturbed and allow the panorama of realities and unrealities to unfold itself. Even the sounds—the whispers of the man and woman—the slow ticking of a grandfather's clock, a distant shout from the street, fitted into their places in the chimera.

Then suddenly came sweet music. It was a woman's voice, a voice which to his fevered imagination belonged more to heaven than to earth. Ethereal though the sounds were they did not seem incongruous. He was puzzled, as the madness of dreams puzzles one. Gradually the harmonious intervals, making up the simplest of melodies, overpowered everything else, and then he became still more puzzled, for, if the singer was angelic, the music was that of a mortal man. He knew the air quite well. To hear it now transported him to a crowded theatre—a vast arena—the plaudits of the multitude. It was all real enough—the air, faint and sickly with the perfumes from the boxes and dress circle, mingled with the scent of oranges from the pit and gallery. The melody dominated everything. The play was poor enough, but the song and the singer saved it.

In some strange way the recollection quickened the return of vitality. Memory asserted itself and he realised that he was listening to the air which has since become world-famous and likely to last to touch the hearts of countless generations yet to come—"Home, sweet home." Bishop's opera, "Clari, the Maid of Milan," had

been produced a month or so before at Covent Garden Theatre, and Maria Tree's delightful singing of "Home, sweet home," with the serenade, "Sleep, gentle lady"—the only things in the opera which have survived—had taken the town. Ralstone had seen it twice, and he could have heard the divine voice of the songstress over and over again and never tire.

But *this* voice—the dream voice. It was no less melodious than the material one, yet it was different. Suddenly it ceased, and with its cessation the dream vanished. The sharp tinkle of a bell, its brassy clang, a violent contrast to the silvery tone of the voice, had the effect of a tonic upon his nerves. For a brief space he saw everything as it was—a plainly-furnished room, with oil paintings on the walls, of the beer and treacle school—brown and smudgy trees, yeasty waterfalls, sooty skies, surrounded by heavy gold frames—the negro and the woman at the door apparently having an altercation. Then the woman bounced out of the room and the man turned towards the couch on which Ralstone was lying. The negro was scowling horribly and a fiendish light gleamed in his eyes. But his forbidding expression vanished directly he saw that Ralstone was gazing at him intently.

"How you feel, massa?" said he.

"A bit shaken up. I don't know where I am. If you brought me out of the rabble, I thank you."

"Missy Barlowe say you no alive. Quamina say yes. Quamina right."

"Looks like it," said Ralstone feebly. "Whose house is this?"

"Missy Glover. She great stage player. She not at home."

Ralstone was too weak to take much interest in anything. He had heard of Mrs. Glover, of course—he might have seen her play, but at that moment nothing mattered. He closed his eyes and his brain went simmering on in its own fashion. He did not quite relapse into his former dreamy condition, but the spasmodic clearness of vision and perception had passed. He lay thus for a minute or so, during which came the sounds of the opening of a door, of whispering voices, but they failed to rouse him. When he again lifted his eyelids it was not in consequence of any external influence, but purely an involuntary physical effort.

He saw standing about a yard from the couch a girl whose eyes, dark as midnight, were fixed steadfastly upon him. She was dressed in a way which gave her distinction. The skirt was longer than what fashion dictated. It swept the ground slightly and so added to her stature, which in reality was slight. But that which absorbed Ralstone's unbalanced mind was the face and the hood which encircled it. It was of purple silk, fringed with gold, and the effect was that of a framed portrait such as Murillo might have painted. The expression was passive, almost statuesque so far as the lips were concerned, but tenderness and sympathy shone in her eyes. The even, dusky pallor of her skin, without the slightest tinge of sallowness, was exquisite. It was the exact tint which her oval face demanded.

"Poor fellow," she murmured. "Are you sure, Quamina, he's not seriously hurt?"

"Massa well. He no bad," said the negro sullenly. "Quamina make him better."

The man advanced towards the couch, evidently with

the intention of lifting Ralstone and carrying him out of the house, when the girl interposed.

"What are you going to do, Quamina? Are you mad? Let him be. Tell me all about it, Mrs. Barlowe. I had no idea anything was going on. I was in the back room, you know, and with my singing I could hear nothing."

The woman entered into a prolix description of how Quamina went to the door out of curiosity and found the man apparently dead, lying on the step. Of course, she knew nothing of the cause of the disturbance, nor how the man came to be lying where he was. The girl put a number of questions, but Mrs. Barlowe could say no more. As for Quamina, when she turned to him, he either could not or would not answer otherwise than in a series of grunts, which might mean anything or nothing. He stood with his aims folded, evidently in an ill-humour.

The girl went up to Ralstone, whose eyes had never ceased to follow her.

"This isn't my house," said she, "but I'm sure my friend, Mrs. Glover, will let you stay here until you're strong enough to walk by yourself."

"I think I shall be able to do that soon, now that I've seen you," said he, speaking with difficulty and in a low voice.

She smiled; and to Ralstone her smile was ravishing. It set his heart beating, so much so that a faint glow suffused his face, which before had been pale enough.

"That's rather a doubtful compliment. I'd no idea that my presence would have the effect of making you wish to go away. Perhaps I'd better leave you."

"No—no. I implore you to stay. I've so much to say

to you, but—but for the moment I've so little breath. It doesn't seem real—the sight of you, I mean. I'm afraid to ask you the question that's worrying me, lest it should prove I've made a terrible mistake."

The girl stared at him in amazement.

"I don't understand you," she cried. "What are you talking about?"

"Haven't we once met?"

"No. I've never seen you before."

"Are you in earnest? Look at me well. *You* are the same—that is, your face—not, your dress."

She remained mute. Her eyes travelled over his face, but her expression remained unmoved. The smile had fled from her eyes. Maybe she thought the stranger wanted to make her acquaintance.

"I don't recognise you," she said at length, coldly.

"God, is it possible? I thought women never forgot. If I've blundered, I humbly apologise."

She made no reply, but her eyes never left his face.

"Of course, I'm altered. I forgot that," he went on. "You see, I've been knocked about a bit—out of recognition, perhaps. If I hadn't the bandage over my forehead, if my lips weren't cut and swollen—I don't quite know what shape my nose is, it feels like a pound weight—and I fancy one at least of my eyes is black. But if I hadn't been twisted out of my proper self, the sight of me might remind you of a certain ride to Bath. You didn't wait for the port wine negus. I've never forgotten *that*—not because of the negus, but because you vanished. Now, am I wrong?"

For an instant her face changed. Ralstone could not decide what her expression meant. It certainly did not

indicate that she was pleased to see him again—that is, if it were she.

"You?" said she, with a little catch of the breath. "Oh …"

Apparently she intended to say something more, but she pulled herself up short and the beautiful mouth hardened.

"Yes. Ralstone's my name. That's the first thing I've got to get right. The blockhead of an ostler at the 'Angel and Sun' told you it was Halstead. It isn't. Old Halstead's my stepfather. He's no blood relation. Does that make any difference to you?"

"All the difference in the world," she breathed in so low a voice that he hardly caught the words. But by following the movement of her lips he was helped.

One other person in the room was as much interested in what she said as was Jack Ralstone. This was Quamina. The man had crept close to the girl, and was listening intently.

"Is that negro behind you your servant?" asked Ralstone. "I've already thanked him for bringing me in here and looking after me, but I don't think I need his services any more."

The girl wheeled round sharply. Quamina, knowing he was detected, was already stealing away.

"You may go, Quamina," said she. "If I want you I'll ring."

The negro grinned, if showing his teeth like a wild cat could be called a grin, and quitted the room noiselessly.

"Quamina means no harm," went on the girl. "He's like a faithful dog—jealous of every one of whom I take any particular notice. Mrs. Barlowe says he objected

to her telling me about you. You mustn't mind. Poor Quamina, I owe everything to his fidelity—and he has suffered so much. He would die for me if need be," and she sighed deeply.

Ralstone could have said as much. Indeed, his impending duel with Sir Phineas Tenbury might end in that, for was not the challenge to fight forced upon him on her behalf? But he could not tell her this.

In some marvellous way the sight of her revived his drooping spirits and renewed his vigour. She had, in his imagination, come to his rescue from another world. He had never thought to see her again, and here, in his hour of dire distress, she had miraculously appeared. Ralstone's strain of romance dominated him at that moment, and her apparition was to him not a coincidence, but a miracle. Fate had ordained the meeting: for what purpose who could say?

Meanwhile, lying there before her, apparently helpless, was abhorrent to him, and he raised himself to a sitting position and attempted to put on his tattered coat. It was a futile struggle. Until then he had not realised how bruised were his arm and shoulders, and how strained were the muscles. But he was grateful to his brutal assailants. But for them he would never have seen her, but for them he would not have felt the soft touch of her fingers when, bending down, she strove to assist him.

In a flash that never-to-be-forgotten ride with her clinging to him came back vividly to his mind. But there was a difference. He had then his back turned towards her. He was now looking into her eyes, lost in their fathomless depths. A thrill went over him, and she noticed it.

"You're cold," said she softly.

"Cold?" and he laughed. "No, I'm not. And yet in a way I suppose I am. I have to be, you know," and involuntarily he glanced at Mrs. Barlowe, who was looking a little puzzled at the absorption of the two. The expression of her face denoted that she was a little scandalised at the interest the girl was showing in a complete stranger. It made it worse that the stranger was young, handsome, and apparently a gentleman.

Ralstone wondered if she understood him. Anyhow, if he was cold, she was icy. He might as well have been silent for anything that her face told him. She simply went on coaxing his arm into his coat-sleeve. Not another word passed. Jack Ralstone could not trust himself to speak. How could he, with her soft, round arms, bare to the elbow, hovering about him?

When the coat was finally adjusted he essayed to rise to his feet. She protested.

"You mustn't go yet. You're not sufficiently recovered."

"Thank you. I could stop here for ever if I might, but——"

His voice sank. A sudden giddiness had seized him. He had overrated his strength, and his face had gone deadly white.

"Mrs. Barlowe," said she, rapidly wheeling round. "Fetch my cordial water and vinaigrette, please. They're on my toilet-table."

Mrs. Barlowe hesitated. It did not seem quite proper to leave the two young people alone.

"Shall I send Quamina here to help you?" said she stiffly.

"No, no. What do I want with Quamina? Do what I tell you. Quick. See, he's going to swoon, I believe."

The girl spoke in quite an angry tone. Mrs. Barlowe said no more, but fled.

CHAPTER XIII

A Startling Letter

Ralstone did not lose his senses. The faintness was passing now that he had ceased to exert himself. Every word the girl uttered was distinctly audible, and her solicitude filled him with secret joy. A few silent moments after the door closed, and looking up into her face he murmured:

"Why did you run away? You remember, don't you? When I returned and found you gone I didn't know what to make of it. I felt a little hurt."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she returned hurriedly, and her bosom heaved. "You must have thought me very ungrateful. But I wasn't. I wanted to thank you, but directly I heard your name was Halstead something dragged me away. I couldn't be under an obligation to anyone of that name and in whose veins ran the blood of that—that beast."

"You mean Simon Halstead?"

"Yes. Some day, perhaps, you may know why. But I can't tell you now. It's everything to me that you've nothing to do with him. It may alter my plans—I don't know—I'm confused—I—"

She became terribly agitated. Footsteps were heard

on the staircase outside. Mrs. Barlowe was returning. When she entered the girl had regained her calmness, and, taking the quaintly-shaped bottle from the woman, she poured out a little of the contents into a glass, and Ralstone sipped the fragrant amber liquid.

"It's very good. I never tasted anything so fine. It's put new life into me. What rare stuff for a cold hunting morning after an hour's run. I'd like to buy a bottle. Where can I get some?"

"Not in London—not in England anywhere. It comes from the West India plantations."

"The plantations——"

Her finger went to her lips in token of secrecy, and he said no more. The word "plantations" had started a current of puzzling thoughts, but nothing could be discussed with the tiresome Barlowe hovering about, and Jack whispered a request to be allowed to meet her, where they could talk freely.

"I'm staying at the 'Tavistock.' I shan't rest—I can't—until I see you again. I've a thousand questions to ask—your name, for instance. You know mine. It's only fair," he expostulated.

"I'm known in this house as Amelia Hart. I'm a sort of maid-companion to Mrs. Glover, the actress—the kindest-hearted soul in the world. But for her I must have died. She knows something about me—I had to tell her, you know—but not everything. There's a man who's my bitter enemy. I dare not go out in the day-time for fear—ah, there she is. I know her knock."

Mrs. Barlowe hurried away. Once more they were together. Jack seized the girl's hand.

"Tell me—I insist upon it—how can we meet?" he ex-

claimed.

"I don't know—I can't think; stay—I'll find some way of letting you know. At the 'Tavistock,' you say."

"Yes, but don't send any message by that black fellow of yours. I don't think he likes me. He might play you false."

"Quamina play me false? *Me?* Oh, you don't know him."

"That's true, and I can't say I'm particularly anxious to make his acquaintance. You see——"

"Hush. Here is Mrs. Glover."

The clever actress came bustling in. She was then at the height of her popularity, and her fine, deep, rich voice, her commanding presence, and her energy, made her unrivalled in certain parts. When, the year before. she played the part of Hamlet at Drury Lane. she achieved a *tour de force* that was the talk of the town. Nature in a generous mood had moulded her lavishly. She was tall and stout in her middle age—too stout possibly as she grew older—not perhaps handsome, but her face was expressive and open, with fine eyes that stared fixedly at one and invited confidence.

Mrs. Barlowe had told her of the incident, and the actress was full of sympathy.

"The vile wretches," she exclaimed. "I suppose their idea was robbery."

"I don't know, madam, but if so they carried it out with great nicety. I haven't a penny left."

"You poor young gentleman! How much do you think you've lost?"

Jack dreaded to think. His intention was, after he left the Fives Court, to go on to White's Club with Lord Wal-

sham and try his luck at the faro table. He had scraped together all the money he had, and the thieves had made a decent haul. He returned some indefinite answer to Mrs. Glover, and, good-natured as she was to a degree, she immediately offered to lend him a small sum. He thanked her, but refused, and, remarking that he had reached the limits of her hospitality, he rose to go.

"Are you sure you can walk without assistance? Shall Quamina go with you?"

"Not on any account. It's no distance to the 'Tavistock,' and I can look after myself quite well, thanks to the magic virtues of some mysterious cordial Miss Hart has been good enough to administer."

"Oh, Amelia is a rare hand at mysterious concoctions. I believe she knows all about poisons."

A spasm seemed to pass over the girl's face at this jesting accusation, but she made no reply. She was evidently much disturbed, and Jack was prompted to come to her rescue by a playful allusion to his ragged attire.

"I don't know what the hotel people will think of me. Perhaps they'll fancy I'm the beggar of Bethnal Green come to life."

"Dress is nothing," said Mrs. Glover laughingly. "Amelia can tell you something about that."

"Indeed," remarked Ralstone, with a well-assumed air of innocence. "I should much like to hear the story."

"It's nothing, and it wouldn't interest a stranger," said Amelia.

Ralstone bowed, and as he did so he contrived to cast a glance which spoke volumes.

"I'm not so sure about that," put in the actress, "but I won't tease you any more to-night. It wouldn't be right

after you've played the part of the Good Samaritan so well." Then, turning to Ralstone, she went on to suggest that, to save appearances, she could let him have one of her husband's coats.

"He's not living here," said she, a shade of sadness passing over her face, "so he won't miss it."

Mrs. Glover was unfortunate both in her father and husband. The first sponged upon her, the second was a drunkard.

"I'm sure I won't trouble you. The 'Tavistock' people know what a London mob is like. It's not the first time one of their customers has come home like a rag-bag. Thank you again, and goodnight."

His leave-taking was formal. It could hardly be otherwise. With Amelia Hart, as she chose to be called, he did not dare go further than tenderly press her band. Was it his fancy, or did she really return that pressure? Whether it was the effect of the cordial, or the fillip to his nerves at the unexpected sight of the beautiful girl, the subject of his constantly-recurring waking dreams, and the mysterious cause of the bitter enmity of Sir Phineas towards him, Ralstone could not determine, but he forgot his stiffness and his aches and pains, and walked quite briskly to the hotel.

The clock of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, struck twelve as he entered the portals of the "Tavistock," but the hour was not late for those free-and-easy times. The coffee-room windows were lighted up, and the porter, while staring at Ralstone's bandaged hand, betrayed no surprise. "The Tavistock," as a "bachelors' house," was used to the young bloods, its patrons, not infrequently coming back in rather a dilapidated condition. Indeed, Gregory

the porter was a rare hand at "painting" and disguising black eyes.

"Glad to see you back, Mr. Ralstone. Had a rough time, I hear, sir."

"What, has the news reached you already?"

"Well, sir, in course we heard the shindy, and some of our gentlemen went out to see the fun, but we didn't know as you was in it."

"I was *it*, Gregory, worse luck."

"So I heered, sir."

"The deuce you did. How?"

"Lord Walsham called to inquire about you, sir. He'd been round to the watch-house, but they knowed nothing."

"Was his lordship hurt at all?"

"Not much, sir. The blackguards seem to have let him alone. They made a dead set on you, sir, he says."

"That was so. I was pretty well done for, but luckily I fell into good hands, and I've been patched up."

He was within an ace of saying that it was at Mrs. Glover's house in King Street where he was sheltered, but he remembered the girl's caution in time and he said nothing.

"Glad to hear it, sir. Are you, going in the coffee-room? A niceish company there, sir."

"What, in this ragged, out-at-elbows state? Not likely. I'm going to bed. Send up some mulled claret to my room."

"Very well, sir. Good night, Mr. Ralstone.—Oh, blest if I didn't nigh forget. Here's something for you, sir."

The porter took a letter from the rack on the mantelshelf and handed it to Ralstone. The writing was un-

mistakably feminine, all pothooks and hangers, in the sloping Italian style taught then in fashionable boarding-schools.

"H'm," grunted Jack with a grimace, when he looked at it. He did not open the letter. He thought it would keep until he reached his bedroom. He imagined it to be from one of the fair Cyprians whom in the Covent Garden saloon an evening or two before he had treated to a bottle of wine.

"I didn't think I'd been such a noodle as to tell that brown-haired wench where I was staying. I suppose I did. Fool!"

He toiled up the stairs, lighted candle in his hand, and when he got into his room he threw himself into an easy chair. He was dead beat, and no wonder. The reaction had set in, his bruises and cuts pained him, and he was stiff all over. He caught sight of his reflection in the toilet glass and burst into a laugh which hadn't an atom of mirth in it.

"The devil! What a Guy Fawkes I look! I wonder what the dear girl thought of me. Never mind, when next she sees me I shall be myself. When *next*—when? What a mystery the thing is! She began by being a mystery, and she's continuing to be one. What will the end be like—but, after all, what's a woman worth when there's nothing to find out about her?"

Presently a knock came at the door. A waiter had brought up the mulled claret. The warm drink was comforting, and, snuggling in his chair, Jack sipped it slowly and thought over things—that is to say, he thought of the midnight eyes, the fascinating pallor, the raven hair, the delightful chin, the scarlet lips, and a hundred other

charms of the girl who had taken possession of him.

"'My name in this house is Amelia Hart,' she said. What is it outside the house? I don't like Amelia Hart. It's commonplace. She's had to take it for some reason. That means she's afraid to use her own name. And she dares not got out in the day. Why? Is Mrs. Glover in the know? What's that nigger—Quadrumana—Quadrillana—can't think of it—got to do with her? And, above all, that fellow Tenbury—what part does he play in the business?"

The recollection of Sir Phineas stirred the young man's bile. Sir Phineas had already served him one dishonourable trick—of making love to Lady Barbara Dacre, who he must have known was betrothed. That neither he nor Lady Barbara cared for each other did not excuse Tenbury's conduct. Of course, Lady Barbara was to blame too, but that did not matter. It was a woman's privilege to change her mind.

"Tenbury can have her ladyship and welcome," cried Jack, addressing his reflection in the mirror, "but I'm damned if he shall interfere with my dark-eyed damsel. She's mine and I'm proving it by fighting for her."

He felt suddenly exalted. How wonderful it was that a mere slip of a girl should have the power of dominating him, of forcing him to concentrate every thought, every feeling, every emotion upon her! If this meant love, then he was most assuredly in love, in all senses of the word.

Jack Ralstone had had his flirtations—what young man in those Fourth Georgian days had not? Flirting was part of his education, like tying a cravat properly, or going the grand tour, but all his flirtations had left him heart-whole. But this—oh, this was no flirtation. It was life—

real life and real love.

He thought of the painted, brazen women he had talked with and treated at the Drury Lane and Covent Garden saloons—at Vauxhall Gardens—at some of the gaming hells, where they played the part of decoys. What a difference between this horde of Jezebels and the girl who, even in her tatters, looked pure and innocent!

"Yes," he soliloquised, "and she's not a Barbara Dacre either. I'll swear that if once she loved she would be constant, she would never go from her word. But—Barbara——"

Finishing the sentence with a shrug of the shoulders, Ralstone commenced to undress, taking off his coat with difficulty—a difficulty which brought to his remembrance the girl's tender deftness when she assisted him to put it on.

As he sat with the coat across his knees, it occurred to him to see whether the thieves had left him any money. He went through his pockets. He found no money, but he pulled out the letter given him by Gregory.

He frowned. It was unpleasant to be reminded of his folly. Only one motive could actuate a writer of the class to which he believed she belonged—money.

"I think I can open the thing with perfect safety," he thought, smiling bitterly, "seeing that I've been cleaned out of every penny. So much the better. I shan't have the trouble of making up my mind."

He tore through the wax and unfolded the paper. What he read was this, and it took his breath away:

"My Dearest Jack,"

"I am writing humbly to ask your forgiveness. Believe me, I've been utterly miserable ever since you left me

that night at Bath. I know I behaved badly to you. I ought not to have said what I did. I can't think what possessed me. You'll forget it, won't you? Do let us make it up. Come and see me to-morrow. I feel I shall die if you keep away any longer. You don't know how much I love you. Fondly,"

"Yours,"

"Barbara."

CHAPTER XIV

What the Spy Reported

Sir Phineas Tenbury, with the assistance of his valet, had not long got out of bed. It was about midday, and he was toying with devilled kidneys and frizzled bacon, and sipping coffee laced with cognac. He was arrayed in a gorgeous dressing-gown, and on his head was an embroidered smoking-cap adorned with a huge tassel. The whole effect, to the taste of the twentieth century, was somewhat raffish, not a little of the raffishness being due possibly to the generally wrecked condition of the baronet. Sir Phineas had had a heavy night; his eyes were bleared, his cheeks were puffy, his mouth loose, and his complexion whitish, with here and there a yellow patch. He had been, until the small hours were well on their way, in one of the questionable gaming houses of St. James's Street, Piccadilly.

Tenbury had chambers in the "Albany." The room in which he was sitting, or rather sprawling, his legs crossed, one slippered foot dangling over the edge of the sofa, and the other extended along its length, was furnished and adorned after the fashion in favour with men of *ton*. Coloured prints of hunting and coach-

ing scenes, coloured pictures of ballet girls, of boxing celebrities, of distinguished race horses, ratters, and champion game cocks covered the walls, interspersed with coarse, coloured caricatures which lampooned men and women of the day in a style both abusive and libellous.

It was a lovely summer's day, but all the sun which came into the room was that reflected from a wall opposite the window. The "Albany," with all its attractions for men about town, was not a cheerful place of residence—at all events in the daytime. At night things were different. Life then began with those whose idea of existence was to plunge into excess of so-called pleasure, when the rest of the world were in their beds. Perfect freedom was aimed at in the "Albany," and it could be had by those who chose to be liberal to the attendants. It was in fact an Alsatia for aristocrats.

Sir Phineas lazily ran his eye over the *Morning Post* and tossed it aside impatiently. *Bell's Life* and *John Bull* were not more interesting; he let them slip on the floor and did not bother to pick them up. He yawned, stretched out his arm with an effort, reached the hand bell and shook it. His valet entered and waited for orders.

"Clear away this muck, Benham," said the baronet querulously. "Pass me the cognac and the carafe. Pah! My throat's as dry as the road to Epsom on a dusty day."

The man administered to his master's wants and noiselessly and expeditiously removed the evidence of breakfast, while Sir Phineas slaked his thirst. Then, with his hands behind his head he leaned back and pondered. He was wondering if Lady Barbara Dacre had kept her

word and carried out the programme he had laid down.

Two days had gone by since the fateful night at Almack's and meanwhile he had satisfied the blackmailing propensities of the rapacious Mrs. Matthews, not indeed to the full extent of her demands, but sufficiently to keep her quiet for a few weeks. He had not the slightest intention of allowing the women to spoil his plans in regard to Ralstone. It was vital that they should succeed, for at that moment Ralstone was causing him much perturbation of mind.

"Barbara seems likely to stick to me like a leech," he mused. "Damme, I never thought she'd take matters so seriously. How stupid to mix up sentiment with a *faux pas*. The second can be excused but not the first. That's the worst of women. One never knows what their views are in such matters. Who would have thought the Duke would have cut up so rough. The old rip's closing of his pockets over her debts was an unexpected blow for me, still if Ralstone can be bamboozled into taking the girl off my hands everything will go smoothly. Anyhow I convinced Barbara and if she's any sense she'll do what I told her."

He closed his eyes. His expression altered. Other thoughts had taken hold of his mind. His mouth hardened and his nostrils twitched and whitened—a sure sign with him of suppressed passion.

"Why the devil hasn't Vicary turned up? Three weeks gone and not a sign of the fellow," he burst out. "It's true I told him not to bother me unless he had matters to report, but it's impossible he shouldn't have been able to find out something by this time. Perhaps——"

A tap came at the door. It was Benham.

"Vicary has come, Sir Phineas. He told me——"

"Devil take what he told you. Send him up at once. Talk of the devil and you smell sulphur."

Vicary entered, the obsequious bend of his shoulders more pronounced than ever. He was the manservant whose mingled insolence and feigned humility so excited Jack Ralstone's ire at the "George," Andover, on the morning of the prize fight. Before being engaged by Sir Phineas, Vicary had filled the despicable rôle of a "common informer," and it was whispered that three years before he had been in the pay of the infamous Edwards, whose perjury secured the conviction and execution of Thistlewood and his fellow conspirators. Anyway, after the brutal exhibition on the scaffold there followed a reaction in public opinion and Vicary hastened to earn his living in another way. As a spy Sir Phineas had found him exceedingly useful in many intrigues.

"Well, Vicary, what news?" inquired Sir Phineas eagerly.

"Nothing of very great importance, sir. I'm sorry to say—that is, I haven't succeeded in getting upon the track of the girl."

"Then what the deuce do you mean by bothering me?" stormed Sir Phineas. "You know what I told you."

"Yes, Sir Phineas. But I have something to say, that I thought would interest you, about the young gentleman."

"Damn the young gentleman, but go on. You'd better have a drink. It might ease your tongue. Help yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

Vicary did not hurry. It was his habit to be deliberate. Sir Phineas, turning on his side, watched him frown-

ingly.

"I've every reason to believe, sir, that Mr. Ralstone, if not dead, is next door to it."

"What!"

Ralstone's death was a possibility which had not entered into Sir Phineas's calculations. He had never bothered about it, not even in connection with the duel. It might have the effect of altering many of his plans. But he was not one to waste time upon mere conjectures. He harshly bade the spy explain himself.

"It was this way, sir. Ever since you put me on this job I've never lost sight of Mr. Ralstone—that is, sir, whenever he showed himself in the street. I hadn't to bother about him in the hotel, because, as you know, sir, no lady would be admitted into the 'Tavistock.' I've followed him into the theatres—Covent Garden, Drury Lane, the Surrey, Davis's amphitheatre in the Westminster Bridge Road—it used to be called Astley's, sir—'Tom and Jerry's' been having quite a run there——"

"Really," broke in Sir Phineas ironically, "seems to me, Vicary, you've been enjoying yourself. It doesn't interest me where Mr. Ralstone went, seeing that it has all led to nothing."

"I was going to explain, sir," said Vicary apologetically, "that Mr. Ralstone never had a lady with him on these occasions. Nor did he ever meet a lady, that is to say, *your* lady."

"What about Vauxhall Gardens? Did he ever go there?" demanded the baronet, with a slight nervousness in his manner which sat strangely upon him.

"Oh yes, sir, often and often. And once he was with a party of ladies and gentlemen in one of the supper

boxes."

"Well. And the ladies? Did you see them?"

"Yes, sir. I think you'll find them nearly every night in the Drury Lane saloon. I didn't bother about them. No, sir, nothing suspicious happened at Vauxhall."

"Of course not," said Sir Phineas, with a forced laugh. "I was a fool to suppose that she would be at the Gardens."

"Quite so, sir. Too many unpleasant reflections. Her painful experience would be too fresh in her mind."

"Painful? What the devil do you mean by painful?" cried Sir Phineas irritably.

"I beg your pardon, Sir Phineas. Of course not. She was foolish. She was unnecessarily alarmed. You wouldn't have harmed her."

"Keep your opinions about my conduct to yourself. They don't interest me. What of Ralstone? If he was as long in dying as you are in getting through your story, I pity the poor devil."

"I crave forgiveness, sir. I was only anxious to show you that I had faithfully done my duty and had neglected nothing. But about Mr. Ralstone. Last night I followed him to the Fives Court. It was Tom Cribb's benefit and there was no end of sparring. A man named Thurtell—maybe your honour has heard of him—was there. He was the worse for liquor, and from what I overheard he'd come on purpose to revenge himself on Mr. Ralstone over some grievance. He challenged Mr. Ralstone to a boxing match and got badly beaten. The word was passed among his friends to wait on Mr. Ralstone when he left the Court, and they *did* wait on him. It was as savage a bit of business as ever I see."

"Oh!" ejaculated Sir Phineas, his eyes gleaming. "He was knocked about, was he?"

"Knocked—kicked—stoned. It's my belief Thurtell had given orders that he was to be beaten to death."

"Yes—yes. And was he?"

"I'm not sure, sir. The mob drove him into Rose Street and I followed, but when I got into King Street I heard the horse soldiers coming, and I ran out of the way as quickly as I could."

"I'll warrant you did. Trust you for keeping your skin whole, Vicary," said Sir Phineas sardonically. "And what became of young Ralstone?"

"That's what I couldn't find out. When the coast was clear I went down King Street and made inquiries, but could learn nothing. It was the same at the watch house."

"And what about the 'Tavistock'?"

"I didn't go there, sir."

"You fool. That's the very place you should have called at."

"I know that, sir, but to tell you the truth, Gregory, the porter there, and me are not over good friends. He got into trouble some long time ago, and I had to appear against him in the witness box at Bow Street Court. He was put away at Clerkenwell prison and he's never forgiven me."

"And I don't suppose he ever will. I understand. So you think Mr. Ralstone is dead?"

"I don't say he's lying dead at this moment, but be was so fiercely set upon he can hardly recover."

"Well, you'd better find out and give me the latest news of him. Send some one to the 'Tavistock' the porter hasn't a grudge against. I suppose you've acquaintances

who've not belonged to your former admirable profession."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Very well, see to it then."

Vicary touched his forehead and lingered hesitatingly. Sir Phineas guessed why. He threw a couple of guineas on the table and the spy departed.

For some time after he was alone Sir Phineas sat with his brow puckered and his lips moving in accordance with his thoughts, but he uttered no sound.

The sum of his cogitations was that if Vicary spoke the truth it did not appear as though Ralstone knew the whereabouts of the girl with whom he had undoubtedly ridden away. He had taken her to the "Angel and Sun" just outside Bath—so much Sir Phineas had ascertained from the ostler—and here all trace of her was lost.

"I can't believe Ralstone would be the man to let her slip out of his reach," thought the baronet. "The little cat's far too fascinating. She's as full of wiles as a monkey, and if she chose could worm her way into any man's heart. The worst of it is she's not to be tempted by either gold or gems. I tried her with both. A woman of that sort generally makes a fool of herself. Falls in love with some handsome boy, whose attraction seems to be that he knows nothing of women and that she'll have the pleasure of teaching him. If he didn't fall in love with her and so was inclined to give Lady Barbara the go-by when she vexed him, he's got those damned woman-loving eyes for no purpose. And Nyra? Black as a gipsy—I'll swear she's got some nigger blood in her—and he a fair Saxon. Opposites attract each other. Where do I come in? Curse them both."

He had been comforting himself during this mental tirade with neat cognac, and had worked himself into a fury. Then he realised the folly of his outburst, supposing Ralstone was on the point of death. What would be his position then? Surely all to the good. His debt of £4,000 need not be discharged, and he would be perfectly free to run to earth the girl who had escaped him. Lady Barbara would, of course, be done out of her prospect of a reconciliation which would have given her a rich husband, for no doubt Simon Halstead would keep his word if Ralstone made it up with her. But Lady Barbara's future was no concern of the baronet's. He had made use of her purely to spite Ralstone, and the elimination of the latter sent her out of his reckoning also.

But the point to be settled was the condition of Ralstone—whether he was likely to recover.

"I must know at once," was his conclusion. "That rascal Vicary is as likely as not to spin out the job to run up the cost. I'll see about it myself."

He made his usual careful toilet with the aid of Benham, and in about two hours' time strolled down St. James's Street and looked in at White's. The news of the affair at the Fives Court on the preceding night was all the talk. Many members of the club were interested in the "fancy" and some had been present as Tom Cribb's patrons. They were all enthusiastic over the skill and pluck of Jack Ralstone, but no one could say exactly what had become of him, save that he was lying at the "Tavistock."

"Walsham was with him," said a Waterloo man and an old comrade of Tenbury's, Captain Frederick Charteris by name. "And I believe he came out of the scrimmage

without a scratch, but from what I hear the two became separated early in the row and he's as much in the dark as anybody, or was—for I should think by this time he had called at the 'Tavistock' to inquire after his friend."

Sir Phineas made no comment. He did not particularly want to appear to be interested in Ralstone. Besides, the mention of Lord Walsham had started a train of thought. Shortly after he buttonholed Charteris.

"Fred," said he, "I want your advice on a little affair of honour. I received a challenge a short time ago from a man—I'm not going to mention his name just yet—Walsham was going to act for him and Houston for me. Houston, as you know, has gone off to Paris with little Marie Dupont of the 'King's' and how long he'll stay there the deuce only can tell. Now the point is, should I wait until Walsham asks for some one to take Houston's place, or should I suggest another man?"

"How long is it since Walsham went to see Houston?" rejoined the Captain with a twirl of his whiskers and with a solemnity of manner which he invariably assumed when his services were required in connection with a duel.

"Quite a fortnight."

"And *you* haven't heard from him?"

"No."

"That doesn't look as if his principal were very eager. Has he never been out before?"

"I'm sure I can't say. I should fancy not."

"H'm, then I don't wonder he's hesitating. Your record in the field is likely to make him think twice. But you can't have a challenge hanging over your head indefinitely. I should ascertain if he means to go on, Tenbury."

Sir Phineas did not at once reply. He was pondering on the matter.

"Yes," said he at last, "that seems the proper course. Will you act for me?"

"With great pleasure. Not the first time, you know, Tenbury. Shall I write to Walsham conveying your wishes?"

"Not for the moment. I want to turn the thing round in my mind; I'll let you know as soon as I've come to a decision. I merely wanted to be sure of you in case of need."

"Oh, that's *un fait accompli.*"

"Thanks."

Sir Phineas sauntered out with a somewhat preoccupied air. A notion had entered his head—not a chivalrous one by any means, but whether he would act upon it depended upon what he ascertained from the people of the "Tavistock," whither he was now bent.

Gregory touched his cap respectfully to the baronet. He knew Sir Phineas very well and was about to precede him to the coffee-room to open the door, but Tenbury checked him.

"I'm not going to stay. I merely called to inquire how Mr. Ralstone was. I've had rather bad accounts of him."

"Well, sir, I do think anybody but Mr. Jack Ralstone would be a-lying on his back with half a dozen doctors a-consulting over him as to how long he ought to be allowed to live. But Mr. Ralstone ain't a gentleman o' that sort. He slept like a top for ten or eleven hours and we didn't trouble to waken him—he was breathin' as easily as a child—knowing as rest was the best physic. About twelve he got up, had a bath, sent for a surgeon to

take the bandage off his head and put on a bit o' strapping, and made a hearty breakfast, rumpsteak and mushrooms, sir. It would ha' done your honour's heart good to see him put it away. I understand he was brought up in the country—runnin', jumpin', cricket, shootin', fishin', fox huntin'—ah, there's nothin' like the good old English sport for givin' a man muscles an' for layin' down a stock of 'ealth."

Sir Phineas frowned. The news of Ralstone's speedy recovery did not seem to please him.

"And where is he now? In his room?"

"Lor bless me, no, sir. Out and about as brisk as a bee. He's not like them P.R. men as takes to their drink d'rectly they comes to theirselves. All they think of is 'ow much liquor they can swaller."

"I'm glad to hear that Mr. Ralstone's better," said Sir Phineas in a tone the irony of which was quite lost on Gregory.

"Thank'ee, sir. I'll tell him you called."

It was on the tip of the baronet's tongue to say, "Don't do anything of the kind," but on second thoughts he held his tongue. Outwardly he had to behave as a gentleman. It was part of his reputation. It was said that when he pinked his antagonist or sent a bullet through the arm, or any part of the body that fancy might select, he did it in the most gentlemanly way possible. After a duel he was invariably solicitous that the wounded man should be carefully tended.

Sir Phineas quitted the hotel very much perturbed. The vague notion which had passed through his mind at White's was that if the duel were to come off there could be no better time for it than while Ralstone was

enfeebled. But this idea would have to be discarded. In less than a week Ralstone in all probability would be in possession of his full health and strength.

Exactly as he yearned to revenge himself upon his rival by the latter's death at his hand, a more bitter and more complete plan was that in which he designed Lady Barbara should play a part. That Lady Barbara when married to Ralstone should still be mistress of another man was a device worthy of Iago. But this depended upon the issue of her ladyship's blandishments. Would she succeed in winning back her truant love? Sir Phineas felt that his hand was stayed until this matter was settled.

Then there was the incomparable dark-eyed girl upon whose conquest Sir Phineas had set his heart. What part was she destined to play in the drama notwithstanding the fact that for the present she had dropped out? Sir Phineas was convinced she would reappear though he had nothing to justify this conviction. Anyhow, the marriage of Ralstone and Lady Barbara would serve a double purpose. It would make any attachment between Ralstone and the girl impossible.

But if there had already been some love passages between the two? Because Vicary had failed to find any evidence that Ralstone knew where she was hardly seemed conclusive proof. The possibility that Vicary had blundered or had been negligent maddened him. He glanced around him on leaving the "Tavistock" and could see nothing of the fellow.

"Why isn't he here on the look out?" he muttered wrathfully.

Then it occurred to him that his anger was unreason-

able. If Ralstone had gone out, as Gregory said, was it not the spy's duty to follow him? Pacified by the thought he wended his way back to the Albany, calling on his road at the "White Horse Cellars," Piccadilly, to inquire the latest odds on a horse he fancied was likely to win at Goodwood.

"Vicary's waiting to see you, sir," were the words with which Benham greeted him.

"Ha, send him up."

Sir Phineas was pacing his room when the spy entered.

"Well, what have you found out?"

"Mr. Ralstone isn't nearly as ill as I thought. He left the 'Tavistock' about one o'clock, and I followed him. He took a hackney coach in the Strand, and I was after him in another. He was set down in Berkeley Square, and went into a house—No. 62."

It was the Duke of Endsleigh's mansion. Then Lady Barbara had succeeded in enticing him to her presence! This was good news, and a grim smile curved the baronet's lips.

"Did you wait until he came out?"

"Certainly, Sir Phineas."

"How long did he stay?"

"Quite an hour and a half."

This also was good. What wiles could not a clever woman exercise over a man in an hour and a half?

"And what became of him after that?"

"He went back to the 'Tavistock.'"

So all seemed to be going well.

CHAPTER XV

A Woman's Wiles

Lady Barbara's letter, couched in such appealing terms, sent a chill over Jack Ralstone. It could not have arrived at a less opportune moment. Before he opened it he was in the freshness of an entrancing dream of love, such as comes but once in a man's existence. He was in the full flush of adolescence, when all that is best and charming in a woman is tinged with the rosy light of romance. To know that the girl whom he had never forgotten, of whom he had constantly thought, to whom he had been irresistibly drawn, whose disappearance had left such a blank in his life, had come back, more divine because more mysterious, seemed to him nothing short of a miracle. Exultantly he looked forward to the time when he should see her again.

Ever since he had been in London the time had gone with him feverishly, in a sort of make-believe. He had plunged into the life which he had once thought was an ideal existence—the life of a man about town, or a man with sporting tastes, free, independent, irresponsible. If he kicked over the traces—well, there would be no vicious intention; nothing more than the outcome of high

spirits—an outlet for buoyant vitality.

But it had all turned out differently. He found little real pleasure in the amusements of London. When he went to the theatre his attention wandered. Macready bored him. Liston was amusing, and Madame Vestris and Maria Foots delightful, but before the end of the performance came he lost interest, and he was at a loss to know why. At least, so he told himself. But the fact was, he was ashamed to confess that he was guilty of the weakness of constantly thinking of a pair of dark lustrous eyes, of an exquisite oval face and olive-tinted complexion, of fascinating lines of beauty—from the ear to the chin, in the sweep of the neck to the shoulders, in the charmingly moulded arms and wrists.

His scruples and self-reproaches vanished at the sight of the girl. He was another man. He was no longer discontented and dissatisfied for no apparent reason. He had, in short, discovered that he was in love. But even now his feelings were more or less vague. They were brought to a crisis by Lady Barbara's disquieting letter.

What was the proper course to take as an honourable man? Really he could not make up his mind. The plain facts were that he and Lady Barbara had been engaged, that neither of them cared for the other, that her ladyship had shown herself indifferent to him at the Bath masquerade, and a decided preference for Sir Phineas Tenbury, in itself an unpardonable piece of frivolity, considering Tenbury's questionable reputation. Remembering all this, Jack Ralstone argued that the fault was on the lady's side, and that her fiancé was quite justified in being offended. Whether she knew he had told his stepfather he had broken his engagement, and that in conse-

quence he had been sent adrift, Ralstone could not say, but since the night when she so markedly slighted him, she had made no sign of regrets or excuses. Then there was Lord Walsham's story of her openly flirting at Almack's with Sir Phineas, and her complete indifference as to what might be thought and said of her conduct.

"And now, hang it, she wants me to come back as if nothing had happened!" cried Ralstone hotly. "Does she think I'm a spaniel she only needs to whistle to and he at once comes to heel? Deuce take her airs and graces, her whims and fancies! She's chosen her man, let her stick to him."

The outburst was probably justifiable. It was certainly very comforting to his outraged feelings, but it did not answer the question what was he to do. Some kind of reply must be made. The matter could not be allowed to drift—especially as the girl with the dark eyes had intervened. The point was, should he write to Lady Barbara or go and see her, and thrash out the matter once and for all?

"Dashed if I know. Anyhow, I won't worry over the business to-night. I'll sleep on it," was his conclusion.

He closed his eyes, but although, as Gregory said, he was sleeping as peacefully as a child when the hotel valet went into his room the next morning, it was some time before he went to sleep. In spite of his vow not to worry, he worried all the same.

He awoke with the bright sunshine full on his face, and he struggled out of bed. A long and painful toilet with the valet's assistance, the attentions of the doctor, the skilful manipulation of Gregory in disguising his undoubted black eye, his bath and the replacement of his

soiled and tattered garments by others, worked wonders. When he looked at himself in the glass he was agreeably surprised to find that he was fairly presentable. With the pardonable vanity of youth he regarded his appearance as very important, for he had come to the opinion that he ought to see Barbara face to face.

But not then. He was so stiff he could hardly drag one leg after the other. His nerves had had a nasty jar, and he was not in a fit state for what could not be other than a painful and trying interview. For all that, he rather dreaded an interchange of letters which might fail to change the situation. He felt he must convince Lady Barbara by word of mouth that their engagement no longer existed. The only way out was to send her a polite note to the effect that owing to an accident he would have to keep indoors for a few days, and that he would write and make an appointment directly he was well enough to keep it.

This note, short as it was, took him some time to write, but at last it was done and dispatched. What effect it would have on the lady he could only conjecture, for she sent him no reply.

He was certainly wise in resting. Three or four days went over before he could say he was fairly fit, and even then his bruised face had not quite resumed its normal appearance. Had he not been blessed with a splendid constitution his period of seclusion would have lasted much longer.

All the time he was invalided the prospect of a "scene" with Lady Barbara worried him, but it had to be faced, and having written that he would wait upon her the following afternoon, he set out at the hour fixed and took a

hackney coach, as Vicary did not fail to note, which set him down at the Duke of Endsleigh's house in Berkeley Square. He gave his name to a footman, and when the man returned with the message that Lady Barbara was at home and would see him, he could not decide whether he was pleased or sorry.

Ralstone was not shown into the drawing-room or library as he expected, but into a sort of boudoir, one of a suite of rooms assigned to Lady Barbara, and furnished and decorated in a style befitting the daughter of a duke. Maybe the young man was inclined to be critical—he had had so many disillusions of late that it would not be extraordinary if he were—and it seemed to him that the room reflected Lady Barbara's characteristics and tastes. The panels were fitted with mirrors; silk hangings of pale blue abounded; gilt adornments were stuck wherever it was possible; the furniture was in the Empire style, overlaid with florid ornamentation. A faint perfume scented the air. All was artificial, gilt and glitter.

Suddenly the door opened noiselessly, and Lady Barbara glided in. She was dressed for the part. The fine lady had disappeared. She affected the village maiden, in her plain muslin dress, unflounced, with short sleeves tied up with ribbon in shoulder-knot fashion. Her arms were bare and her low corsage displayed a liberal amount of bust. A cluster of white roses backed by dark green leaves suggested virginal innocence.

She hesitated, her fingers lingering on the door-handle as though deriving support from the contact while she gathered courage. Her eyes were downcast. As a matter of fact, she was waiting to see what Ralstone would do. Her aspect of maiden timidity should have in-

vited him to make the first advance, but it did not. He stood motionless.

The slightest possible wrinkle showed itself between her eyebrows. She was piqued by his immobility. It was not that she cared for him as a lover, nor that she expected him to behave like a lover, but as a man of politeness he might have had the decency to show *some* kind of feeling. Had she not metaphorically thrown herself at his feet?

The silence was intolerable. She quitted the protesting handle and went forward a step.

"Have you nothing to say?" she broke out agitatedly.

"I hardly know. I came to hear what *you* had to say. You invited me, you know."

"Invited? How coldly you speak of my letter. If you only knew what it cost me to write it! Couldn't you see it came from my heart? And you talk of it as if it were an invitation to dinner!"

"I didn't look at it in that light, I assure you. It puzzled—it surprised me. It seemed to me that you wrote it without knowing what had passed between me and Mr. Halstead. I could hardly think that."

If ever Lady Barbara needed the actress's art it was at that moment. Of course she knew, but she was not going to confess that she did. She tried to stare at Ralstone in blank astonishment. It was not altogether a successful effort.

"You talk in riddles," said she. "If you were surprised and puzzled, what about me? What excuse have you to make for your neglect? Not a word from you since that night. How many weeks ago is it? An age to me, at all events."

"It wasn't neglect," he rejoined bluntly. "It was what would naturally follow from what I told the Squire."

"And what *did* you tell him?" she cried, clasping her hands and with a note of passion in her voice which was not altogether simulated. She was fast working herself into a rage, for she foresaw failure.

"That our engagement was a great mistake and that our marriage would be a fatal one. You didn't care for me and I didn't care for you. You know that, Lady Barbara, as well as I do. The business was arranged by the Squire and the Duke. Neither you nor I had a say in the matter. I suppose but for things happening outside we should both have gone on blindly. But my eyes were opened."

"Over my silly pet at the masquerade?"

"Well—yes."

His momentary hesitation exposed a vulnerable point in his armour, of which woman's uncanny penetration in matters of the heart instantly took advantage.

"Or was it your other lady love?"

Ralstone was no hand at the game of Cupid's thrust and parry. He could not conceal his discomfiture. The attack was so unexpected that he hardly knew what to say. What had Lady Barbara heard? How could he tell that the question put so adroitly and with such confidence was simply a flash of a feminine weapon against which a man is helpless?

"I don't know what you mean. I've no other lady love. Perhaps it would be more correct to say I've no lady love at all."

Lady Barbara was now quivering with anger. All thought of the fascinations which were to bring Ralstone back had vanished. Up to this point she had lin-

gering hopes that she might save the situation, but Ralstone's evident embarrassment when tackled about the "other woman" had sent them to the winds. She could have endured his refusing to marry her because of it being a mere matter of arrangement. A *mariage de convenance* was common enough. The example furnished by the Prince Regent and Caroline of Brunswick, and its culmination the miserable squabble at the coronation in Westminster Abbey, when the King employed a body of prize-fighters, with Jackson at their head, to guard his sacred person, were fresh in the public mind, and there were hosts of other instances of ill-assorted marriages among the aristocracy. Lady Barbara was quite willing to take the risk now that the want of money had forced her hand.

But her vanity was touched at the thought of a rival. She would make one more effort, not so much with the object of winning over Ralstone as of gratifying herself—of asserting the power of her own charms. It was humiliating to think that she had been supplanted by another woman.

Suddenly she pulled out her handkerchief and dabbed her eyes. A sob burst from her, real enough, though it was a sob of anger rather than of anguish; she tottered towards him, sank upon the couch in a picturesque attitude, and buried her face in the pillow, a lovely picture of beauty in distress.

It was a little overdone, and to Jack Ralstone, unused to heroics in private life, it seemed a trifle theatrical. Sobs and gasps from Lady Barbara, who had always been so cold, who had hardly gone nearer to familiarity than the exhibition of a kind of stately condescension, did

not appear natural. It was what might have been expected from an emotional country maiden, disappointed in her first love affair, but from the haughty and high-born Lady Barbara, no.

But his doubts did not help to extricate him from an embarrassing position. She had not, in his opinion, righted herself. She had not satisfactorily accounted for her relations with Sir Phineas. She had made matters worse by the innuendo she had thrown out concerning another woman. The sneer angered him, possibly because there was a measure of truth in the accusation.

All this rushed through his mind while he was trying to decide whether he should offer consolation or maintain a stony indifference. He had naturally rather a tender heart, and her apparent self-abandonment was beginning to touch him. He might have yielded to his sympathetic impulses had not Lady Barbara been so impatient. As he did not immediately throw himself on his knees, call himself a hard-hearted monster and beg forgiveness, she came to the conclusion that the tactics of pathos had failed. Besides, the tears would not come. She sprang to her feet, came quite close to him, stretched out both hands and looked up imploringly. If ever a pair of blue eyes asked for a kiss, Lady Barbara's did just then.

"Can't we forget all our silly quarrel and begin again as if nothing had happened?" she murmured brokenly.

"The quarrel doesn't strike me as silly. I suppose we ought to have an eye to the future," he was beginning, when she put her hand over his mouth.

"Oh, how dreadfully solemn! I hate to talk about the future. It reminds me of being in church," she exclaimed, quite determined that he should not treat the matter se-

riously.

"Very well, then we'll take the present. The position is that old Halstead has, so to speak, kicked me out of his house because I told him I didn't think our engagement ought to continue. I haven't a feather to fly with. That doesn't sound very attractive, does it?"

"Oh, I know all about that. Let me tell you that we've only got to make it up and everything would be well again," she cried eagerly.

"Really? I understood from your ladyship just now that you were quite ignorant of what has passed between me and my stepfather. How is it you're so certain he'll go back on his word?"

Lady Barbara was dumbfounded. She had made a frightful slip, and how to retrieve her error was not very clear to her.

"Oh, it's only my impression," she faltered. "In any case, I'm quite willing to risk Mr. Halstead altering his mind, if you are."

Ralstone was silent. An ugly thought had flashed across his brain, It suddenly occurred to him that Lady Barbara had much to gain by marrying him and restoring Simon Halstead's good humour. Had not Simon promised to hand over thirty thousand pounds to the duke on their marriage day?

"I can't make out why you should think so," he rejoined presently. "I fancy I know more about Simon Halstead's obstinacy than you do. We'd better look at the thing fairly and squarely, Lady Barbara. It's impossible you can marry a man who hasn't a penny in his pocket."

Secure in her belief that, once married to Jack Ralstone, his stepfather would relent, she laughed incred-

ulously.

"If that's your only objection, I don't see that there's much in it. I love you. Don't you know that?"

"It comes as news to me," he answered coldly.

"But I do," she persisted.

He did not believe her, but he could hardly say so. He was anxious to avoid any further unpleasantness. All he wanted was to say good-bye and take his departure. He would rather they parted as friends, but it was not so easy in the face of her intense desire for reconciliation. Her change of attitude puzzled him. He had always thought her cold, haughty and vain, and the emotion of that day had not materially altered his opinion. Indeed, the suggestion that she was also mercenary had strengthened it. Short of a blunt and emphatic refusal to marry her, it looked as if nothing would convince her that he was in earnest.

He was reluctant to take this course unless she gave him a chance of doing it naturally, and a crisis of this kind she seemed carefully to avoid.

"I take what you say as the greatest compliment you can pay me," said he awkwardly. "But——"

"Only a compliment? A woman's love?" she interposed scornfully.

"When I can't return it, what else can I say? If it be true——"

"It *is* true. Do you suppose I should so humble myself if it weren't?"

"I accept your word, but it makes it all the more necessary I should tell you the risk you run."

He spoke desperately. It was the last argument he had short of being what might be termed brutal.

"Risk? Didn't I tell you that I was willing to face any risk?"

"The risk of poverty, yes, but not the risk of wasting your love on one who in a few weeks time may cease to exist."

"Good heavens, what are you talking about? Surely you don't contemplate making away with yourself?"

"Nothing so silly. I'm going to fight a duel."

"Only that? Duels are fought every day, and not much harm's done. It's all very absurd. Just an exchange of bullets and honour's satisfied. I suppose men have no other way of settling their quarrels. May I ask with when you're going to fight?"

"Some one in whom you're interested—unless I'm doing you an injustice—Sir Phineas Tenbury."

The colour fled from Lady Barbara's cheeks. She stared mutely at Ralstone. His words seemed to have paralysed her speech.

"It will probably be not the harmless affair you infer," went on Ralstone. "I shouldn't have mentioned the matter to you. but I thought it only right to warn you after the declaration of your affection with which you've honoured me. Obviously it would be wise of you to turn your thoughts elsewhere. In the event of the duel having a fatal termination so far as I'm concerned, you'd be saved a deal of distress."

Ralstone spoke with a stiffness and formality which did not come naturally to him, but he did so purposely, as he was anxious to avoid a repetition of hysterical emotion. To his relief Lady Barbara showed no symptoms of anything of the kind. The shock had passed away. She exhibited no resentment at the mention of Tenbury's

name, as he expected, and her face betrayed an eager interest which puzzled him. The truth was she felt immensely flattered. A duel between Sir Phineas and Ralstone could have connection with no one other than herself. It gratified her vanity. She felt almost grateful to Ralstone. If he were not in love with her, he was ready to die for her.

"Oh, you mustn't meet Sir Phineas," she cried. "I've heard terrible stories about him as a duellist. I don't mean that he doesn't fight fair, but he's a deadly shot."

"I know. It makes no difference."

"But cannot it be settled without fighting?"

"No; the cause of quarrel is too serious."

"What is it all about? Is there a lady in it?"

Lady Barbara asked the question with as much indifference as she could assume. She was in reality burning to have her suspicions confirmed.

"You'd better ask Sir Phineas," was Ralstone's reply.

"No. I'd prefer to have it from your own lips. Sir Phineas is nothing to me."

Ralstone could not prevent himself from raising his eyebrows slightly. The suggestion of incredulity angered the lady.

"I'm sorry I'm not in a position to give you any information."

"But I've a right to know—that is, if it concerns me."

"Make your mind easy. Your ladyship has nothing to do with our quarrel. You can't reproach yourself if it so happens that I come to grief."

It would have been hard to find anything which would have served Ralstone's desire to close the discussion so well as the turn the talk had taken. The wound

from which her vanity was already suffering was a mere scratch compared with what it had now received.

"Then you two are fighting over some other woman," she almost shrieked, her lips tremulous with rage.

"I can only refer you to Sir Phineas Tenbury," returned Ralstone with a low bow.

"Oh, you're driving me mad! Every time I talk to you, you heap fresh insults upon me. Yes, you're right, you'd make a wretched husband. I've mercifully refrained from saying anything personal, but I don't see why I should now have any scruple. You look in anything but a fit state for presenting yourself before a lady. I suppose you've been in some vulgar street row. I believe you Corinthians, as you call yourselves, glory in your familiarity with all that's low in London. Please go back to your boon companions. I've done with you."

Jack Ralstone said not a word. He was only too glad to get away from the enraged lady. He again bowed and walked to the door, pursued by vituperations which amazed him, coming as they did from the daughter of a duke. But it was a robust age. When men—and women too—let themselves go, they did so with a vengeance.

"Phew!" ejaculated Ralstone, when he was in the square. "I now know something about her ladyship's temper. I'd heard she'd a pretty rough side to her tongue, and by gad, it's true. A beautiful termagant! What an escape for me! I'm deucedly obliged to old Simon. If he hadn't cup up nasty I might still be dangling after my lady. But she's a bit of a mystery. How does Sir Phineas stand with her? I thought she looked mighty queer when I told her I was going to fight him. Is there really anything between the pair? Thank goodness, it's no affair

of mine."

The feeling of relief now that he was free from entanglement produced an exhilaration which made him forget his aches and pains, and he was tempted to walk back to Covent Garden. There was another reason, and a more important one, why he should walk. He had but a shilling in his pocket. He became suddenly serious. He had come to the end of his resources and would have to consider what he should do.

Meanwhile Lady Barbara was in what the servants called her "tantrums." Directly Ralstone had departed she rushed to her bedroom, rang furiously for her maid, tore the white roses from her bosom and trampled upon them, and did not wait for the Abigail to help her to take off the muslin dress, the sight of which accentuated her rage. But though the maid came as quickly as she could, knowing what the sound of the bell meant, she was welcomed with a sound box on the ear for her alleged dilatoriness.

Then, when Lady Barbara's anger had somewhat spent itself, she sat down and wrote a frenzied note to Sir Phineas, which she dispatched to the Albany by a groom.

Sir Phineas was congratulating himself that all was going on well when he received Lady Barbara's disturbing missive.

"I must see you at once about something important concerning yourself and Jack Ralstone. I shall be at Matthews's at nine. On no account fail me.—B."

"Humph," muttered Sir Phineas, frowning as he crumpled the note and then tore it into fragments. "A 'B' with a sting."

CHAPTER XVI

Vicary gets his Deserts

Ralstone reached the "Tavistock" quite done up. The interview with Lady Barbara had tried his nerves, and the walk from Berkeley Square, in his shaken condition, had not been a less severe ordeal. He was glad to find the cheery Walsham in the coffee-room awaiting his return.

"My dear fellow," cried Walsham, "I've been horribly concerned about you. It relieved my mind when Gregory told me you had been brought here fairly safely—a bit battered but otherwise not much the worse. By Jove it was a near thing. What the deuce did it mean? You were the mark. Somebody had a grudge against you. Who was it? That devil Thurtell?"

"Of course it was. He was frightfully savage at being licked after his boasting. I'm told he's as vain as a peacock. That sneakish fellow I pointed out to you must have been in his pay."

Walsham shook his head.

"Wait a moment," said he. "I called at Bow Street this morning and had a talk with some of the 'Robin Redbreasts' (Bow Street runners)—I know Ruthven and one or two more. I mentioned that spy fellow and they

laughed at the idea of his being employed by Thurtell. They know the blackguard quite well and have seen him hanging about here. He was one of the 'common informers' a few years ago, and was always at Bow Street swearing away the liberty of some poor fellow who couldn't pay him to keep his tongue to himself. In whose service do you think he's been for many months past?"

"How on earth can I tell. Old Satan's I should imagine, from what you say."

"Oh, I've no doubt the devil's been at his back, but just now his master is Sir Phineas Tenbury."

Ralstone slapped his thigh.

"By gad that's it!" he cried. "I knew I'd seen the scoundrel somewhere. I threatened to kick him out of my room at the 'George,' Andover, for his insolence. At a matter of fact that was the beginning of my difference with Tenbury. But why should Tenbury set him to watch me? The next time I see the rascal I'll drag the truth out of him."

"You'll get nothing but lies. At the same time, it's an infernal nuisance to feel you're being spied upon."

"An infernal nuisance? Yes, and I won't stand it. I did think Tenbury had some remains of a gentleman about him, but it doesn't look like it. If I hadn't already quarrelled with him this would be enough to make me call him out. He owes me four thousand pounds, and never a word of explanation have I had why he doesn't pay up like a man of honour."

"I'm told that the City bill discounters won't look at his paper. The Jews are at him like a pack of hounds round a fox. By the way, my dear Jack, how did you fare that night? Did the rabble rob you?"

"Rob me? I was left with nothing. I'm in the deuce of a fix in consequence. I can't stay much longer here. I already owe the 'Tavistock' people a pretty stiff bill."

"I feared as much. Look here, if a couple of 'ponies' are any good, you're quite welcome. I've been fairly lucky of late."

"You're a good chap, Walsham, but I don't like taking your money. How the deuce am I to pay you back?"

"That doesn't matter a rap. I don't expect you'll be always hard up. There's my motion of a rich wife still on the cards, that is, if you're quite free of Lady Barbara Dacre."

"Oh, that's all off—finally. I settled the matter an hour ago. She wrote me a most extraordinary letter—for her—making out she was heart-broken——"

Walsham burst into a laugh.

"What! Has Sir Phineas said good-bye?"

"I don't know. The whole business is very bewildering. I went to see her—I couldn't well get out of it—there was a bit of a scene—she kicked up a frightful row; the end was I came away, and I suppose we're now daggers drawn. So much the better."

"I congratulate you. Well, there are the 'ponies.' If you want any more, tell me."

The young lord took a couple of twenty-pound notes from his pocket-book and pushed them across the table. Ralstone took them with evident reluctance.

"If I could screw out of that fellow Weare the hundred pounds he owes me, I could pay at once," said he a little gloomily.

"You'd better consider Weare as a rotten egg. I asked the Bow Street men about him, and they give him a thun-

dering bad character. He poses as a moneylender, and no doubt he does a bit that way, but he does more in gambling, with a little card sharping thrown in. Runs a gambling booth on race courses. He's to be seen every night at Rexworthy's gambling hell in Spring Gardens. He and Thurtell just now are as thick as thieves. Ruthven thinks their friendship will end in Thurtell being rooked. He's more fool than knave, but when he's wound up there's no telling what he won't do."

"*Ecce signum* at the Fives Court for instance."

"Yes. You scored, but he very nearly did for you outright."

Ralstone did not answer. His eyes were bent absently on the floor. He hadn't had time to think over his affairs, and the present was certainly not suitable; for all that a disturbing feeling crept over him, that the sooner he pulled himself together the better. He was brought to realities by Walsham giving him a rousing slap on the shoulder.

"What are you dreaming about? I've made two splendid suggestions and you've not taken the slightest notice."

"I beg your pardon. What were they?"

"One that we should dine at Boodle's, where you'll have really a decent dinner, much better than the stodgy fare of the 'Tavistock,' and that afterwards we should go to the King's Theatre. The ballet's worth seeing. You'll have a sight of some handsome women who know how to dance. Doesn't the prospect tempt you?"

"Not to-night, my friend. I'm rather afraid of your dinners unless I'm in good fettle, and I'm not that just now."

"Maybe you're right. Anyhow, I'm not going to let

you off. To-morrow night—what do you say?"

"Perhaps. I'll see how I feel. A chop here and a pint of claret quietly is more my form."

Walsham shrugged his shoulders and remarked that Ralstone's diet suggested that he was training for a prize fight.

"I may even have to do that. I'm at my wit's end how to make money."

"You're a bit hipped, my dear fellow. You'll take a different view of life to-morrow after a good night's rest."

Walsham sat chatting for some little time and then took his departure, leaving Ralstone to get over his fit of the blues by himself.

As sometimes happen when the spirits are depressed, all one's worries come tumbling one after the other into the brain, and this was just now with Jack Ralstone. His severance from Simon Halstead, and what that severance meant—the necessity of doing something, not merely to keep up his reputation among his friends as a Corinthian, but to live decently—the puzzling behaviour of Lady Barbara—the amazing reappearance of the girl who chose to call herself Amelia Hart—her mysterious reference to Simon Halstead, pointing as it did to some secret resentment—the outrageous assault upon him by Thurtell's gang, and the duel with Tenbury and its problematical ending—really his troubles were overwhelming.

As a rule his buoyancy was sufficient to enable him to laugh at difficulties, but he had never had such difficulties as these to surmount. Possibly it was the uncertainty clouding them, the impossibility of explaining everything to his satisfaction which weighed him down, but whether or not, there he sat brooding until the waiter

asked him if he intended to dine and what he would like.

"Oh, anything—anything. Don't bother me. Bring me whatever is ready," he rapped out irritably.

The waiter vanished. It did not surprise him that Mr. Jack Ralstone, who was generally inclined to a joke, should be out of temper. Of course he hadn't recovered from the effects to the Fives Court adventure, though it was marvellous how his youth and vigorous constitution had thrown off any serious trouble. Word was passed down to the kitchen to look after the "brave young gentleman," and the cook did her best to serve up two or three dainty dishes. Her efforts, together with a pint of Burgundy, succeeded to some extent in restoring the young gentleman's equanimity.

But he was not nearly himself. He felt terribly restless. The stuffiness of the coffee-room, with its whiffy memories of innumerable dinners and diners, was intolerable. It was impossible to ponder over his worries inside the hotel, and he sallied forth to walk himself into an equable humour.

His intention was dashed at the very outset. He had hardly got to the corner of James Street when he saw the spy lurking at his favourite spot under the colonnade opposite. Instantly Ralstone's smouldering passion flared up and he strode across the road. The fellow saw him coming and spotting danger was slinking away, when he heard the words:

"Stop, you. I've got something to say before you sneak off."

The man pretended not to hear, but he dared not run for fear of attracting attention. Before a minute elapsed the irate young man was by his side, and glad of the

chance to vent his feelings, had brought down a heavy hand on his shoulder; he found himself twisted round and faced by as threatening a look as ever he had set eyes upon, and this was saying a good deal, for many a time Vicary had had to use his wits to escape the thrashing that he deserved.

"What's your game in watching me, you rascal? Have you taken up your old dirty trade of informer?"

Vicary's white face became of an unwholesome pasty hue. His forehead was damp and his knees knocked against each other. Ralstone was holding him by the collar at arm's length, and the young man's knuckles were grinding into his neck.

"Let me go, sir," he implored, "you're choking me."

"I hope so. I'm only anticipating what, I'll swear, Jack Ketch will do to you some day. Your answer—quick—or I'll roll you in that muck heap."

The sweepings of the market were piled up close to the kerb. There had been a little rain, and it was as foul and as unsavoury a mass of vegetable offal as could be found anywhere outside the Fleet Ditch.

"I've no game at all, sir. You're greatly mistaken. I have a perfect right to w—walk here, sir," he spluttered.

"Don't talk to me about your rights. If you're at all curious over the subject I'll show you what they are."

The hands shifted from the coat collar to the neck and he felt like a rat in the jaws of a terrier, shaken as he was till he was gasping and nearly black in the face.

"Are your muddy brains any clearer?" demanded his torturer, ceasing the pressure and the shaking to permit his victim to speak. "Why has your master sent you here to spy?"

"My m—master, sir? I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know very well whom I mean. None of your lies. We've met before. At Andover. I ought to have kicked you then for your insolence, but the kicking will keep. What dirty work is Sir Phineas employing you for now?"

The man probably saw that it was useless trying to keep up his pretended ignorance. He mumbled out sullenly:

"You'd better ask Sir Phineas. It's no affair of mine. I never ask questions."

"That's enough for me. You can tell your employer that if he wishes to watch me, he'd better act as his own spy. I shall treat him as I'm now treating his underling."

Ralstone's grip on the fellow's throat tightened and Vicary became horribly frightened. He really thought he was going to be strangled. But his captor had no such intention. Vicary struggled violently to free himself, and Ralstone gradually backed him towards the muck heap and then suddenly let go and gave him a slight push. Vicary's body was bent; he was unable to recover his perpendicular. and the next moment the spy was spluttering and choking in the midst of the muddy, rotten garbage. And there Ralstone left him and walked on, feeling more satisfied with himself than he'd been for many a day.

What became of the man he did not trouble to see. He went towards King Street, where he had not been since the night of the affray. He had been tempted to revisit it more than once, but he would not run any risks after the girl's warning. But now that he had disposed of the spy, caution did not seem to matter.

He looked up as he passed the house. It was dark from basement to attic. He dared not stop. The discovery that the spy was in Sir Phineas Tenbury's service had set him thinking. Clearly he had been on the wrong tack in imagining the fellow was employed by Thurtell. What could be Tenbury's object? Ralstone could only conceive that it had something to do with the girl. Had he not, during their quarrel, asked what he (Ralstone) had done with her? Sir Phineas had refused to accept his denial, and what more likely than that he should set his menial to work to find out whether that denial was true or not?

"If it is so," thought Jack, "it'll mean another score to wipe off. Anyway, I've settled that blackguard's hash for to-night. He'll think twice before he shows his face to me again."

With this conclusion in his mind he was half tempted to turn back and call at the house. It would be quite safe. But he decided not to do so. He remembered her express injunction not to seek her.

It was about nine o'clock. The day had come to an end. The lamplighter, shouldering his ladder, was hurrying past, and the gas-lights, few and feeble, just made Bedford Street, which he had now reached, visible. He wandered down to the Strand and turned to the east. The river, picturesque and romantic at twilight, attracted him as a good setting for the waking dreams of a man in love, and he was inclined to take a wherry at the nearest stairs and be rowed about for an hour or two.

But he altered his mind. There was the waterman to be reckoned with. As a class the watermen were full of gossip, and not infrequently full of beer. The river at that time would he busy with boats full of noisy pleasure

seekers on their way to Vauxhall Gardens in the west, and to Cherry Gardens, Rotherhithe, in the east, and the watermen were certain to exchange badinage more or less coarse. A risk of too many interruptions for one in his mood. So he kept on his way until Somerset House hove in sight.

Waterloo Bridge, then one of the notable adornments in London—it had only been opened some six years—occurred to him. With its toll it promised a fair amount of seclusion, and turning into Lancaster Place he reached the turnstile, threw down his coin and sauntered on to the bridge.

A thunderstorm had broken over the metropolis in the afternoon and had cleared the air, a not unwelcome change after several days of overpowering heat. The opalescent sky, with its canopy of pale blue, was likely to last unchanged until dawn. There was no moon and only a few of the largest and brightest stars were visible. This was not altogether a disadvantage, for deep black shadows were absent and the even light enabled distant objects to be fairly visible. Half-way across the bridge he sat down on one of the alcoved seats on the western side and listened vaguely to the swirl of the flood tide rushing through the arches. The shouts of the watermen and the strident laughter of their men passengers mingled with the shrill giggles of the women did not distract him.

His eyes wandered over the parapet and he took in the varied scene with a quiet sense of pleasure. The dominating feature was Westminster Abbey, far more imposing than it appears to-day, for it was not dwarfed by the present House of Parliament, nor cut in two by the hideous Charing Cross railway bridge. The House

of Parliament of that day, with its squat square towers, looked insignificant and commonplace by the side of the venerable pile.

Under the influence of the surroundings he would have found it hard to say exactly what were his reflections. He might at that moment be likened to Tom Tug—"thinking of nothing at all." He shifted his position and turned his face eastward. A few pedestrians passed him, working people hurrying to their homes on the Surrey side. A hackney coach lumbered by—that was all the traffic. It never was great at any time and less than ever after nightfall. Then the slim figure of a young woman, closely veiled and her shawl drawn tightly about her, tripped slowly along, not with the tired preoccupied air of one who had been at work all day, but rather as though she were out to enjoy the air. Ralstone's eyes fell idly upon her and he hardly gave her a thought.

About a dozen yards in her rear came a man who walked quite unlike a Londoner. There was no slouch of the body, no shuffle of the feet. He had the elasticity of a man who had led an active outdoor life ever since he was a crawling infant. Every movement suggested that his muscles were like springs; they acted in perfect harmony, with not an atom of the stiffness of the drill sergeant. As he went by Ralstone saw that he was a negro and Jack recognised him at once—Quamina.

Instantly the girl's words that she was greatly indebted to the black flashed across Ralstone's mind. The thing was simple enough. Quamina was her bodyguard whenever she went out after dark for a constitutional, and the veiled figure in front was she herself!

"Fool!" he murmured, "not to know her at a glance.

And I call myself her lover!"

He rose and in a few seconds was abreast of the negro. He tapped the man lightly on the arm.

CHAPTER XVII

Nyra

"My good fellow," said Ralstone, "we've met before, but I want you to make sure. Have a good look at me." Quamina wheeled round and fixed his black gleaming eyes on the young Englishman. They were like the eyes of a wild animal fearing an enemy at every turn.

"Me not know massa."

"What's the good of pretending you don't? Have another look. Didn't you carry me in your arms into Mrs. Glover's house in King Street when I didn't know whether you were black or white? A week ago or so. Don't you recollect?"

The negro said nothing. He made some kind of motion with his head, It might mean either yes or no.

"You were a good friend to me then and I haven't thanked you properly. Put this in your pocket."

Ralstone drew out a guinea and handed it to the negro. The latter drew himself up proudly.

"Quamina no take money, sah."

Ralstone stared in amazement. But he wasn't to be put off.

"I admire your independence, though why you should

stand on your dignity hang me if I can understand. If you won't take money will you take my hand?"

"No, massa. Me no shake hands. Dat make me your friend. I no friend." His white teeth showed for an instant, and the thick lips closed tightly upon them.

"As you please. You're not like your mistress. I'm going to speak to her and I'll swear she won't be as ungracious as you are."

"No, sah ..."

Agile as a hare he had moved a step beyond Ralstone, had wheeled round and was confronting him threateningly.

"Oh, go to the devil!" shouted Ralstone at once, losing his temper.

"De debbil you say, sah?"

"Yes, or the river. If you dare to stop me I'll pitch you over the parapet."

The negro's reply was to seize Ralstone's arms. The next moment the two men were writhing like a couple of snakes. Had any of Jack's Corinthian friends been present, they would have found it difficult to lay a bet on either man. Not a blow was struck. It was a wrestling match pure and simple. Ralstone was a skilled wrestler, but he had found his equal. Not that the negro knew anything about the Somersetshire, Westmorland or Cornish styles, but he was the possessor of some curious "holds" and grips which rather bothered the Englishman, used as he was to orthodox methods. His efforts to "cross buttock" his opponent were continually frustrated. Any other way of getting free seemed impossible, so ironlike was the grasp of the black.

While they were bending backwards and forwards like

two saplings swayed by the wind, a sweet, penetrating voice was heard.

"What mad trick are you trying, Quamina. Let go at once. This is my business, not yours."

The negro obeyed sullenly. He dropped his hands and glared savagely at Ralstone, who flushed and panting with the severe struggle had his eyes fixed on the girl. She had raised her veil and her face was more enchanting and witchlike than ever he had seen it.

"You are faithfully served," said he between great gasps of breath. "I can guess why your servant tackled me. I'm afraid I was hasty. I told him I would throw him into the river. I'm sorry. He took me for one of your enemies. I'm not that, am I?"

"No. I've every reason to be grateful to you. Leave us, Quamina."

"Missie not cross?"

"No. You did what you thought was right, but you were mistaken. Remember, this gentleman is my friend and yours too."

"I said as much as that, but he wouldn't have it," rejoined Ralstone. "It doesn't matter. I longed to see you, and now that the chance has come, never mind under what circumstances."

Quamina had retired a few paces. The two were face to face.

"I think we're safe from interruption here," went on Ralstone. "Shall we walk to the end of the bridge. Your man can follow if it pleases you."

The girl bowed and spoke to the negro in foreign lingo. They strolled on together for a minute or so, neither saying a word. Ralstone was the first to break the silence.

"I was beginning to fear you would not keep your promise. A week's gone over and you made no sign. You had forgotten, I thought."

"I did not forget. How could I? But it was difficult. I had but one word and I could not bring myself to write it. But now that I've met you I will try to say it. Farewell."

"Farewell? Surely—surely you don't mean *that*," stammered Ralstone, stating at her aghast.

"Yes. It had to be said some time and the sooner the better."

"Why? In justice to me I ought to know."

She averted her head and was silent.

He came a little closer to her and would have slid his arm within hers, but she gave him no encouragement. She drew her shawl tighter and the garment furnished an insurmountable barrier.

"Am I to understand you refuse to tell me?" he asked.

"Not now. What has to be done must be done. I suppose you'll know—or at least you'll guess—later on when the time comes."

"When will that be?"

"I can't say."

"You mean you *won't* say," he burst out savagely, "I wish you'd clear up this mystery. But I suppose you don't trust me. If you only knew what you are to me——"

"I'm nothing to you," she cried with bitterness in her voice, "I'm only a waif and stray. And the work I've set myself to do will make you hate me. That's why I want you to pass out of my life and forget."

"I don't intend to do the first, and as for the second, that's impossible," he returned doggedly. "I may be very stupid, but I think I'm right in assuming from what you

hinted at when we last talked together that your intention, whatever it might have been, was altered when you imagined I was Simon Halstead's son."

"Yes," she answered, but so faintly that he hardly caught the sound.

"And that on discovering I was not in any way related to him, you went back to your original resolve?"

She bowed her head.

"Well?" he inquired impatiently, as though he expected her to follow the lead she had given him, "won't you solve the mystery?"

"No. It must remain where it is."

He bit his lips. Was there no way of overcoming her firmness? He tried to look her in the face, but she never gave him the chance. He could only see her profile. In the mystic subdued light it was more like inanimate marble than flesh and blood. But it was not less beautiful on that account.

"Do you know what has happened to me since I've been in London? Something that concerns you."

She turned towards him involuntarily, her face full of apprehension. It was the first time since they had been talking that she showed any emotion.

"Concerns me?" she faltered.

"Yes, I've been watched every day, and every night too, when it was possible, by a spy in the pay of Sir Phineas Tenbury."

She clutched his arm agitatedly.

"*That* man?"

"Ah, I see this interests you. So much the better. An hour or so ago I ran across the rascal and the result of the interview was most satisfactory. I left him rolling in

the gutter. I doubt if the blackguard 'll be anxious to spy upon me again."

"But how did you know he had anything to do with Sir Phineas Tenbury, and why should Sir Phineas spy upon you?"

"As to your first question, you may take what I say as the truth. As to your second, I have my suspicions, but only you can verify them."

"You spoke just now of my mystery," she returned after a pause. "Haven't you one of your own?"

"Maybe, but mine depends upon yours, or at least upon part of yours. You told me the other night that you dared not go out in the daytime for fear of some man. When I mentioned Sir Phineas Tenbury's name just now you shook with terror. I could feel your fingers quivering. The answer to all this is perfectly plain. Sir Phineas is the man you're afraid of. Let me have the whole story and I'll explain why he should spy upon me."

"I feel reluctant to thrust my troubles on you. You've done enough for me already and I can never repay you, but——" she stopped hesitatingly.

Jack Ralstone was beginning to understand the ways of women. By some curious instinct he felt that if left to herself she would tell him far more than if he sought to draw the facts from her, so he said nothing, but contrived to insinuate his arm around her. She made no protest, to his huge delight. His caress somehow established a confidence to which she insensibly yielded.

"Oh, I *must* tell you," she went on swiftly, as though she felt that by delay the impulse to seek sympathy would vanish. "Perhaps you ought to know, for it was through that man I came to be with those horrible people

from whom you rescued me."

Again he was silent; the tender pressure of his arm was a sufficient answer.

"I came to England—never mind from what country—about a year ago, with a set purpose in my mind. I found myself without money and unable to move a step towards accomplishing my object. I could sing, not like your fine singers at our operas and concerts, but in my own way. My songs are not like English or Italian ones, but I suppose after a fashion they had some novelty, for when I was desperate I went to Mr. Barnett, the manager of Vauxhall Gardens, and he heard me sing and at once gave me an engagement. I shall never forget my first appearance. I was overwhelmed with the splendour, the millions of lamps as they seemed, the crowds of people with their faces turned upwards waiting for me. When the music struck up to accompany me I was overcome with nervousness and I saw myself being hissed from the stage. Then I forgot everything but the music of my country and I fancied myself back again across the wide sea. I began—it was all a dream—I sang my song right through, whether well or ill I don't know, and I heard a great sound of the clapping of hands and shouts. I had to sing my song over again. Mr. Barnett said to me as I came off, 'You'll do, little one. You've made a hit.' After that I sang every night and my name was in big letters on the bills."

"Your name," whispered Ralstone. "Yes, that's what I want to know. I'll swear it isn't Amelia Hart."

"No. It's Nyra Seaton. I used my Christian name at Vauxhall. I wouldn't have done so—for reasons—but Mr. Barnett took a fancy to it and insisted upon no other. I

suppose I was a great success, for I sang at the Gardens until the winter months and was engaged again in the spring. Then it was my persecution began. Sir Phineas and his friends were constantly there and he began to pursue me with his offensive attentions. I was warned against the man, but there was no necessity for warnings, I hated him from the very first and persistently repulsed him and returned his presents."

"The damned scoundrel," muttered Ralstone under his breath.

"My coldness, my rudeness, my anger made no difference. He continued to insult me with his fulsome flattery, his offers, his insinuations. At last I began to be frightened. He swore he loved me passionately and that nothing should ever turn him. He hinted at all kinds of things and I had no one to protect me. Had Quamina been with me I should have felt safer, but Quamina, like myself, had his living to get, and he had joined a boxing booth and was away in the country at fairs and races. He is reckoned a splendid boxer."

"So I should think," said Ralstone, "if he fights as well as he wrestles."

"Yes. I was quite terrified when I saw you struggling with him. But you are wonderful too, or he would have dashed you to the ground."

Her eyes gleamed suddenly upon him. He thrilled with pleasure, as much at the admiration expressed in her face as in her words.

"It's nice of you to say that. But you make me jealous of Quamina. I want to serve you as he does."

"You cannot. It's impossible," she rejoined with emphasis. "It was because he was not at my side, ever ready

to give his life for me, that all this trouble has happened. He would have killed Sir Phineas."

"I may have to do that," put in Ralstone hastily.

"No. I forbid you. I've escaped him and I want to forget his hateful persecution. It is no affair of yours."

Ralstone's lips contracted. He wondered what Nyra—a delightful name Nyra he thought—would say if she knew that it *was* his affair.

"As you please—for the present. But I've stopped your story. Do let me know the rest."

"Oh, it is soon told. I was leaving the Gardens late one night when I was stopped by a couple of rough men and an old woman. Before I could utter a cry for help a cloak was thrown over my head and I was hurried into some kind of closed vehicle. I struggled to no purpose. Inside the coach or whatever it was I was gagged and bound. Then the two men left me with the old hag, climbed on to the box and the coach was driven off at a great rate. The journey took several hours during which the woman never said a word and I, of course could not speak. We changed horses twice, but I had no chance of appealing to the people at the inn. It was nearly midday when the vehicle stopped, and still gagged and blindfolded I was bundled out into a caravan. One of the men drove away and the other, with the old woman, followed me into the van. The thing jogged on till the evening and was taken on to the dreary common where you first saw me."

"I thank Heaven I did. And the villainous plot was hatched by that dastard Sir Phineas?"

"Oh yes. For a whole week I was kept a prisoner and half starved. I believe firmly that this ill-treatment was part of the plan to enfeeble me in mind and body so that

I might be forced into submission. They were mistaken. I would have died first. One day not a particle of food passed my lips, and in the evening, quite unexpectedly, Sir Phineas made his appearance. There was a scene between us. I drew my knife which I had managed to conceal, and threatened to stab myself. I suppose he saw that I meant to do it for he let me alone and with a jeering laugh said he could wait, and went away. The next morning I found that my gaolers had searched for my knife and had taken it away. My treatment after that was vilely cruel—you saw something of it."

"My God, yes. It made my blood boil."

Nyra paused. Her bosom heaved violently The memory of that terrible time was evidently intensely painful.

"I never saw Sir Phineas after that," she continued with an effort. "And then my imprisonment and torture came to an end—through you. Oh, whatever happens I shall never forget your bravery. I could have screamed with joy every time you struck that monster, Jerry Winch."

She turned her face swiftly towards Ralstone. Tears stood in her eyes. She put out her hand and he clasped it warmly. She said nothing, but he understood how anxious she was that he should think she was full of gratitude.

"And after what you've told me, do you still say that the punishment of that scoundrel Tenbury is not my affair?" he demanded reproachfully.

"Yes, you've done enough."

"Not nearly. I swear to you I shall have no peace until I've brought the villain to his knees." Ralstone's voice, though low, vibrated with passion. His hand, which still held hers, suddenly tightened. She winced. He begged

her pardon.

"It's nothing," she murmured faintly. She did not contradict him and he was glad.

"What happened to you after you ran from me?" he asked presently.

"I tramped all the way to London. I had no money, the old woman had taken every penny. But she could not take my voice, and at every town and village I sang in the street, and the people gave me money. Some of the villagers let me sleep in their cottages. It took me a fortnight to walk to London. You see, I had to spend some time in singing, and I went out of my way to go through a town when I thought I might pick up a few coins. I was at Windsor while a theatrical company was playing, and Mrs. Glover heard me singing, and stopped and spoke. She was a good, kind creature, and I had to tell her something of my story. When she found I was 'Nyra,' she insisted upon my going to her house in King Street, and so I did, and there I've been ever since. She knows why I daren't go out in the daytime, but she doesn't know who my persecutor is. No one knows but you, Mr. Ralstone."

"Not even Quamina?"

"No. I'm afraid to tell him. He has all the savage instincts of his race. It would mean his seeking out Sir Phineas. He'd wait his opportunity and he'd use his knife without scruple when his chance came. All he knows is that I've enemies lying in wait for me, and he doesn't pick and choose. My injuries are his. He doesn't trouble to think that you may be my friend. He hasn't the sense. Besides, he's very jealous of anybody who notices me."

Ralstone saw that this being so, the negro might very

likely prove a source of trouble. He would have to be cautious.

"Do you walk here often?" said he.

"Generally every night, if fine. You see, the bridge is so quiet, and there are so few people. And I like to look upon the river. I see in it something of myself. When it's rough and tossing about the small boats, indifferent whether it smashes them or not, it reminds me of my own uncontrollable fits of passion. If it's quiet, I'm placid and maybe sad. If the wind ruffles the surface and the sun tips the waves and makes them sparkle like diamonds, it shows me when I'm sanguine and full of energy. Oh, yes, the river's very beautiful."

"I understand. Would you be terribly offended if I too walked on the bridgesome evenings?"

"It's as free for you as for me," was her reply.

"Thanks. But that tiresome champion of yours. Must he be always with you?"

"Yes," she answered quickly.

"Oh," said Ralstone in disappointed tone. "But perhaps when he gets more used to me he won't be so savage."

"Used to you? How?"

"That's not so easy to say. So much depends upon you. I want to see you again. I *must.* I want to know more about you—it isn't mere curiosity, I swear. There are reasons—important reasons; they have to do with that scoundrel Tenbury."

"In what way?" she asked a little agitatedly.

"I can't tell you yet. Nothing is settled."

She fixed her eyes upon his face as if to read there the meaning of his words, but his expression told her nothing. It was grave, that was all.

"I'm grateful for the interest you take in me," said she, slowly, "but I go back to what I started with. I must say farewell."

"You may say it if you please, but *I* don't."

He waited impatiently for her answer, but none came. Anyway, she did not protest, and that to some extent was encouraging.

They had arrived at the Surrey end of the bridge, and were returning. Quamina was always some eight or ten yards from them.

The church bells, chiming ten o'clock, came with a mellow sound. The river traffic was subdued. The pleasure-boats had practically ceased. They would not be busy again until close upon midnight. Nyra held out her hand.

"Good night," said she softly.

Ralstone's heart bounded. This surely meant that she had not bidden him adieu definitely. He took the soft little hand and, moved by a sudden impulse, he raised it to his lips. He was startled by a harsh sound from behind, not unlike the growl of a wild beast. Nyra quickly withdrew her hand.

"Quamina's angry," she whispered. "I've kept him waiting too long."

She turned swiftly. Ralstone did not seek to detain her, and she walked with rapid footsteps to the negro, and Ralstone watched them hurrying towards the Strand end of the bridge. He did not attempt to keep pace with them—he knew she would not like it. When he reached the turnstile they had disappeared.

In the Strand, Ralstone jumped into a hackney coach and bade the driver set him down at White's. He wanted

to see Lord Walsham, and found him where he expected —in the card-room.

"When you've finished your game," said he quietly to his friend, who was playing whist, "I'd like to have a word with you."

Walsham nodded and went on dealing. The rubber was over in a quarter of an hour or so, and the two went into the general club-room and sat down in a quiet corner.

"Walsham," said he, "you must arrange this matter between Tenbury and myself at once. Go to him and insist upon his appointing another man in the place of Lord Houston."

"What's happened to put you in such a devil of a hurry?" asked the young nobleman.

"Only that I've discovered Sir Phineas to be a greater blackguard than I took him to be. Don't seek to inquire any further than this. Please oblige me."

"Certainly, if you insist. At the same time, I'm bound to tell you that in my opinion he won't fight until he's discharged his debt of honour."

"To the deuce with his debt and his honour too. I'm going to fight him. For Heaven's sake don't raise any objections. I'm not in the mood for quibbling."

"I see you're not. I'll do what you wish. Make your mind easy. It's too late to begin a wild-goose chase to-night. I'll call upon Tenbury to-morrow."

"Thanks."

"Are you going in for a flutter? You're generally lucky at écarté."

"No. I've other things to think about. Good night and again thank you."

CHAPTER XVIII

Stroke and Counter-Stroke

Lady Barbara, boiling over with wrath, was at the milliner's shop in Cranbourne Alley at the time she had fixed, eager to pour out the dregs of her bad temper on Sir Phineas. Perhaps the baronet anticipated something of the kind, for he came not, nor did he send an apology. The lady waited an hour and a half, snubbed Mrs. Matthews unmercifully when the woman attempted to console her by suggesting excuses for Tenbury, and went away in a fury.

The next morning Benham, Tenbury's valet, brought her a curt note from his master, suggesting the prudence of meeting at an earlier hour, before Mrs. Matthews put up her shutters. If Lady Barbara were then seen entering the shop by any of her friends, it would be thought that her only business was to make a purchase.

By the time her ladyship read the note she had had a night's rest and had calmed down. She realised the policy of discretion, and returned an answer consenting to the arrangement, and appointing seven o'clock for the meeting. Mrs. Matthews closed her shop at half-past.

Sir Phineas was still in bed when Lady Barbara's an-

swer came. Benham brought him his breakfast, and the baronet, while amusing himself with the meal—breakfast with him was always a farce—tried to piece out what the "something important" which had so agitated Lady Barbara could be. He gave it up eventually, for neither of her notes had given him the slightest clue.

Sir Phineas dallied through his toilet, and, while his man was shaving him, Vicary was announced.

"Let him come here," said the baronet.

Something unexpected must have brought the spy, he thought, and he was eager to learn what had happened. Directly he caught sight of Vicary's face in the glass, he knew the matter was serious. The man's complexion was leaden, his lips were red and disagreeably moist, and his eyes, no longer shifty and cunning, had a vicious look in them, the meaning of which Sir Phineas, from previous experience, understood perfectly well. The spy had come to grief, had probably received bodily chastisement, and had consoled himself with deep potations of "heavy wet." He was beginning to pour out the story of his woes, but Tenbury checked him.

"Wait until Benham's finished," said he, harshly. "I'm not going to take the chance of a gash."

So Vicary stood, his drooping shoulders more conspicuous than ever, his eyes scowling and he twisting his hat in his not over-clean hands.

"Now, then, what is it?" said Sir Phineas, rising from his chair after Benham had powdered his face and oiled and brushed his hair, his moustachios and his whiskers.

"This job's done with, Sir Phineas," the fellow burst out. "I'm not going to keep watch on that young tiger again. Get some one else, sir. He spotted me last night

in Covent Garden. He nearly choked me, and pretty near shook the breath out of my body. He dug his knuckles in my throat and I can hardly speak, and he finished by rolling me in a mud-heap. I was to tell you to do your spy work yourself, and he threatened, if he found me watching him again, to half kill me."

Sir Phineas shrugged his shoulders and appeared to regard Vicary's troubles with stony indifference. As a matter of fact he was secretly much perturbed.

"Just pull yourself together and go over the whole story. Don't omit the smallest trifle," said he, coldly.

Vicary obeyed; the baronet listened thoughtfully.

"Why the devil didn't you disguise yourself better?" was his comment, when the man had no more to say. "You did your work clumsily. Where did Ralstone go after he'd done with you?"

"How do I know, sir? I couldn't follow him, covered as I was with mud from head to foot, and bruised and mauled so terribly. You'll have to get somebody else."

"You're a fool. I take it a little golden ointment will cure your hurt."

Sir Phineas dived his hand into his pocket and pulled out five guineas.

The man took the coins, but expressed no thanks.

"What's Mr Ralstone been doing since the rumpus?"

"Staying in bed mostly, so I got out of one of the scullery-maids at the 'Tavistock.' If the way he tumbled me's anything to go by, he don't seem much the worse."

"I thought you were a dabster at the spy game. You don't seem to have learned much when you were an 'informer,'" said Sir Phineas sarcastically.

"That's a gentlemanly occupation, sir, compared to this," retorted the fellow sullenly.

"You mean it's safer. Do you tell me you can't tog yourself out so that you wouldn't be recognised?"

"I don't know, sir. All I can say is that the young bruiser remembered having seen me at 'The George,' Andover."

"The devil he did. I'll swear it was due more to your stupidity than to his sharpness. Tell me, were you ass enough to let out that I was employing you?"

"No, sir. He guessed it, though."

Sir Phineas stroked his moustache thoughtfully. It was of supreme importance that Ralstone should be watched, for he could not get it out of his head that his rival knew where Nyra was, but how could he get another spy at a moment's notice? A woman would serve his purpose better than a man. If he could but lay his hands on old Sally Winch, who had been so valuable to him over Nyra's abduction, she would play the part admirably. Where was she to be found? The last he had heard of her was that she and her son Jerry had been running a boxing booth at Stepney Fair, and varying this business with tricking the public at swindling games. They would most likely be spending their ill-gotten gains at a "boozing ken" in Wapping, the situation of which was known to him.

"See here, Vicary," said he, after a long pause. "Find your way to a fresh disguise—a patch over your eye, a bandage round your head, and a twist of your body as though you were a cripple, to hide your confoundedly ugly shoulders, ought to do the trick. It's your shoulders that give you away. Dress as a beggar and stick on the

kerb. It'll be only for a day or two. After that I mayn't want you."

Vicary evidently didn't relish the proposition. He had a wholesome dread of Ralstone, but finally he consented and shuffled away.

Sir Phineas had not got over the disquietude arising out of Vicary's mishap when a visitor called, the announcement of whose name sent a black frown stealing over his face. The visitor was Lord Walsham. Tenbury had no close acquaintance with Walsham, and there could be only one business which could bring him. He had come on behalf of Jack Ralstone.

"Devil take the fellow," he muttered. "I verily believe he was born to plague me. The sooner he's out of the world the better."

But when Lord Walsham was shown into the room, Sir Phineas was as smooth and as smiling as ever. He bowed and pointed to a chair.

"Thanks. It's hardly worth while sitting down," rejoined the young nobleman politely. "My errand won't take more than a couple of minutes. I'm sure you'll agree with Mr. Ralstone that the little affair between him and you has been hanging about too long. The fault isn't his. Lord Houston, who was to act for you, has not returned from Paris, and no other second has been mentioned. As you've been silent on the matter, Mr. Ralstone has requested me to ask you to name a substitute."

"I can do that at once. Captain Frederick Charteris will be happy to serve me. You will find him at the Guards' Club," rejoined Sir Phineas stiffly.

"I am infinitely obliged. I presume that, like my principal, you don't wish for further delay?"

"The sooner the better, sir."

"I thank you, Sir Phineas. It saves much trouble when the two principals are agreed on so important a point. I have the honour to wish you good day."

"Good day to your lordship."

Tenbury's manner was offensive. As he bowed, Lord Walsham murmured to himself, "Distinctly hoggish. If Ralstone were not going to fight him, I should feel inclined to call him out myself."

The fact was Sir Phineas found it hard work to control his temper. His bile, already stirred up by Vicary's failure, was now bubbling over. Ralstone had scored by taking the first step to bring matters to a conclusion, and this had sent him into a tempest of passion, which burst out in full fury after Lord Walsham was gone. The truth was, he did want the duel postponed. It was a paradoxical position, for the man whom he would like to hurry out of the world was just then indispensable, if his crafty plans were to succeed. Only through Ralstone did he hope to discover where Nyra was hiding, while upon Ralstone's marriage with Lady Barbara Dacre depended his getting free from an entanglement with a passionate, self-willed woman, who was entirely governed by emotions which she was utterly unable to control.

And deep down in his mind was a temptation which he hardly dared formulate into a definite thought. But it existed all the same, and its possibilities continually haunted him step by step. Ralstone wedded to Lady Barbara—Simon Halstead's reconciliation with his stepson—Lady Barbara a rich woman—her husband killed in a duel—Lady Barbara Ralstone a widow—her marriage with himself, Sir Phineas Tenbury. How easy it all was! How

admirably everything dovetailed with each other! But to carry it out, the duel *must* be delayed. The non-payment of his debt of honour was a valid reason why it should be. Men who understood such things would applaud rather than condemn him.

In the midst of his ponderings, to which successive nips of brandy contributed, another visitor was announced—his friend Captain Frederick Charteris, a grey-headed man, stiff and formal in manner.

"Lord Walsham has just called on me," said the grizzled soldier, "so I thought I'd better see you at once. Of course, I'll do all that's needful, but rather a curious point has cropped up, which rests with you to settle. Walsham tells me you owe his man £4,000. Now it appears that this is a bet, and while it's owing you can't possibly meet Ralstone."

"So I once thought. The damned thing's worried me more than enough, but what the deuce can I do? I've exhausted the whole tribe of Judah. They won't lend me a shilling. Does it matter very much?"

"It matters very much to *me*, Tenbury."

Charteris was a martinet in everything he did, and his notions of what constituted gentlemanly conduct were very strict. Straight as a die himself, he had a horror of being mixed up in anything that might be considered at all questionable.

"I don't see why. Walsham had no business to drag in the bet; my quarrel with Ralstone has nothing to do with money."

"That may be, and if it were simply a quarrel we're talking about, it wouldn't matter a jot. But I'm not concerned with your quarrel. It's a duel that's *my* business

—a very different thing. If you go on your usual line of fighting, you're out to wing your man, maybe fatally. If so, and you haven't squared up, it'll be said you killed him to avoid payment. You'll be struck off every club you belong to. Damn it, man, you'll practically be cashiered and ruined."

The honest and punctilious Captain hadn't the slightest idea that he was playing into Tenbury's hands. Sir Phineas had no intention of letting Charteris know of his desire for delay. It suited him admirably that the argument should come from his second. The good faith of the old soldier would not be questioned.

"You hold, then, that the debt must be discharged before I meet Ralstone?" said he, after a long minute of silence, during which he appeared to be turning the matter over in his mind, whereas it was but a piece of acting.

"Unquestionably, as a man of *honour* you've no other course."

"Perhaps you're right. Of course, I'd like to plank the money down, but—how long would you consider a reasonable time?"

"How the deuce can one answer such a question? If it's known you're straining every nerve to raise the needful, Ralstone can't throw a stone at you. I've already hinted as much to Lord Walsham, and if you think as I do, I shall write to him to that effect. He'll see the reasonableness of the thing."

"Very well. I'm in your hands," rejoined Tenbury, with a well-assumed air of resignation.

Captain Charteris expressed his satisfaction and went off with zest to further the negotiations. It was a task after his own heart.

CHAPTER XIX

The Tragedy of Lady Barbara

Tenbury's anxiety was not removed. The success of his crafty plotting depended upon Lady Barbara. He was now impatient to see her—to hear whether she had used her fascinations properly and had won over Ralstone. At times terrible doubts seized him. He was, as a rule, a heavy feeder, but to-day he could hardly eat anything. He could only drink. To drive away his thoughts he passed the afternoon at a cock-fight, won a trifle, had a quarrel with another man, and when the time came for his appointment at Mrs. Matthews he was "jumpy" and in a mood when anything might send him in a fury.

He was so eager to see Lady Barbara that—a most unusual thing for him—he reached the shop a minute or so before the time. Lady Barbara had not come. This irritated him. A second affront was that the room on the first floor, which was usually the meeting place, was not available.

"My own room behind the shop is quite as good," said Mrs. Matthews apologetically. "Had you come last night you could have had the other."

Sir Phineas cursed and swore at the dumpy woman,

with hair the colour of bathbrick, small, washed-out-looking pale blue eyes, and two prominent rabbit-like upper teeth, who only smiled deprecatingly. She knew Tenbury's humour well.

"We might as well be talking in the street," he stormed. "The customers in your shop can hear everything."

"Indeed they can't, Sir Phineas. Look at the double doors. Both covered with green baize, and quite a deep space between. I had them made on purpose. The wall's thick enough, in all conscience."

The lady volunteered to go into the room and sing out her loudest as proof of her assertion, but Sir Phineas rejected her offer contemptuously and strode into the apartment. It was shabbily furnished and had more the appearance of a workshop than a living-room. The bench beneath the window was strewn with millinery materials and bonnets in every stage of preparation. Here Mrs. Matthews stowed away her 'prentice girls, most of them taken from the workhouse of St. Martin's-in-the-Fields, and, it was said, treated them after the fashion of a slave-driver. No doubt she found the double doors useful. People passing along Cranbourne Alley could not hear their screams. She was a veritable Mrs. Brownrigg.

Sir Phineas paced the squalid chamber in a quiver of nerves. The close foul air, the dismal light of the smoky lamp offended the fine gentleman within. What a miserable meeting-place for a baronet and a duke's daughter! But there would be no love-making; of that he was sure.

He had not long to wait. The opening of the door and the sudden appearance of the lady almost startled him, for not a sound had come from the shop. So far Mrs.

Matthews had spoken the truth.

Lady Barbara was closely veiled and very quietly dressed. But beneath her cloak when she threw it open—it was a hot evening and she had walked from Berkeley Square rather than run the risk of being recognised by a hackney coachman—a string of pearls was encircling her round neck, and a brooch of emeralds and diamonds was struck in the bosom of her dress.

Sir Phineas did not advance to meet her, and she came towards him, looking very lovely in her agitation. Like Sir Phineas, she had all day been in a state of nervous excitement.

"Well," said the Baronet abruptly when she was close to him, "what luck? Have you brought him to his knees?"

"No."

"How, then?"

His voice was trembling with suppressed anger. Lady Barbara's, on the contrary, was quite calm, but it was the calm preceding a storm,

"I could do nothing with the fool. He bluntly refused to renew our engagement."

Sir Phineas stared blankly at her as though he had imperfectly grasped the meaning of her words.

"Do you really ask me to believe that you, with all your beauty—with all the arts you women can use when you're so minded—with that flash of your rolling eyes—with those lips which can be so beseeching—haven't I seen them?—you failed to move him?"

"Yes."

"Did you point out that he hasn't a penny to call his own, and that he'd be a rich man if he married you?"

"Oh, he knows it all. But of what use are arguments

against love? What matters a woman's beauty if the man is steeled against it by his love for another? Phineas, Ralstone has found the woman he loves, and *you* know it as well as I do—perhaps better."

Lady Barbara's calmness has vanished. The glitter in her eyes was startling. Rich colour dyed her cheeks, even to her ears. The lips which Sir Phineas had found so beseeching were defiant. For a moment Tenbury was staggered, partly because of the unexpected intensity of her passion, and partly because her words confirmed his worst fears concerning Ralstone and Nyra.

"You say nothing. Then it's true," she cried. "Who's the woman?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about. Ralstone lied if he told you I knew the woman he's put in your place."

"He didn't. I guess it. Why are you fighting? He admitted that it was over a woman. Men don't do that unless they both love her. Who is she?"

"Again I say he lied."

"What are you fighting about?" she reiterated.

"An old quarrel. We fell out at Andover over the prize-fight."

"I don't believe you. Tell me the story."

Sir Phineas mumbled something, but it was not very coherent, and Lady Barbara listened to him impatiently.

"'Tis you who's the liar. Why did you send me to Jack Ralstone, to be humiliated? He as good as insulted me, but you're a thousand times worse. What are you going to do?"

"What can I do? Nothing. I don't see why you should fly into a rage. You failed. Well, I'm sorry you're done

out of your promised dowry. I thought you were more fascinating than it appears you are—that's all."

The slighting words fanned the fire of her fury. She could contain herself no longer. She swiftly raised her hand and struck him on the cheek with all her strength. It was a woman's blow, but no light one, coming from a Somersetshire girl full of youth and vigour. He threw back his head and involuntarily clenched his fists. Murder was written in his eyes, but she faced him undauntedly.

His glance fell beneath hers. He hardly knew what to say. He wanted time to think, and that he had much to think about was certain, for the whole edifice he had plotted so carefully to build was toppling over.

Hatred of Jack Ralstone was seething in his brain. There was no necessity for deferring the duel. He wished it could have been brought off that minute. But his bet was still the stumbling block. Lady Barbara was a negligible quantity. All the same, there she was, and something would have to be done with her. Squabbling and mutual recriminations would lead to nothing.

"Your ladyship has a strong hand. I presume your maids give you plenty of exercise that way. Suppose we sit down and talk quietly over this wretched business," said he, trying hard to keep his voice steady.

"Talk quietly? What's the use of that? We've talked too much already. Do you think it's any pleasure for me to listen to your falsehoods? Tell me the name of the woman you and Ralstone are going to fight for."

She was raging up and down the room. It seemed useless to say anything while she was no longer mistress of herself. He threw himself sullenly in a chair and

watched her. Had he not been so personally concerned and in such a quandary, he would have enjoyed the sight. The sudden lifting of her arm when striking him had displaced the upper part of her dress. The short sleeve had shifted from the right shoulder, and the pearls showed prominently on the satin background of her white skin. They shimmered at every movement of her supple body, which swayed under the influence of her mad fury. It was a magnificent picture of glowing womanhood, and one of which she was wholly unconscious.

Under other circumstances Sir Phineas would have had no eyes but for her beauty and her form, but now his attention was fixed on the pearls. The sight flashed an idea through his mind. He knew their value. The duke had given ten thousand pounds for them as a gift to his wife on their wedding day.

"I could borrow five thousand pounds on those pearls easy. I wonder if it's possible to talk Barbara into lending them to me? If not—damn it, I *must* have them."

His blood had been stirred by the brutal cock-fighting match he had witnessed that afternoon. It had set his brain on fire, and the lust of combat, of savagery, of victory lingered. His animal instinct for mastery had been roused, and all that had happened since had but accentuated it. He longed to see Ralstone prostrate at his feet, whether by bullet or sword did not matter much. It could be done. The way was in sight if Barbara ...

A significant sound broke into his reverie. Lady Barbara had sunk upon the couch; her face was buried in her hands; she was sobbing bitterly. The tears which would not come at her bidding when she was with Jack Ralstone were streaming freely enough now. The inevitable

result of over-excitement had come.

A grim smile flitted across Tenbury's hard face when he saw this sign of softening. If he insisted, the pearls were as good as his. He had no compunction as to the morality of what he contemplated. He had for years lived on women. If he could not coax them into helping him, he took what he wanted by force. But he preferred the first method.

He allowed her ladyship to have her cry out, and waited patiently for her to raise her tear-stained face. But she was thoroughly exhausted, and though her audible sobs had ceased, it was evident by the heaving of her shoulders and the throbbing of her body that she was repressing them by strength of will.

At last Sir Phineas could endure the spectacle no longer. To his mind it was ridiculous—almost as ridiculous as her jealousy of an unknown woman, for, of course, jealousy was at the bottom of the exhibition.

"Isn't it time this tragic farce of yours was over, Lady Barbara?" he inquired sarcastically. "Perhaps you'll listen now that you're coming to your senses. I didn't think it necessary to go into the details of the quarrel between me and Ralstone, but if you must know, it concerned a little French woman, who keeps a perfume and fal-lal shop in Burlington Arcade. It doesn't affect you in the slightest, nor, in fact, does it me. About Ralstone I won't say. Madame seems unwarrantably to have said something concerning myself to him. We had a few words—of course your name came up, and the way I cut him out at Bath, which he seems to have taken much to heart—and there was no alternative but to fight it out. There you have the whole thing in a nutshell."

Lady Barbara slowly lifted her head. Every vestige of colour had vanished from her face save a bright patch of scarlet in the centre of each cheek. Despite the heat of the room, she was shivering.

"Your story is interesting, and might go down if Jack Ralstone had not assured me that *I* was not the cause of the quarrel. It was that which opened my eyes."

"Exactly. And what Ralstone told you corroborates my words."

"I don't care whether it does or doesn't. I've had enough of this very unpleasant subject, and I don't want to hear any more about it. Nor do I wish to see you again."

She struggled to her feet and began arranging her dress and bonnet in front of a mirror. Sir Phineas saw that he must bring matters to an issue or his chance would be gone.

He stole behind her, and his arm went round her waist. At his touch she shrank from him.

"You're making a mountain out of a molehill, my darling Barbara," said he softly. "You talk about not seeing me again, but that's nonsense. You can't do without me. You're still in a fix over your debts. I've got you out of one difficulty; I've satisfied the harpy in the shop, but what about the others? How are you going to get credit to enable you to dress as a woman of your rank and fashion ought?"

Lady Barbara winced. He had reminded her of the skeleton which was continually coming out of its cupboard and frightening her. Already she had received rebuffs. Her mercer, her draper, her dressmaker insisted upon ready money.

"I wonder you haven't thought of the way out that's before your eyes," he went on.

"Before my eyes? You're talking nonsense."

"What about those beautiful pearls? I can raise money on them enough to pay what you owe twice over."

"Part with my pearls? Never!"

"It's not parting with them. It's just depositing them for a short time with a jeweller. You've only to repay the borrowed money and they're yours again."

"No. I refuse. The pearls were my mother's; they shall not go out of my keeping."

All the brutality in Tenbury's nature—and he had plenty of it—leaped up. Hatred of Ralstone was still in his mind. Once his rival was out of the way nothing stood between him and Nyra. That he would succeed in tracing her he was certain. That four thousand pounds he must have. He would behave fair to Lady Barbara. He would give her one thousand out of the five thousand pounds he hoped to raise. This would reconcile her to the temporary loss of the pearls.

"I'm going to have them. Do you hear? Take them off."

His face was distorted—fiendish. He thrust out his hand. She wheeled swiftly round to avoid him, caught her foot in some waste material, shreds of silk, lining, wire and what not, cast on the ground after the fashion of milliners, and pitched forward. A ghastly sound, as her head struck the sharp steel fender, sent the blood rushing from Tenbury's face. Horror-stricken, he glared at the prostrate, motionless body for a second or two, and tremblingly bent over her. The fender had inflicted a frightful wound. Already the grey shadow of death

was passing over her face. He felt her wrist. He could not distinguish a single pulse-beat.

There came an agitated rapping at the door. Despite Mrs. Matthews's elaborate precautions for the deadening of sound, she must have heard the crash, for in her fall Barbara had sent the fire-irons jingling.

Sir Phineas had but a few seconds in which to provide for a dozen vital contingencies. Mrs. Matthews could not be kept waiting, or her suspicions would be aroused. He had to be ready with some plausible story as to how the accident had happened. There was the necklace. Should he yield to the temptation of taking it? If he did, would it be missed? Could Barbara's maid say if her mistress was wearing it when she went out? The probabilities were in favour of the maid's ignorance. Lady Barbara was on an errand which demanded the utmost secrecy. She had dressed herself in plain, sober garments and would not need the girl's services.

But he could not debate the point. The rapping, after ceasing for a while, had recommenced. He made a dash for the clasp, unfastened it, and dragged the pearls, their lustre dimmed with red, from the fair neck. The next moment they were in his pocket, and then he rushed to the door and shot back the bolt.

"Good lawk, Sir Phineas, what's amiss?" whispered the woman, shaking from head to foot. Then she caught sight of Lady Barbara and the blood which was slowly trickling down the fender on to the hearthrug, and she gave a scream.

"Oh, sir. What have you done?"

"Done?" echoed Sir Phineas harshly. "Nothing. It was an accident. Lady Barbara tripped over some rubbish on

the floor and fell. The wire's twisted round her ankle. Can't you see? It's all the fault of your careless girls."

"I'd better fetch a doctor," gasped Mrs. Matthews in a hushed voice.

"I'm afraid he can't do anything. I believe the poor lady's dead."

"Dead! Oh, my God!"

"What's done is done. A doctor must see her, of course, but you've got to think of yourself first. Do as I tell you. I mustn't be known in the matter. The most important thing is Lady Barbara's reputation. No one must know that she was here to meet me. It was an accident. Keep that fixed in your mind. She came into this room to try on a bonnet, or whatever you please—I leave that to you—and her foot slipped. Your shop isn't shut, and there was nobody in it besides yourself, so the tale will hang together. Recollect, if there's any inquiry, you'll cone out of it rather badly. 1 shall contradict you flatly if you drag me into the business, and my word will be taken against yours. I fancy you know what the inside of Newgate's like. On the other hand, carry out my instructions, be discreet and wary, and I'll make it worth your while. Here's something to go on with."

He had his gains at the cockpit on him, and he counted out ten guineas and dropped them into the woman's shaking hand.

"It's simple enough," he went on rapidly. "Wait a couple of minutes after I'm gone, and then you can send for a doctor. Have you got the story pat?"

"Oh. I—I think so, Sir Phineas," stammered the woman.

Sir Phineas looked at her keenly. He knew she was as

shrewd and crafty as a woman who engaged in so doubtful an occupation need be. He was satisfied and he strode away.

CHAPTER XX

The Trysting-Place on the Bridge

"Who on earth would have supposed the fellow would have had such a nice sense of what he calls honour? The debt ought not to stand in the way. Though I'm hard up, as you know, Walsham, I don't care a curse about the money. I want to get even with the scoundrel."

"Of course. Charteris tells me that his man is as eager to fight as you are. It's Charteris himself who's the obstacle. There's a lot of the pipeclay and the drill-sergeant's stick about the captain. He's as firm as a rock on the point that while bets between principals exist there ought to be no fight. I'm inclined to agree with him, but to oblige you I was willing to give way, but Charteris won't hear of it. However, you mayn't have to wait long."

"What makes you think that?" demanded Ralstone gloomily. "There's not a money-lender in London who'll advance Tenbury a shilling."

"I'm aware of that. I made it my business to call on Charteris this morning to discuss the matter again, and he told me he'd had a letter late last night from Sir Phineas to the effect that he was certain to be able to

borrow the money from Lord Houston. Houston came into a fortune some three months ago, and he's flinging his gold about like water."

"At the best it means a delay of at least a fortnight."

"Probably; but that's all in your favour. A few days' more practice at the foils and pistols won't hurt you."

"I'm not so sure. There's such a thing as getting stale. Excepting the few days after the Thurtell battering, I've been doing nothing but hard work at both at Castellani's. Castellani was good enough to tell me this week that he considered I was at the top of my form. I succeeded in breaking through his guard yesterday, and I snuffed the candle nine times out of ten at fifteen paces."

"I congratulate you. My advice is to take it easy for a week or so."

The two men were at White's. At that moment a member bustled in with the *Globe and Traveller* in his hand. His face was serious, his manner full of importance.

"A most frightful thing has happened," said he, approaching the friends and breaking into their conversation without ceremony. "The *Globe* says that Lady Barbara Dacre met with a fatal accident last night. She's dead."

"Great Heaven!" cried Ralstone, terribly shocked and with genuine emotion in his voice. He could say no more. He was stunned. The news was incredible. It was Lord Walsham who asked how the catastrophe had come about.

The journals of a century ago did not understand the art of sensational newsmongering. They were contented to record bare facts expressed tersely. Space was limited. All that could be learned from the *Globe* was that Lady

Barbara Dacre was trying on a bonnet in the inner room of a milliner's shop in Cranbourne Alley when, in turning round, her foot became entangled in some wire and waste stuff on the floor and she fell, striking her head on the fender and receiving so severe a wound that she was dead before a doctor could be summoned. "Great sympathy," the paragraph went on, "has been expressed with his Grace the Duke of Endsleigh and the callers at his mansion in Berkeley Square this morning were very numerous, but the duke was too prostrated by grief to see anyone."

Lord Walsham uttered a few words of condolence, but Ralstone hardly heard them.

"I wish to God we had parted friends," broke out Jack in choking tones. A lump had risen in his throat and he grasped the young nobleman's hand held out to him in kindliness.

"You've nothing to reproach yourself with, my dear Ralstone."

"Perhaps not; but it's an awful thing to think about. Poor creature. How handsome she was—just at the beginning of life too! I ought, I suppose, to call upon the duke. It'll be a terribly painful interview—especially after my breaking off the engagement. I can't tell him why. I wouldn't say a word against poor Lady Barbara for words."

"It's no use trying to see him for a few days. I know his Grace's peculiar humour. He hates pity. He'll receive you with cold politeness, hear what you have to say, express his obligation and that'll be all. I should write if I were you."

"I hate letters of condolence. They always seem more

or less false. In my case, what can I say that won't sound hypocritical?"

"The less said the better. The duke understands the rules of etiquette as well as any man in the world. A respectful formula will suffice. He wouldn't appreciate expressions of real feeling. More likely than not he'd despise them."

Ralstone felt in his heart that Walsham correctly gauged the duke's character. But he wanted to do the right thing and as promptly as possible. For the moment the tragedy had driven everything out of his head and he hurried back to the "Tavistock" to piece out something appropriate in the quietude of his bedroom. At last the embarrassing task was accomplished and he dispatched the note by one of the servants. Then he sat down to ponder over the matter and to consider its effect in other directions.

There was Squire Halstead. How would he take it? Seriously, without a doubt, for he knew little or nothing of the state of affairs between his stepson and Lady Barbara, and while she was alive he might have cherished the hope that matters would yet turn out as he had planned.

Thoughts of the Squire revived in Ralstone's mind a recollection of what Bill Neate had said about him—how his strangeness of manner was causing uneasiness to his household. Since Ralstone's departure from the Manor House not the slightest communication had passed between him and the old man. Jack had stood upon his dignity and Simon Halstead's was not the nature to give way. Indeed, had he been so inclined, he was not a letter writer and this in itself was a sufficient barrier to a

reconciliation.

Now that Jack was free and no longer rankling under the sense of injustice, he was quite willing to do what he could to conciliate Simon. He was not actuated in this feeling by any mercenary motive. Never would he ask his stepfather for a single penny, no matter what his difficulties might be. But it was just these scruples which would prevent him seeking a reconciliation. Old Simon's nature was suspicious and he would more likely than not attribute Jack's motive to self-interest and gain.

Yet Simon had lavished money upon him, and up to the time of their difference he had never had to ask twice for any sum that he wanted. He was quite aware that his silence might be construed as indifference and ingratitude.

"Well, I suppose I must risk that. Things'll have to go on as they are," was the conclusion he came to.

Then gradually his thoughts went back to Nyra—not, indeed, that they had left her for long. He had wandered up and down Waterloo Bridge the night before, but she came not. He proposed doing the same thing that evening, and he carried out his resolution, but with no success.

One thing, however, he had to congratulate himself upon. He saw no more of the spy. He attributed the reason to the absence of Sir Phineas Tenbury. While he was away the operation of watching no doubt had been suspended.

Two days went over, during which he struggled against an intolerable restlessness. His fencing and his pistol practice gave him no satisfaction. He never handled the foils worse nor missed the candles so many

times. His instructor could not understand what had come to him. On the third day he received a polite and formal acknowledgment of his letter from the Duke of Endsleigh, and on the fourth came a brief account of the inquest on Lady Barbara. "Death by misadventure" was the verdict, and the nine days' wonder in the fashionable world was over.

And all this time he had heard nothing, nor had he seen anything of Nyra. He was beginning to worry intensely. Should he call on Mrs. Glover and settle his doubts? He could not bring his mind to this—at least, not until he had tried Waterloo Bridge once more.

It was very dark, totally unlike that lovely night when he last met Nyra, full of romance as it was, with the opalescent sky above and the rushing of the flood tide below. The air was close, almost suffocating. The low rumble of distant thunder came now and again. The river was invisible—nothing but a huge black gap between the few feebly lighted windows of the waterside taverns. The bridge lamps cast weird patches of moving light on the oily stream, now at its ebb, leisurely crawling down to the sea. Long stretches of mud, which the afternoon sun had been fermenting, sent up a foul odour, mingled with the more wholesome smell of pitch from the coal barges awaiting dawn to be unloaded. The silence was broken now and again by a soft ripple as the currents met against the buttresses of the arches.

"She said she only came here when it was fine," thought Ralstone, as he squeezed through the turnstile. "I'm doomed to be disappointed—and if I do meet her that confounded nuisance of a nigger will be hanging round closer than ever."

He strolled onwards. There were fewer people than on the occasions of his previous visits, and these were hurrying homewards to escape a possible storm. The recesses were vacant and he almost laughed at himself for looking into them. The last thing she would do, he thought, would be sitting on such a threatening night.

He was wrong. In one of these retreats, just about the crown of the bridge, he caught sight of a shadowy figure, its outlines so indistinct they seemed to mingle with the blackness around. He stopped hesitatingly. The shadowy figure rose and stood perfectly still. It was she. He could not see her face, but the gracefulness of form, the characteristic carriage of the shoulders, and the head slightly thrown back, could hardly be mistaken. He stepped into the recess and held out his hand.

"Nyra," he whispered.

"You knew me then?"

"Yes, and you?"

"Oh, I think I could pick you out among a thousand."

She spoke with a curious catching of the breath, as though she had said more than she intended.

"Do you really mean that?" he rejoined quickly; his heart bounding in response more to what her words implied than to the words themselves.

"I told you I should never forget you."

There was a sweetness in her soft reproach that made Ralstone long to take her in his arms and kiss the beautiful lips that seemed to be awaiting his.

He could see her face now. The murky light from the lamp on its standard above glanced across it as she drooped her head under his ardent gaze, but not before her gleaming eyes for an instant had rested upon him.

It was one of those soul-felt moments when speech seems an intrusion. They stood silent—absorbed in each other. Then, as often happens in such an emotional crisis, when they did speak it was in commonplaces—the nervous tension seemed to demand some relief.

"I did not expect to see you to-night," said Ralstone. "I'm afraid we shall have a storm before long."

"Very likely, but I did not think of that when I started. We're used to terrific thunderstorms in—where I come from."

"Yes? And where is that?" said Ralstone, with seeming indifference. He did not want to betray the curiosity which was consuming him. "But perhaps I ought not to ask. It's no concern of mine."

Her reply whetted that curiosity still more.

"It's more your concern than you imagine," said she. "But we needn't talk about that. Have you been walking on the bridge since we last met?"

"Every night. I've gone away feeling the most dismal of mortals. But now that you're here——"

He paused. Her large eyes were again fixed upon him. Something prevented him finishing the sentence. But indeed he hardly knew what he intended to say.

"Where's your faithful watchdog to-night?" he asked suddenly.

"You mean Quamina?"

She smiled. It was the first time he had seen a real smile on her face. It was like the flash of sunshine on an April day.

"Of course I do."

"I've done without him. He did not think I was going out and he went with Mrs. Glover to the theatre. He

walks on the stage as one of a crowd. He will never leave the house if he imagines I intend to go out. He'll contrive somehow to follow me."

"But is he so necessary? You've come to-night alone—why not always?"

"Have you forgotten the reason?"

"I beg your pardon. Yes. You must be guarded. But for a short time you're safe. At least I hope so. The man you dread and the man I hate—Sir Phineas Tenbury—is in Paris. He has other things to think of besides yourself."

"Are you sure?" she cried anxiously.

"Yes. I'm bound to know the minute he returns. It won't be for at least another week."

"You make my heart glad. Oh, if I only had money!" she burst out.

"That's what I've been wishing for myself for days past. And what would you do if you had it?"

"Return to my own country. I ought not to have left it, but I had a great purpose which I felt I ought to fulfil. It was a mistake—at least I think so now—I didn't think like that then."

"So that purpose, whatever it may be, you haven't carried out?"

"No. I've been weak. I had not the courage. So many things have happened to shake my resolve. If I'd not come to England I should have escaped my frightful experience of the ways of English—gentlemen."

"They're not all such blackguards as Sir Phineas Tenbury," Ralstone exclaimed warmly. "I've many good friends—men like myself—ready to make the best of life and get as much pleasure out of it as they can. Of course they're not saints and they play the fool sometimes, but

they'd scorn to do a mean or dishonourable action. They would never insult a woman. People shrug their shoulders because the newspapers call us Corinthians—it was the 'Tom and Jerry' book and play that started the name—and because we're fond of using our fists. Perhaps we are, but we fight fair. After all, the fist comes in handy sometimes, doesn't it?"

He glanced significantly at Nyra and the warm blood rushed to her face. The colour made her look indescribably beautiful.

"You're quite right. But for you—oh, I tremble to think what would have become of me."

"Anyway, that's past and gone. It's the money we must both think about now. What would it cost to take you back to—what did you say was your country?" he asked cunningly.

She refused to rise to the bait.

"I paid £50 for myself and Quamina to come to England."

"Quamina? Do you propose that he should accompany you?"

"I daren't leave him behind."

"Why not? He could earn a good living in England. He might go in for 'milling.' The blacks are splendid boxers. If Molyneux had had fair play he would have beaten Tom Cribb. Think of that! The champion of England to go down before a negro—though of course Cribb wasn't champion then. There's Bill Richmond, another man of colour—he's a good fighter too."

Ralstone spoke with enthusiasm, as he always did when he got upon the subject of "milling" and the heroes of the prize ring.

"I can't go without Quamina," said Nyra firmly. "He mustn't be left here by himself. I've my reasons."

"Your reasons shall be respected. You know Quamina and I don't, excepting that I'm sure he doesn't like me. In spite of that I've but one wish. Can you guess it?"

"Indeed no. How can I? What is your wish?"

"That I may be permitted to go with you, Quamina notwithstanding, wherever it may be."

"You're wishing impossibilities."

"I don't think so. Supposing I came to you with the money——"

"No, no," she interrupted agitatedly. "It's not to be thought of."

"So you say, but I mean to think of it all the same."

They had been so absorbed in each other that they never heeded the thunder rumble becoming louder and louder. At that moment a vivid lightning flash flooded everything with light. It was followed instantly by a loud crash and then came isolated drops of warm rain as large as sixpences.

"By Jove! We shall be drenched in less than no time," cried Ralstone. "Let's run. We can get a coach in the Strand, or at least the shelter of a doorway."

CHAPTER XXI

The Call of the Blood

There was certainly no sense in allowing themselves to be converted into the condition of drowned rats. Nyra without a word complied and the two set off at a smart pace. They had a respite from the coming storm in the cessation of the rain for a few minutes. The big drops had obligingly served as a warning. But by the time they had passed through the turnstile into Lancaster Place the rain was coming down a pelter.

They had no alternative but to make for the nearest doorway. There was one at hand, narrow but deep, with an overhanging shelter in front in the old Georgian fashion. They managed to squeeze in before the rain descended, as it did with almost tropical violence.

The two had to stand very close together and Ralstone blessed the storm which had brought him such good luck. The torrential downpour in front shut them out from the outer world. The sense of isolation with so charming a companion was a pleasure as novel to Jack Ralstone as it was unexpected. True, he had already had an experience of a somewhat similar kind, but there was a difference. When he rode away with her arms cling-

ing round him, he had to devote his attention mainly to his horse, and he had not the slightest idea he was rescuing so beauteous a maiden. But the position was now reversed. He had no one to think of but her, and it was not her arms that were round his waist but his—at least, one of his—round hers, on the plea of giving her more room. And she made no protest! After all, that was the main point. It was a supreme moment for the exchange of confidence.

After the first crashing thunder peal, those that followed were of a milder character. The lightning flashes were not so vivid. The storm was expending its fury in buckets of rain. The patter on the cobblestones and the bubbling of the streams that ran from the roof gutters lent romance and unreality to the scene. The situation, the surroundings, the memory of what had gone before, and the vagueness of the future, acted on their nerves and brought their personalities closer together.

"The thunder doesn't frighten you, does it?" Ralstone asked, his arm increasing its tender pressure as if to assure her he was acting as her protector.

"No. I'm used to storms much worse than this. You in England can't imagine what a Barbados hurricane is like!"

Barbados! The name was familiar enough to Jack Ralstone. Was it not here that his stepfather had his plantations, and where he had made his money? But he held his tongue. As he hoped and expected, she continued:

"But when it's over and the wind dies down, and the rain ceases, the blue sky and the glorious sunshine make one forget everything."

"You were happy, then, in the land where you were

born?"

"Yes and no. How can one be happy where there is little else but cruelty and slavery—where the rich white man grinds down the black, where there's no freedom, no justice?"

The soft note in her voice was gone. She spoke in accents strangely harsh and guttural. Ralstone was disagreeably reminded of certain tones in Quamina's voice—tones which became very pronounced during their altercation on the bridge. He glanced at her face. Excitement possessed her. Her eyes, no longer liquid, were fierce with passion. She was wound up apparently by her recalling memories of some old grievance, and went on talking more to herself than to Ralstone. Indeed, she seemed to have forgotten his presence.

"It was more than the search for justice which brought me to England. It was revenge. I would have struck down the brutal tyrant who made my father's life a misery—who robbed him of his land—who more than once slashed his cruel whip across the shoulders of his daughter—a mere child she was—who killed her mother—who was looked upon with horror by all who slaved for him to put money in his pocket. It was he who nearly tortured Quamina to death and looked on coldly while his drivers did it—white men, remember!—oh, there was unhappiness enough in the plantations to make one long for death. What would *you* have done had you been one of Simon Halstead's slaves?"

Simon Halstead! His stepfather! Jack Ralstone started with horror. All the blood in his veins seemed to rush to his heart and left the surface of his body cold. He was beginning to read the riddle of Nyra Seaton—to compre-

hend faintly why she ran from him at Bath, thinking he was of the blood of the man she loathed, whose death, maybe, she sought.

"I'm glad you've told me about Simon," said Ralstone slowly. "I understand now why you've been so reluctant to talk about yourself, but you need not have been. I've had a bitter quarrel with the old man. I shall probably never see him again, and after what you've said it would certainly be better not. I should have to speak my mind and pretty plainly. But for the present I've nothing to do with him. I'm only concerned with you."

"But that's what you mustn't be," she rejoined, much calmer in manner, as though unburdening herself to him was a great relief.

"What about your going back to Barbados? Mayn't I help you in that? If I can read what's in your mind, you've given up your idea of revenge."

She did not reply. The fire had gone from her eyes. They had become unfathomable—mystic. Her features had resumed that immobility which he had come to know so well, and which had always puzzled and tormented him.

"I think I could raise the money you want, but if you go, what's to become of me?"

"Oh, you can easily console yourself. England is full of beautiful women. I've seen many."

"There's only one like you, Nyra, and that's yourself. I love you. I can't—I won't—live without you."

She sighed deeply.

"You must try," said she.

"Is that what you intend to do?"

Another sigh.

"Yes." But it was breathed so faintly he only just caught the word.

"Well, I don't. Why shouldn't I go with you? By Heaven, if it were to the end of the world—to Hades itself—I wouldn't care a jot so long as you were by my side. What is there to keep me in England?"

"You have a woman you love."

"Only you, Nyra."

"Not the Lady Barbara Dacre?"

"What do you know about Lady Barbara?"

"Only that you are betrothed to her. Mrs. Glover told me when I explained to her who you were."

"And did Mrs. Glover tell you that I did *not* love her, that she did not love me, and because I refused to marry her I quarrelled with Simon Halstead and left him?"

"Is that true?"

Her eyes were fixed penetratingly upon his. He met her gaze frankly, undauntedly.

"As true as that you're the only woman in the world I love and ever shall love. But I haven't told you all about Lady Barbara. The end of the story is tragic. Poor Lady Barbara is dead."

"Oh!"

The exclamation and the tone in which it was uttered were capable of more than one meaning, but she did not give him time to think.

"I didn't know. How could I? I'm sorry. For you—I mean. Tell me more," she went on a little incoherently.

Ralstone could only relate what he had gleaned from the newspapers. She listened intently.

"Lady Barbara is but a memory of sadness," said he when he had finished. "We need now only talk of our-

selves."

The storm was passing. The black clouds had vanished and the darkness was not so profound. The downpour had become a gentle rain which hardly made any noise. Now and again came a glimpse of moonlight, and he could see her face. The lines had relaxed. The lips were no longer tightly drawn. The eyes were tender, sympathetic. The impenetrable mask of composure was gone. But she remained silent.

"Everything concerning you, Nyra, interests me," he continued insistently. "I said I loved you. I repeat it. I've had no reply."

"What am I to say?" she asked helplessly.

"Why, that you love me, of course. Isn't it so?"

They were face to face. All at once her self-control fled. She involuntarily drew closer to him. She seemed to be imploring him to be kind to her. In an instant the barriers of sex were broken, his arms were enfolding her, he was kissing her ardently, and she had responded.

"Oh, you're taking my breath away," he heard her murmur. "You mustn't."

But her sweet protest was only provocative.

"I shall kiss you until you say 'I love you,'" he whispered.

"Oh I do love you. Heaven forgive me. It's wrong—it's wicked. But I cannot help it."

"Wicked? Why? What is there wicked in love? Isn't it the only thing in the world worth living for?"

"Yes, but——"

"There mustn't be any 'buts.' I've often dreamed of a moment like this, little sweetheart. I never thought my dream would come true, but now that it has I want to

make it a reality."

They relapsed into the babble of love, which is pretty much in spirit the same with all young lovers, rich or poor, educated or illiterate.

"I'd like to confess something to you," said she presently. "You must have all my secrets. You wanted to know why I think it's wicked for me to love you. There's a difference between us. You're white, I'm not. I've black blood in my veins."

"What of that?" he broke in impetuously. "It makes you more enchanting."

"They don't think so in Barbados. Black blood bears the taint of slavery, of inferiority."

"Well, we're not in Barbados, so that goes for nothing."

"You forget. I'm returning there. Yet I have in me but a trace of my African forefathers. My father is white, my mother had a Spanish father, but his wife was a pure black. Her descent is enough to make me despised by the pure white people in the Island. It's useless to complain. It is so."

"I don't care a button for all the white people in the world. I love you."

She looked at him, her eyes wide with wonderment.

"You can't imagine what your words mean to me," she whispered, with a throb of joy in her voice.

"I'm glad I altered my mind about Simon Halstead," she went on after a pause. "It first came to me when I imagined you were his son. Though the cruel, hard-hearted man deserved to die, though I had determined upon my vengeance either by my hand or Quamina's, I felt I could not bring myself to do it after I'd seen you and after your bravery. I suppose I must have loved you even

then, but I didn't know it. Perhaps that had something to do with my running from you. Do you forgive me?"

Her frankness, her freedom from affectation, invested her with a new charm. The orthodox love-making of those days was stilted and simpering. Nyra's simplicity and directness sounded to Jack delightfully fresh. What could he do but renew his kisses?

"But when I found you were no more connected with Simon Halstead than I was, my thoughts went back to revenge. I wrestled with myself. I wanted you to think well of me. I hated imagining your knowing I could do so horrible a thing as was in my mind. I conquered my evil temptations and—and you love me!"

"And yet you would leave me."

"Oh, I must—I must. You see, there is Quamina."

"Well, what about him?"

"He's just the same. He's never ceased craving for vengeance. He's half a savage, you know, poor fellow," she added apologetically. "That's why I want to take him back with me to Barbados."

The whole business was now clear. For all that, Ralstone could not see why she should sacrifice herself and her love for him for an ignorant barbarian of a negro, but maybe the call of the blood in her had its influence.

However, he would not argue the point. He also had his plan, and he intended to work it out without telling her anything until he had accomplished it.

The rain had now ceased. The moon was shining brightly, and the fleecy clouds sweeping across it did not dim its brightness materially. They set out to walk back to Covent Garden. The storm had cleared the streets of passenger traffic, and they hardly met a single person on

their way to King Street. Ralstone did not hesitate to see her to the house, for Quamina would not return for quite an hour.

"Will you be on the bridge to-morrow night?" were his parting words.

"I don't know. I will try."

"I shall be there. I may have some news for you."

One last kiss and he tore himself away.

CHAPTER XXII

Jack Ralstone Follows His Luck

An hour or so after leaving King Street, Ralstone was walking slowly along St. James's Street, Piccadilly. He stopped now at one house, then at another, looked up at their sedate, and in some cases shabby, fronts, and went on. He jingled the guineas in his pockets, and when he stopped again it was opposite a modest-looking house on the front-door of which was a brass plate bearing the inscription "C. Jones, Coal Merchant." Not a window was lighted. A harmless-looking place indeed, the household doubtless keeping proper hours for it was nearly eleven o'clock. But Jack Ralstone knew better. Once through its portals the visitor, if he had sufficient imagination and sufficient foolishness, could picture the "potentiality of growing rich beyond the dreams of avarice." The house, in fact, was one of the most notorious gaming-hells in London. Here roulette, or "roly-poly," as the punters called it, was nightly played.

"No. I'll not risk 'roly-poly,'" muttered Ralstone. "I've heard that it can be worked in favour of the bank."

Some of the revolving tables were fitted with a spring, which could he worked by the foot and the ball made to

roll into the compartment marked *zero*, when of course all the players lost.

Ralstone had made up his mind to follow his luck, which he considered had been all in his favour since he had been in London. True, he had spent all his winnings over Spring *v.* Neate—some £500—in two months, but he had had a good run for his money. He put on one side the £100 owed him by Weare, the moneylender, and Sir Phineas Tenbury's £4,000. He had won the most lovable girl in the world, and this piece of good luck counterbalanced everything.

At the same time he regretted his recklessness. If he hadn't been such a spendthrift he would have had enough money to take Nyra and himself, with Quamina thrown in, to Barbados—that was, if his duel with Tenbury could be brought off in time and successfully. His fear, however, was that Tenbury meant to back out, and that neither the £4,000 nor the fight would be forthcoming.

Ralstone was far too impetuous to wait for uncertainties to decide themselves. He wanted to take the money to Nyra at once. It would be such a proof of his sincerity. And he had but £20 in the world, all that remained of Walsham's loan!

He had two courses open to him. He might go to a moneylender or to a gaming-house. The first meant delay; security (he hadn't any to offer, and he wouldn't bring a friend into his difficulties) and the possibility of being landed in the King's Bench prison if he could not meet the repayment, which was extremely likely. The second might bring him a fortune or—sudden death. But there was the element of luck, and luck appealed to him

just now. Besides, £20 was such a paltry sum, it might as well be nothing at all. So here he was prowling about the purlieus of St. James's Palace, where gambling hells most abounded.

No den in St. James's Street appealed to him, for what reason he could not quite determine, save that they were all more or less shady, and he crossed the road into St. James's Square and went eastward. He was inclined to favour what was known as the "Dandy House" at the corner of Bury Street and Jermyn Street. Outwardly, it was of a higher class than the blackleg establishments of St. James's Street, but in principle it was exactly the same. Here Ralstone knew that he might meet some of his brother Corinthians. He had a repugnance to rubbing shoulders against raffish. men, who for all their fine clothes were bullies and little better than thieves.

Like all the dens where gambling was carried on, the exterior of the "Dandy House" was very modest and unpretentious. Laws against keeping a common gaming-house were in force, but, unless there was a direct complaint, rarely acted upon. To enter was easy enough, as Ralstone found, but in the centre of the hall he was brought up by a door, in which was a small spy-hole. He had to wait while he was being inspected by the Cerberus on the other side, and his appearance being deemed satisfactory, he was admitted and ushered up a staircase. At the top was another gate, but this was *open sesame* after his approval down below. Then followed the swinging back of an iron door on the landing, and he found himself in the saloon.

The apartment was of considerable size, with plain panelled walls, and lighted in the centre by a crys-

tal chandelier, holding some twenty or thirty candles, which, with the assistance of the prismatic pendants, threw a glare upon the centre of a long, oblong, green baize-covered table about six yards long by two and a half broad. Some eighteen inches from each end were two spaces, one red and the other black, about three feet and a half long by two feet and a half broad. *Rouge et noir* was the game played.

The table was surrounded by men, some sitting, others standing, whose eyes were fixed intently on the table and on the croupiers, who acted as dealers. The game was the essence of simplicity, and of course in favour of the bank. All you had to do was to stake your money on the colour you fancied and the croupiers did the rest.

The cards were valued thus: court cards as ten pips, aces for one, and the rest as marked. The dealer started with the black space, throwing out the cards one by one and stopping as soon as the pips exceeded thirty. When this came about he called out "One." Then he passed to the red, and if the cards he dealt on this side exceeded the number of pips on the black, red lost, and the croupiers raked in the red stakes.

Frequently both colours turned up thirty-one. This, was called a *one après.* The money staked on each side was drawn in, and the players could either halve their stakes with the bank or trust to the chance of the next event. But to the man who staked on the winning colour in the succeeding round, no profit came. He only got back the money he had originally ventured. The bank, on the other hand, took all the stakes of the losers, so that every time a thirty-one *après* happened, half the money on the table went into its coffers. Obviously it was to the

advantage of the bank every time an *après* was called.

Ralstone did not join in the play at once. He could have done so without much risk, as the stakes could be as low as five shillings, rising to £20, which was the maximum, save under certain conditions. If anyone put down a £50 or a £100 note, it must be placed face upwards, and the bank had the option of accepting or rejecting it. Jack was at first more interested in the gamblers and spectators, and looked around to see if anyone he knew was present.

It was easy to tell the "pigeons" from the "hawks." The majority of the former were young men, with more money than brains, and what they had of the last was muddled by the drinks, which were freely handed about and for which no charge was made. The "hawks" were apparently well dressed until you looked closely at the cloth of their coats, worn threadbare by constant brushing, and at the colour of their linen. Some had their hair and whiskers dyed, and their low-crowned beaver hats were for the most part the worse for wear and limp of brim. A few were playing, and when they grabbed their winnings the croupier pushed towards them, they noisily proclaimed the fact. They were probably decoys.

Others of a different type lounged about, apparently bent upon killing time, and paid little attention to the table. They had their eyes fixed upon every stranger who entered, and summed him up with the accuracy of long practice. Their duty was to encourage the coy and timid ones, and to whisper how they had been winners, how many times red or black had been lucky in succession, and how they regretted the chances they had missed.

A waiter came up to Ralstone with a tray of glasses

filled with champagne. Jack refused the drink.

"There's nothing to pay, sir. The establishment's liberal—most liberal. It's really Liberty Hall here," a voice from behind was heard saying.

Ralstone turned round sharply. He recognised the small pointed chin, the high cheek-bones, the narrow forehead, and the long, thin face. The speaker was Weare, the moneylender and gambling sharper. Directly his eyes fell on Ralstone he started and would have slunk away. Jack gripped his arm.

"Not so fast, Mr. Weare. I fancy we have a little matter of business—hardly one of honour—to thrash out. You owe me £100, which I'm going to ask you to pay. What's your answer?"

"'Pon my word, sir, I don't understand you; you must mistake me for some one else."

"Impossible. I should think, Mr. Weare, you're the last man in the world to have a double. I repeat that you owe me £100 on a bet you made at 'The Angel and Sun,' outside Bath, on the Andover fight. If you doubt me, suppose we take a coach to Tom Belcher's. He was there, you know, and heard all that passed."

Weare looked horribly uncomfortable. Not long since Tom Belcher had kicked him out of his house, "The Castle," Holborn, for some shady transaction in which he had swindled one of Tom's best customers. Weare wouldn't face Belcher on any account.

"I think I've some recollection of the bet you speak of now that you remind me. I'm very sorry. It quite slipped my memory."

"Really? In spite of my reminder on the ring side after the fight. Perhaps you've forgotten the hiding I gave

to your champion, Thurtell? If you have, I should be very pleased to refresh your memory in your own person. Suppose we adjourn to the quietude of St. James's Square? We're not likely to be interfered.with there at this time of night."

"Oh dear, no. I—I remember you now, sir. Of course you shall have your money. I'll make a memorandum to send it you to-morrow. Where are you staying?"

Weare went through a parade of taking out a pocket-book with a flourish and biting the end of a very worn lead pencil.

"You needn't trouble," rejoined Ralstone coldly. "I mean to be paid *now*."

"My dear sir, I can't do it—I really can't. I've very little money on me."

"You do yourself an injustice, Mr. Weare. I happen to know that you never go anywhere without carrying your entire exchequer with you. Ready money enables you to complete a money-lending transaction on the spot; no doubt very useful to reckless gamblers who've come to the bottom of their pockets, and I dare say it enables you to exact a usurious profit. At least, so I hear from some of the Bow Street runners. So you see you've a reputation to keep up. Look here," went on Ralstone, suddenly changing his tone, "unless you fork out I shall be forced to upset the harmony of this place. I shall denounce you first and punch your head afterwards. I dare say I shall get support from the decent men here. They're not all blacklegs, I expect."

"Pray do nothing so rash," returned Weare agitatedly. "I'll try to find something on account and send you the rest."

"Very well, that'll do. Say fifty pounds."

"Oh dear, no. I can't manage a farthing more than twenty-five pounds, and that'll leave me nothing to go on with."

"Rather a new sensation for you, I fancy. I don't want to be hard. Hand over the twenty-five pounds and forward the balance to me at the 'Tavistock.'"

Weare's long, thin face became thinner and more shrunken, but he was driven into an awkward corner, and had no alternative. He put his hand beneath his coat and appeared to be struggling to reach the small of his back. The result of his wriggling was the production of a small, thin pocket-book. How many notes it contained Weare was careful not to let Ralstone see, but he extracted five five-pound notes, which he grudgingly held out.

"Thanks," said Ralstone. "That leaves seventy-five pounds you owe. Hope you'll keep your word and send the balance to-morrow."

And he strolled to the table, leaving Weare scowling and muttering. It may here be noted that Weare's practice of carrying his capital with him in various secret pockets concealed about his person led to his undoing. Four months later—in the month of November—he was lying dead in a lane near Elstree, butchered by Thurtell and his gang, to get the money which they knew he had somewhere in his dress.

Ralstone stood a few minutes watching the game and noting the number of times in succession the black or the red won. He was elated by the stroke of good fortune which had sent him against Weare. His luck had pursued him, and he was tempted to pursue it. When a

waiter approached him with champagne he tossed off a glass. It was vile-doctored stuff, and a small quantity was guaranteed to bring on semi-intoxication in the shortest possible time, but Jack did not know this.

Black had won no less than seven times running. There was odd magic in the number seven, Ralstone had heard. It was time red had its turn. He threw down a guinea on the red. He was successful, and wished he had placed twenty times the amount. This would have given him all the money he wanted, and he would then have left the saloon. But the champagne had not destroyed all his caution, and at the next deal he contented himself with staking five guineas. Again he won.

"Your luck's in, sir. Don't spoil a good chance by a faint heart," whispered his neighbour, a very dark, curly-haired man with heavy, bloated features. He was quite six feet high and very muscular. He had some friends with him who addressed him as Probert.

"Oh, my heart's good enough," said Jack with a careless laugh. "It's my luck that's the thing."

"Well, sir, I drink to it. You're game, I can see, and I like pluck, whether it's with cards, women or wine. You'll have a glass with me?"

The waiter was just behind them. Ralstone hesitated, but his throat was parched. The champagne he had drunk had given him a craving for more. And the fever of gambling was in his veins. He seized a glass and accepted Probert's challenge.

At the next deal he plunged. It was to be his last venture, win or lose. He staked his winnings, his original stakes, and added twenty pounds. He stood to make a hundred pounds. The croupier began to throw out

cards to black—three tens and one ace, thirty-one! Ralstone held his breath and his pulse quickened. The dealer seemed unconsciously slow in dealing to red, but it was not so. Ralstone's anxiety had deceived him. Two tens and a nine appeared; all depended upon the fourth card. It proved to be the two. Red and black had each scored thirty-one! It was an *après*, and the stakes on both sides were drawn into a space at the end of the table marked off from the red and black by a yellow line.

Ralstone could now either halve his stake with the bank or leave it and take his chance of the next deal. In the first case he would lose half his money, in the second he would, if lucky, get back his stake, but he would gain nothing. He elected to do the second.

It took some little time to return the money of those who had decided to put up with losing half their stakes, and then the excitement increased. Ralstone's stake was by far the highest on the table. He watched the dealer closely, not that he suspected anything wrong, but on the pack depended his fate. His eye, trained by snipe and wild duck shooting, and strengthened by his practice in the fencing-room, was exceptionally quick, and rarely played him false. The dealer went on mechanically. The black worked out at thirty, the red at thirty-three. Ralstone had lost. The croupier extended his rake to sweep in his gains.

"Stop!" suddenly yelled Ralstone. "This is cheating. I saw the croupier shift the bottom card to the top of the pack. The red and black were both thirty. The last card he should have thrown to the red is this."

He was standing close to the dealer. Quick as thought his hand went out to the pack from which the cards had

been dealt. He lifted the top card before anyone could prevent him, and threw it on the table face upward. It was an ace. If it had been dealt, red would have won.

Instantly there was a terrific uproar. Ralstone, his brain inflamed by the hocussed wine, made a grab at the gold and notes the croupier was raking in, but only succeeded in scattering the money. At the same moment a pair of powerful arms pinned him from behind, and the shrill voice of Weare was heard shrieking. "Out with him. He's a spy. He's sent by the Bow Street Robin Redbreasts."

Professional punters, decoys, blacklegs and friends of the proprietor were in the majority. They pressed round the audacious visitor, bent on acting upon Weare's cry. But they had reckoned without Ralstone's strength and activity. Suddenly raising his foot, he stuck it against the edge of the table to obtain leverage, shot his body back with all his force, and using his elbows like wedges, cleaved his way through the seething mass. In less than a minute he had shaken himself free, and his chest heaving, his eyes glaring and his lips white and set he stood awaiting the onrush.

But it did not come. Blacklegs are not bruisers, and what they lacked in courage they made up for in shouts and oaths. Presently the crowd parted, a man elbowed his way through. It was Probert, with whom Ralstone had hobnobbed. He was followed by a couple of men evidently emboldened by Probert's example. They meant mischief. Instantly Ralstone was on his guard.

Probert made a rush. His attitude and the way he held his hands told Jack that though he knew a little about boxing, that knowledge did not amount to much.

He opened with a rush, and launched a heavy blow at Ralstone's head. Jack ducked, received it on his shoulder and retaliated by a smasher full in Probert's face, of much the same character as that which some forty years later floored Jem Mace when he fought Tom King. Ralstone's fist, hardened by use, caught the man on the nose and between the eyes, and accentuated by the weight of his body infused into the blow, sent him crashing to the ground, and there he lay, not insensible, but unable to move. His comrades did not wait to try further conclusions with so doughty a fighter and precipitately retreated.

The hubbub increased ,and some one began to blow out the lights in the chandelier. At this juncture Ralstone was joined by one of the players, a young man of gentlemanly appearance.

"You'd better get out quick," he whispered. "You were right. The scoundrel cheated you, but you've no remedy. The croupier has vanished with the swag, and if the room's darkened you won't have a dog's chance. The blackguards mean mischief. They're collecting the empty bottles, and you'll have a devil of a volley in half a minute."

Ralstone appreciated the wisdom of this advice. He wheeled round, and as he was turning, caught sight of Weare with a champagne bottle creeping towards him, so as to get a better aim. Jack Ralstone had not been a cricketer for nothing. He saw the missile coming; he caught it neatly and returned it as though he was aiming to get a batsman out. The bottle struck the moneylender on the temple, and he went down like a cricket stump. Then Ralstone and his companion dashed for the door,

upset the custodian as though he were a ninepin, and fled down the stairs three at a time. The guardian of the lobby door, a burly fellow with a fighter's broken nose, would have stopped them, but they were ready for him.

"Keep the door open," shouted Ralstone. "The place is on fire!"

The man did not ask any questions, but bolted upstairs to see for himself. The two fugitives darted into the street, made for Shepherd's Market, and, once in the maze of passages which then existed, were safe from pursuit. They found their way into the Haymarket, and walked rapidly towards Charing Cross.

"Did you lose much?" asked Ralstone, when they could talk freely.

"Cleaned out. And you?"

"Almost the same. I went in with twenty pounds. I spotted that thief Weare and extracted twenty-five pounds out of a hundred-pound bet he owed me—it was like drawing blood from a stone—started play and, despite winning at first, I've lost forty pounds out of my capital."

"You squeezed twenty-five pounds out of Weare! Damne, you worked a miracle. How did you manage it?"

"Frightened him. Threatened to punch his head and tell to the room why."

"By Gad, that explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Just before the last deal—the *après*, you know, that finished the lot of us—I twigged Weare whispering to the croupier, and glancing at you. You were so intent on watching the cards you didn't notice. He was arranging

the trick to get his own back."

"And he got it with a vengeance. He won't be seen in public for a week, I'll swear. By the way, do you know the fellow they called Probert, who made a dead set at me?"

"I don't know any good of him. A boaster and bragger, and, I'm told, a close pal of that man Thurtell, who's to be seen often at that den. It's a wonder he wasn't there to-night."

A friend of Thurtell Probert was indeed, for it was in the pond of his garden at Elstree that the body of Weare was thrown after being murdered.

On the whole, in spite of his being fleeced, Ralstone had reason to congratulate himself, for he had wiped out the score against him which had started at the Andover fight. Thurtell—Weare—and now Probert, who probably saw him at the "Fives Court" row, and who might have been one of the gang that so brutally attacked him. One debtor remained—Sir Phineas Tenbury.

At Charing Cross Ralstone parted from his companion, each wishing the other better luck, and went on to the "Tavistock," feeling somewhat giddy, for the fumes of the doctored champagne were not completely dissipated. He was not in a condition to think over things, and he had no sooner thrown himself into bed than he was in a heavy sleep.

The next morning brought painful recollection. He came to the conclusion that he had made an ass of himself—at all events as far as losing his money was concerned. The problem of raising sufficient to help Nyra still faced him. Walsham would probably lend him another fifty pounds, but this was not nearly enough. A

hundred pounds would hardly do what he wanted.

"If it weren't for that long-legged blackamoor she mightn't want to leave England at all. Why should she? I can see what's in her mind. She wants to keep the fellow from doing that infernal stepfather of mine an injury. I'll swear Quamina will finish the job in workmanlike style if he has half a chance. But Simon's safe enough where he is. What does the negro know about England? He'd never find his way down to Somersetshire. I don't think I need bother over the Squire."

And he dismissed Simon Halstead (towards whom, in spite of Nyra's moving story, he had a spark of kindly feeling, for he had nothing personally to complain of—it was rather the other way about) from his mind.

But Nyra was different. Looking at his duel with Sir Phineas seriously, it might mean his own death. He had not hitherto troubled to regard it in this light, but now, as things had turned out, it had to be reckoned with.

"While I'm near at hand I defy Tenbury to harm my darling, but supposing I was heavily grassed, and the sponge had to be thrown up? God knows what would happen then. She must be got out of the country before the last act comes. It's the only way."

He was slowly dressing while these thoughts were chasing each other, and at the end of his toilet he had made up his mind what his next step should be. It was a desperate project which at odd times had flitted across his brain.

Within the next hour he was at Tom Spring's house, The Weymouth Arms, Weymouth Street, Portman Square. Spring, who was in the bar, greeted the visitor heartily, and surveyed him with a critical eye.

"You're not much the worse, sir, for your turn up with that blackguard Thurtell and the ugly work that followed. I got together a lot of our chaps when we heard what was going on, and we went out to lend you a hand, but the mischief was done. You ought to have taken my advice, sir."

"Of course I ought, Tom. Anyhow, I shan't go against it another time, and, as a matter of fact, I'm here to seek it."

In a few words he disclosed his project. It was to issue a challenge to any one who chose to take it up. He meant to back himself, and he meant to win.

"The long and short of it is, Spring, I want five hundred pounds in as short a time as possible, and I look to you to help me to get it."

"'Tain't so easy as you think, Mr. Ralstone," said Spring, shaking his head. "You're not in the same class as the old 'uns. Besides, I don't think they'd care to fight a gentleman."

"I should take another name."

"That wouldn't make a bit of difference. You'd be known just the same. What about the stakes? If you pulled 'em off it wouldn't mean more than fifty pounds. The nobs wouldn't put down more than twenty-five pounds on an unknown man."

"I'd easily get some of my friends to subscribe a decent sum."

"I know you Corinthian gentlemen stick to one another. It's the other side I'm thinking about. And, according to you, the pull's to come out of the betting. You can't guarantee you'll win. The best man in the world can't. And there mustn't be the slightest suspicion of a

'cross.'"

"What are you talking about, Tom?" cried Ralstone indignantly. "A 'cross'—I should think not indeed."

"That's what I'm saying. Now, look 'ee here. There's a man down Wapping way that the East Enders are bragging about. I've not seen him, but I'm told he's a glutton for punishment and as full of tricks as a monkey. He's on for a match, but his backers can't spring more'n twenty-five pounds. I don't say you'd beat him, but you've got more than a fighting chance. I'll make inquiries about him if you like."

"I wish you would, Tom. The sooner the better."

And after half an hour's sparring with Spring, during which Tom pointed out a few defects, but pronounced his pupil on the whole to be greatly improved in the strength of his punches and in his quickness in getting away, Jack departed much comforted.

CHAPTER XXIII

East Against West

The "Blue Anchor," Oyster-shell Alley, Wapping, was a typical waterside tavern, neither better nor worse than any other between Limehouse and Westminster. It was at the corner of the alley. At the end of the latter ran the Thames, reached by a flight of slimy, uneven steps, partly of brick, partly of lumps of stone. A tumble-down. weather-boarded structure, the "Blue Anchor" was so lopsided that it looked as if a vigorous push would send it toppling into the river. A bay window, the frame of which had long ceased acquaintance with paint, projecting from the ground-floor room, would certainly not have required much pushing to separate it from the house, had it not been shored up by two stout beams driven into the shingle below. The "Blue Anchor" would have delighted a modern artist, but he would have thought twice before he sampled its beer or rum.

In the room with the bay-window, amid squalid surroundings. in a leather-covered arm-chair, worn rusty by long usage, sat, or rather lounged, the fine gentleman, Sir Phineas Tenbury. He was supposed to be in Paris; he was in hiding at the "Blue Anchor." Always vicious-

looking, he was now at his worst. The grey shade of dissipation and sleepless nights had crept over his face. His eyes, since the tragic episode in Cranbourne Alley, had in them the restless glance of the hunted man. He had been horribly nervous about Lady Barbara's pearls, and he had determined to lie low until he was sure Mrs. Matthews had not given him away, and that the loss of the necklace had not been discovered. A fortnight had gone over, nothing had happened to cause him uneasiness, and he was beginning to feel less anxious.

He had not the slightest difficulty in accounting for his seeking refuge at the "Blue Anchor." He was, he said, being pursued by duns, writs were out against him, and he had no desire to be lodged in a Cursitor Street sponging house. The story was highly credible, and Sam Appleby, the landlord, who knew Sir Phineas well, never thought of questioning it.

Tenbury had another reason for selecting the "Blue Anchor." It was the house of call of Sally Winch and her son Jerry, and Sally he was employing to watch Ralstone in place of Vicary. Sally had got work in Covent Garden market, and was able to combine pea-shelling with spying. Ralstone, it was pretty certain, would never suspect her. Sir Phineas was now awaiting her first report.

The door opened, and Appleby put his shock head into the room.

"'Ere's the old 'oman," said he in a beery voice.

"I'll see her."

Sally had brought her son with her, but she left him in the bar. She bobbed cringingly and commenced her story. She had brought news. Mr. Ralstone had left the "Tavistock" and was staying with Tom Spring at the

Weymouth Arms.

"How did you find that out?" growled Tenbury.

"It warn't me, yer 'onour, as diskivered it. It war Jerry. He'll tell 'ee all about it, sir. He's outside now."

"Bring him in."

Her offspring slouched in, touching his forelock. He was a different Jerry from the drunken bruiser who had gone down under Jack Ralstone's fist on the common on the Bristol and Bath Road. He had never forgotten the humiliation of his defeat, he the "milling" champion of many a boxing-booth fight, by an amateur! He was burning to reinstate his reputation, for somehow the story had got wind. He had turned over a new leaf. He had reduced his potations of "heavy wet" and had put himself under the care of a trainer of men and horses. His constant outdoor life and exercise, running and riding, had made him as hard as nails. His face was no longer red and bloated, but lean and bronzed. He had lost a stone in weight and had now the litheness of body and the firmness of muscular development of the born fighter.

"What d'ye think, Sir Phineas?" he began excitedly. "That theer C'rinthian as you put t'old mother to foller is a goin' in for a 'ring' match. I want ter take 'im on. 'Im an' me's got a score ter settle, as *you* know. You've only got to plank down twenty-five shiners an' I'll 'arf kill my fine genelman."

Jerry had adorned his story with a few oaths which may be omitted, and finished by spitting on both palms and clenching his fists.

Tenbury's dull eyes lightened. He saw the change in the burly ruffian and noted the brawny neck and shoul-

ders. Jerry was likely to prove a formidable antagonist. It would be something towards his revenge if his rival were crippled—the loss of an eye—the bridge of his nose smashed—his jaw broken—anything so long as his good looks were permanently ruined.

"Are you sure?" he asked eagerly.

"Sartin' sure. I was a-sparrin' at 'The Feathers,' Ratcliff 'Ighway, t'other night; blest if I didn't see Spring among the landlord's friends a-quizzin' me. The C'rinthian's a-comin' out as Bob 'Umphries, but it's Ralstone all the same. Spring's a-lookin' out fur a man to meet 'im, an' he wanted to see if I was good enough. Good enough? Oh, lor!"

And Jerry spat once more, this time on the ground.

"If I find the money, will the match come off?" asked Tenbury, biting his nails.

"I'll take my oath it will."

"Come here to-morrow. I'll see what I can do. Meanwhile your mother must hang about the Weymouth Arms. And you might keep your eyes open too. I want every step of Ralstone's dogged. D'ye understand?"

Jerry nodded, his mother cackled, and the precious pair departed with the few shillings Sir Phineas found for them. Then he had a consultation with Sam Appleby. The purport was the disposal of some jewellery which Sir Phineas had determined upon selling, so as to get free of his pressing liabilities and enable him to come out into the open. Appleby had heard that a Dutch Jew had come over from Antwerp on business, and could be seen at a house in the Minories. The Jew was a dealer in precious stones.

"Is he good for £5,000?"

"Any amount, so I've heard tell. Them Jews hang together, an' what one ain't got another makes up. They're always on fur a deal. I'll get the address some time this afternoon."

Appleby was as good as his word. That evening Sir Phineas interviewed a grey-bearded man in a long gabardine, and drove a hard bargain for the pearls. He wanted £5000; Solomon Sluys would only give £4,000. They compromised for £4,250. The next day Jerry and his trainer were at the "Blue Anchor," the £25 was handed over and deposited, as was duly notified in the next issue of *Bell's Life*.

There was to be no delay in bringing matters to an issue. Both men were in good fettle and were eager for the fight. From the East End point of view, Spring's "novice" hadn't the ghost of a chance against Jerry Winch, who had been boxing week in and week out six months of the year ever since he was out of his teens. True, he had mostly had ambitious "duffers" to deal with on the racecourses and at fairs where his mother's boxing booth was pitched, but the milling, such as it was, kept him in condition.

Apart from the confidence they had in their man, Winch's supporters had prided themselves on the fact that it was the East against the West, for it had oozed out that "Bob Humphries" was a swell and a Corinthian to boot. In a way this feeling suited Jack Ralstone's book, as it enabled him to accept the bets which the backers of Winch were quite ready to make, If he won, Jack saw his way to the £500 he wanted. But it was going to be a near thing. Spring warned him that his opponent was likely to prove a tough customer.

The place for the fight was kept as much of a secret as was possible, but it was known to a few that the historic battle ground of Moulsey Hurst had been chosen. For the moment the day was left open. Meanwhile Ralstone passed his time between Spring's house and lodgings he had taken at Hampstead. Here, amid beautiful and wild surroundings, he did his open-air training, winding up the day with a walk to Waterloo Bridge and back on the off-chance of meeting Nyra.

Happy meetings they were when fortune favoured them. By mutual yet tacit agreement both avoided talking of anything outside their new-found love, and this subject seemed inexhaustible. Nyra, in some way which Ralstone never sought to know, had found means to put off Quamina, for the black no longer accompanied her.

A fortnight passed quickly, and then came a surprise. Jack heard from Lord Walsham that Sir Phineas Tenbury had returned from Paris and was again to be seen in his old haunts. Two days after Walsham found his way to Flask Walk, where Ralstone had his rooms, with an important piece of news.

Walsham threw a slip of paper on the table.

"Tenbury's cheque for £4,000," said he. "The fellow seems to have squeezed Houston to some purpose. Captain Charteris brought it to me this morning. I rather fancy it was due to Charteris's scruples rather than because Tenbury thought he ought to pay you, that he scraped the money together. Anyhow, you're in funds. You don't seem overjoyed."

And indeed Ralstone's face was unusually grave.

"It's come too late. Three weeks ago I might have welcomed it. 1 should have been saved my venture into the

prize ring. I can't back out now. If I suggested such a thing it would be said I was showing the white feather."

"But no one knows you're 'Bob Humphries.'"

"Spring does. I can't sell him. He'd never look at me again. You don't know the trouble he's taken to put me up to every move. Besides, I've been thinking over the matter, and I've decided that I won't be indebted to Tenbury for being able to bring off the plan I've got in my mind. I'll make the money I want by my own efforts or not at all. What d'you say?"

"Well, I know nothing about it, but I dare say you're right."

"I feel I am. I've never told you the facts about the girl I'm fighting for. Tenbury was villain enough to employ a gang of ruffians to carry her off one night as she was coming from Vauxhall Gardens, where she had been singing—perhaps you may have heard Nyra?"

"The deuce! So it's Nyra, the charming singer the town went mad over some months ago, is it? Heaps of men have been wondering what has become of her. By Jupiter, Ralstone, you're in luck. But Sir Phineas—so he got hold of her, did he?"

"He tried to, but failed. The blackguards in his pay—a beast of an old woman and her son were the ringleaders; I gave the scoundrel a thrashing and I'd like to give him another—took her to Somersetshire, and I rescued her. I rode with her to Bath; she ran away for reasons which I needn't go into; we met again in London, and now she's mine. I've reason to believe Tenbury's moving heaven and earth to find her, but he won't. I want to take her away after I've settled with the fellow. That's why I won't touch a farthing of his money."

"What am I to do with his cheque, then?"

"Haven't made up my mind. Keep it in your possession for the present."

Within another week the day for the fight was fixed, and it was soon buzzed about that it was to come off at Moulsey Hurst.

The Thames never looked more inviting for a swim, a row, or a sail, than on this August morning; but the crowds, both of the washed and unwashed, streaming over Hampton Court Bridge, besieging the ferry boats at Hampton, and blocking up the roads with drags, curricles, tandems, gigs, and every kind of vehicle that could be pressed into service, had no thoughts of these harmless pleasures. Nor did they care for the beauty of the pastoral surroundings or the bright sunshine, save that the latter meant bodily comfort. Their minds were fixed on seeing two men batter each other about. Nor did they care a straw for the nobility of the manly art of self-defence. They were out to see blood and bruises, and to some tastes the more of both the better.

Jack Ralstone had put up the night before with his mentor, Spring at Walton; thence it was an easy ride to Moulsey Hurst, immediately opposite Hampton village. The authorities had apparently "winked the other eye," and there was no thought of difficulties from the magistrates. A huge multitude had assembled round the ropes when a close carriage brought "Bob Humphries" to a convenient spot cleared in readiness by the ex-P.R. bodyguard, and expert eyes eagerly scrutinised the representative of the "Corinthians," for it was now known to every one that Tom Spring's "novice" belonged to the world of swelldom. On the whole the verdict was sat-

isfactory, though there were some judges who thought that the young "nob," with his white skin, tanned though his face was by sun and wind, and finely-drawn, sharply-defined muscular development, would never stand the hammering which the brawny champion of the East End had in readiness.

The East Enders had mustered in great force, and a thousand and more hoarse, raucous voices hailed their hero when he leaped over the ropes and flung his "castor" into the ring. "Gentleman" Jackson had the arrangements in his hands, and at the given moment both men were at their corners. When Jack glanced across the enclosure, curious to see what kind of man he had to meet, the sun was shining full upon Jerry Winch's face, and Ralstone gave a start of recognition. He turned at once to Spring.

"Tom," said he in a low voice, "I've already fought that fellow."

"You have, sir?" exclaimed the surprised Spring.

"Yes. I'll tell you something about it after the fight. All I can say now is that I beat him and I mean to do it again."

"You've your work cut out. He'll stand any amount of your punches. Mind he doesn't get one of his in unawares. He can hit. Remember what I told you. Don't force the fighting. Tire him and watch your chance."

Ralstone nodded. The knowledge that he was pitted against the ruffian who had done Tenbury's dirty work gave him a sense of joy. He thought of Nyra, and he was burning to avenge her wrongs. At the same time he resolved that this feeling should not affect his judgment. He saw he would have to be cooler and more guarded

than ever.

It was the reverse with Jerry Winch. His animalism showed itself, in the impudent grin, the protruding lower jaw, and the small, tigerish eyes deep in their sockets. He was bursting to pound his antagonist and gratify his love of brutality, and a curious sound, like the snarl of a savage dog, issued from his lips as at the appointed signal he faced the tall, lithe figure who advanced towards him.

The spectators held their breath. Then something like a sigh seemed to pass over the vast multitude. It was a murmur of astonishment. The two combatants had not observed the usual etiquette. Neither had offered to shake hands. Winch's backers thought the omission was due to the Corinthian's "stuck-uppishness." Ralstone's supporters put it down to Winch's ignorance and boorishness. Then, when the astonishment passed away, a jeering "yah" burst from the outraged East Enders. As a matter of fact, the two men knew they were out for the grim reality of fighting, and neither was in the mood for ceremony and a pretence that there was no ill-feeling.

The first round gave no hint of what was to follow. Winch's tactics, it was clear, were of the rushing order. He hardly gave Ralstone time to pose in the "correct" attitude before he was upon him like a wild cat, sending in blow after blow, which, had they been direct instead of being slightly curved, might have done his opponent some damage. He wanted to get inside Jack's guard by a side attack, which would make the accepted rules go for naught, but he failed. Ralstone did not escape entirely, but there was nothing very serious. He did not attempt to retreat, indeed the onslaught was too sudden, and he closed instead, relying upon his skill as a wrestler.

Wrestling, it so happened, was not one of Winch's strong points. He was a Londoner born and bred, and belonged to a hybrid class known as "Stepney" gipsies—nomads who pose as gipsies when it suits them, but have not the least trace of the true Romany blood in them. He struggled to free himself from Ralstone's grip, and for a time it was a hard tussle, Winch making up for his want of knowledge by his enormous strength. But science and practice won the day. Suddenly he was lifted up, his body whirled in the air, and he came down a huddled heap, breathless and quivering. He was at once taken to his corner, and was soon ready once more. He was not much hurt, but considerably shaken.

When the second round started it could be seen that he was mad with rage. He tried the rushing game, but Jack was ready, and stepped back in time to avoid his savage thrusts. Now and again Ralstone got in a jabbing stroke, and though he found his mark on Winch's face, the fellow's head was so hard he could make little impression. Jerry's nose and mouth were bleeding, but he took no heed and pressed on, Ralstone all the time retreating. This kind of fighting was not what Jerry had been used to in his boxing-booth encounters, and, after the shaking up of the first round, he began to lose his wind. His fury was so intense that he fought quite wildly, and Jack planted a terrific blow on the "mark" and down he went again, doubled up with pain. The applause was deafening as Ralstone walked to his corner without a scratch.

"That's the game," said Spring, while he was attending to his man. "Don't let him come to close quarters."

In the third round Ralstone's straight blows fell with

unerring certainty. Jerry looked like a fiend, and, conscious of his ability to take any amount of punishment so far as his bullet head and muscular chest were concerned, hardly tried to defend himself. He paid the penalty at the end of the fourth round. He attempted to get within Jack's guard, and made a bull-like rush at a moment when he was short of breath, missed, and received a direct upper-cut which caught him on the chin and sent him flying like a ninepin. But he was not to be denied. He came up to time and, stung by the reproaches of his supporters, could hardly contain himself. One blow of his got home, and Ralstone staggered under it and went down on one knee. Jerry did not pursue his advantage. He had his adversary at his mercy, but his eyes were half closed; his brain was paralysed, partly because it was naturally slow, and partly because what there was of it was filled by his ungovernable hatred, and he did not at once realise his advantage. The next instant Ralstone was on both feet and landed his man a stupendous crash between the eyes, cutting his knuckles against Jerry's cheekbones, but effectually blinding him. When Winch's backers saw his fists whirling aimlessly, they yelled out volleys of execrations. But the round had to be finished, and Jack closed and threw him.

Jerry's seconds saw there was no chance for their man. He came to before he was counted out, struggled to his feet, and insisted upon going on. He was livid with mortification, and wouldn't listen to their remonstrances. He had his way, and staggered with assistance to the centre of the ring. He looked a pitiable object, swaying to and fro and vainly endeavouring to see his antagonist. Jack walked up to him, heard his gasping oaths, and gen-

tly pushed him. Down he went.

The fight was over. Jerry Winch was carried to his corner insensible, and a great shout rose from the Corinthians and their friends. Jack, save a cut on his cheek, had come through with very slight injuries. He was surrounded and overwhelmed with congratulations.

"You'd be as good as Gentleman Jackson or Mr. Gully," said Spring, "if you cared."

"No. I've had enough. I've done more than I expected. I've thrashed an enemy," returned Jack with a smile.

His friends would have given him a dinner, but he would have none of it. He had important business that night, he said. And this was true. He had to meet Nyra.

He was so excited he did not see Sir Phineas. The baronet was whispering to a witch-like old woman who was making her way towards the defeated Jerry. The old hag was Sally Winch.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Avenger—Death

Ralstone had not seen Nyra for four evenings. He paced the bridge impatiently, wondering if she would come. He was followed through the turnstile by an old beggar-woman, apparently a cripple. She kept on the opposite side, and when she found that he was walking up and down, evidently expecting some one, she squatted in one of the recesses and kept her head down as though asleep.

But she was on the alert; she saw Nyra pass, and watched her meet Ralstone. She grinned maliciously when they kissed.

"Good news—great news, sweetheart," cried Ralstone, joyfully. "I've all the money you want, and more—at least, I shall have before the week is over."

The girl made no answer, but drew closer to him. Did the affection expressed in the movement mean her thanks? He waited for her to speak, but she remained silent.

"Aren't you glad, dearest?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, yes, for your sake, but——"

She looked up. He saw trouble written in her eyes.

"What's the matter? Has anything happened?"

"It's—it's Quamina."

"Damn Quamina," thought Ralstone. "The fellow's a plaguey nuisance."

"Well, what about him?"

"He's been missing for two days."

"Rather a good thing, I should say."

"Oh you don't know, you don't know. If you did—"

"Well, if I did, what then?"

He looked into her eyes and saw trouble written there.

"You see," she went on in low, plaintive tones, "it was all my fault. I persuaded Quamina to come to England with me. We were to visit vengeance on Simon Halstead, as I told you. Quamina by himself would never have thought of doing what I talked him into, and, if he *had* thought, he couldn't have carried it out. How could he? So I'm responsible, and—and now he's gone to—"

She shuddered and turned her head away.

"You mean that he's gone off on his own account to do what was in your mind when you brought him to England?"

"Yes, that's what's frightening me. Since I've known you I've changed. I can't explain why. Angry words have passed of late between me and Quamina. He thinks of nothing but blood—but he's only a poor savage. You mustn't be hard on him. He dislikes you because he's certain that it's you who's made me alter my plan. Do you understand? I tried to explain that … murder … could not make things better. What's done is done, and Halstead's death can't restore to my father what was taken from him. It can't remove Quamina's scars. It can't make me forget the persecution he inflicted upon me because I was the daughter of slaves."

"Slaves? Not your father, surely?" cried Ralstone, horrified.

"Yes. My father was a man of past middle age when he married. He was nearly seventy when he died, and he told me that fifty years ago he was kidnapped in Bristol, smuggled on board one of Halstead's father's ships, and taken to Barbados and sold as a slave. Oh, it would make your blood run cold if you knew the terrible things done in the old days. When my father fell in love with my mother—she was very beautiful—"

"I can well believe that," interjected Ralstone.

"Simon Halstead swore he would make life a hell for him. He wanted her for himself, you see. My father defied him, and hell came. I don't want to say any more about this—I want to forget my wrongs. But Quamina doesn't. He never will, and I'm sure it's that which has taken him away. What am I to do? Something terrible may happen. I can't prevent it. I'm helpless."

Ralstone was silent for a few moments. He was rapidly summing up the situation.

"Does he know where the old man lives?" he asked abruptly.

"In a way, yes. While those wretches who had me in their clutches were camping on the common, I heard them talking about the gentlefolk who had estates in the neighbourhood and which was the safest place for poaching, and they mentioned Simon Halstead and the woods round the Manor House. After I ran from you I was full of horrible thoughts, and when I again met Quamina I told him everything. In the forests of Barbados he could track down anything he once set his mind upon. No bloodhound has a keener scent. He mayn't

know the road to Bristol, but he'll find it."

Ralstone did not under-estimate the danger, and he could see but one way to counteract it. Unwilling as he was to meet his stepfather, he must go down to the Manor House and warn him.

"You say Quamina's been gone two days. It's over a hundred miles to Bristol. Even if he were familiar with the road, it would take him four days at least to get there. As he'd probably have to ask his way, we might allow him a week."

"Not so long," cried Nyra. "He's a very fast runner. He would sleep in the day and run in the night and never stop. *I* know what he can do."

"Very well. Let us say four days. I don't think you've anything to fear meanwhile, so long as you keep to the house. Promise me that."

"Are you then going away?" she asked with a slight quiver in her voice.

"Yes. I must go to Bristol. I must get there before Quamina. What else is to be done?"

"Nothing."

She seemed to speak hopelessly. Ralstone wondered what was in her mind. They strolled on slowly, neither speaking for some moments.

"Supposing he hasn't gone there?" she broke out suddenly.

"That occurred to me too. I can only put Simon on his guard and come away. I can do no more."

He felt her hand which was in his suddenly tremble.

"But that will mean you'll have to tell him about me," she whispered.

"Not at all. I shall have to tell him where his danger

lies of course, that is if he has the patience to listen to me.. Perhaps he won't. One never knows how he'll take things. Anyhow, *you* won't come into the matter. You're not afraid to be left in London alone, are you?"

"No, I'm not afraid."

But he felt her shiver all the same.

"Keep a brave heart, little one," he went on. "Just a few days more—I've one thing left to do and then—all the world's before us."

He spoke encouragingly, but it was an effort. He had the duel with Tenbury on his mind. Despite his belief in his luck it might come off with him rather badly. If he could only be sure that Nyra was completely out of the man's reach he would not mind so much. But he could devise no plan without enlighten- ing her, and this he would not do. He did not even allude to his fight with Jerry Winch, and he blessed the dark night that prevented her seeing the strapping on his right cheek.

They wandered back to the Middlesex side of the bridge, the old woman whom neither had seen following them stealthily. He saw her to the house in King Street and was loth to leave her, but he purposed catching the night coach for Bristol, which started from the "White Horse Cellar," Piccadilly, a little before twelve.

Then came the last adieu. Just a few endearing words. He hardly knew what he said. For a moment she clung to him as though impelled to the embrace by every nerve in her body. He left her with a heavy heart, and with the picture in his memory of her pale face and tearful eyes.

He was far too absorbed to notice the old woman crouching in a doorway opposite, and jumping into a coach he hastened to Tom Spring's to explain that he was

called away to the West of England on important business, and was at the "White Horse Cellar" a little before eleven and booked the only vacant seat that was left. By midnight the coach, to the admiration of the crowd who nightly assembled to see the sight, was making a brave show along Piccadilly.

Ralstone reckoned that he would be at the Manor House about noon of the following day, but on the Bath Road, some sixty miles from London, one of the leaders went lame; it was a couple of hours before another horse could be procured, and he proved to be a jibber. It was night before Bath was left behind and the coach speeding on its way to Bristol along the road ever associated with Nyra, for it was here that he had his memorable ride with her arms enclosing him. He seemed to feel their warmth and pressure even now.

The coach put him down at the nearest point to the Manor House. He had about a couple of miles to walk along a road lonely at any time, but doubly so at the dead of night. Part of the way was between a pine plantation on either side, but the spot was familiar to him and he had no longer the feeling of desolation which overtook him after he had alighted, and the grinding of the coach and the rattle of the horses' hoofs were becoming fainter and fainter.

The smell of the soil, the scent of the pines and bracken, even the peculiar stagnant odour from the big pond where he had ofttimes caught carp and tench brought back his boyhood. The distinctive smell of London, with its unswept streets and festering gutters, was that of foulness. It was akin to life as he had found it in the metropolis—that life which he once thought meant

the height of pleasure—Tenbury, Weare, Thurtell, Vicary, Jerry Winch, all types of degradation, greed and brutality. Even poor Lady Barbara represented nothing but frivolous artificiality, selfishness and vanity. The one bright ray amid the blackness was Nyra.

He was inclined to except boxing—at least, so far as the fighters themselves were concerned. They bore themselves like men. The majority exhibited a certain amount of chivalry, and there was rarely any malice. A few cases where a "cross" might be suspected could have been cited, but there were not nearly so many as in modern times when big stakes became the fashion. But of the hangers-on, the dregs, most of whom would hardly face a fist, the less said the better.

He was pondering all this when through a clearing in the plantations he saw, to his surprise, a light in the window of a house which he knew well enough. Was the squire drinking himself to sleep after his old fashion? If so, what kind of reception would he have?

Ralstone stopped, his eyes fixed on the window. The onerous nature of his task, now that it was so near, presented itself vividly. He thought of that truculent, tyrannical old man and of Nyra's story of his terrible cruelty. At that moment a shadowy form passed rapidly between him and the light and vanished. Ralstone instantly thought of Quamina and rushed forward. His foot caught a gnarled tree root and he pitched down headlong. He picked himself up, more angry than hurt. All chance of pursuing the negro—if it were he—was gone. He went on to the Manor House wondering if any of the servants were about.

He was beneath the porch, and deciding that the bell

would make too much noise, knocked softly. No one came, and he went round to the back of the house. Stephen slept over the stables, and picking up a stone he flung it against the window. Presently the sash was flung up.

"Who be that?" growled the coachman. "Anything more happened?"

"It's I, Stephen—Jack Ralstone. Come down. I want to speak to you."

"I'm domned! If this bean't like the finger o' Providence. I'll be wi' 'ee in two twos."

The door opened. Stephen, half dressed and shaking like a leaf, confronted him.

"'Ee must ha' knowed what be a happenin' to bring 'ee 'ere now," he stammered in his shrill, quavering voice.

"What *has* happened? I know nothing."

"T' old squire be a lyin' stark dead. Tummas found him stiff in his chair an' black in the face. I saddled Black Ivory an' rode post haste to Bristol for the doctor, but it warn't no good. Doctor said he'd had a apple-plectoic fit, an' had been dead 'arf an hour afore Tummas commed in the room."

Something like a feeling of relief went over Ralstone. All his worry and trouble about Nyra and Quamina had come to an end.

"When did it occur?" he asked.

"Nigh upon three o'clock this afternoon. Squire ate a 'earty dinner—he were al'ays a good trencherman, drunk or sober, mostly drunk, I'm bound to say, and he were left asleep and a snorin' peacefully. We never disturb him when he's nappin', an' it were only 'cause Tummas couldn't hear him a sendin' his pigs to market as the

lad went in, knowin' as he had appinted to meet Lawyer Knowles at his office. It was then as Tummas came runnin' out a cryin' as the master was dead an' gone."

"I saw a light in his room. Is he there?"

"Aye. We took him an' laid him on the big bed. Will 'ee go an' see him? I'll knock Tummas up. There bean't no one else in the house. Mrs. Coombes, the cook, were too frightened to stay, and all the maids they be gone weeks an' weeks. The Squire he ha' been awful queer in his ways, and they took an' left. He were like one possessed of a devil at times, an' at others you'd ha' thought as he'd done a murder or summat dreadful and was haunted. I dunno what comed to him o' late, unless it were you a goin' away."

Ralstone understood but, of course, did not enlighten Stephen. He decided to see the dead squire at once, and Stephen, after some difficulty, succeeded in rousing Thomas.

Soon Ralstone was in the death chamber, which Mrs. Coombes, with a proper regard for etiquette on such occasions, had made decent and in order. With feelings which he did not take the trouble to analyse, even had analysis been possible, the young man looked upon the face of his stepfather. Death, in its merciful fashion, had softened the repulsive lines and lessened the coarseness of the old man's features, but there was enough indication left of his evil life and of his animalism to tell its own story.

"You'll want a rest, Master Jack," said Stephen, who had accompanied Ralstone. "I dunno where to put 'ee. Most o' the beds'll be damp wi' no maids to see to 'em. There's only the little room Mrs. Coombes used to have.

It be along that passage. A bit near the Squire's, but I don't see as there be ought to fear in a dead body."

"Of course there isn't The little room will do well enough. I'm dead beat."

Ralstone had only been able to doze during the long coach ride, and as he had an outside seat his sleep didn't amount to much.

Stephen attended him, candle in hand, and shuffled away to his own quarters. Ralstone was too fatigued to undress. He threw himself on the bed and had hardly laid his head on the pillow than he dropped into a heavy sleep. But not for long. He was overwrought and his nerves and brain refused to become normal at once. He had not slumbered for ten minutes when he found himself wide awake, but with no clear idea where he was or of what had happened.

Slowly consciousness struggled back. He found himself sitting up, but had no remembrance of having raised his body. The silence was broken by a cracking sound. He could not determine whether he really heard anything or that it was the fag-end of a dream. He listened. It came again. It was not from anything in his room, but outside the house, a short distance away. He could see nothing. Then he went into the passage. He could distinctly hear footsteps. They were in Simon Halstead's room. He strode softly to the door and opened it.

Quamina, knife in hand, was standing at the foot of the bed, glaring at the dead man. He was so motionless he might have been black marble. Evidently he had not heard Ralstone enter.

"Quamina," said Ralstone, "what are you doing here?"

The negro started. He fixed his gleaming eyes on Jack.

"Him dead, massa?" he growled in guttural tones.

"Yes. You're too late. Put that knife away. Go back to your mistress. She needs you. Why did you leave her?"

Ralstone purposely spoke without the slightest suggestion of rancour or harshness. He reckoned upon the negro's savage instincts being appeased by the sight of his hated enemy lying dead, and that his sense of rough justice was satisfied.

Jack was right, but he was not prepared for Quamina throwing himself at his feet and pouring out a torrent of words in his native tongue, mingled with a few expressions in broken English. These expressions gave the clue to his attitude. He thought that Halstead had been slain by Ralstone. This was enough to banish his jealousy and ensure his gratitude. Ralstone did not undeceive him. What did it matter so long as a threatened tragedy had been averted?

"You must return to Nyra at once," said he.

The negro rose submissively enough and was going towards the window, one pane of which was broken. It was by this window he had entered, breaking the glass and slipping back the catch by putting his hand through the hole. It was easy enough for so active a fellow to haul himself up with the assistance of the stout wisteria which covered half the front of the house.

"No, no, not that way," commanded Ralstone. "I'll show you an easier road."

Quamina did not attempt to question Ralstone's word, but followed like a dog. On the way down it occurred to Jack that he would send a line to Nyra, telling her the all-important news and begging her to be of good courage until his return. He took the negro into the dining-room,

found pens, ink and paper, and scribbled his note.

"That's for your mistress. Don't lose it. Get it to her as soon as you can."

Quamina nodded, stuck the note within the folds of the gay bandana handkerchief he wore like a girdle round his waist, and departed. When Ralstone returned to his bed he slept like a top.

CHAPTER XXV

Nemesis!

It was clear to Ralstone that he would have to stay at the Manor House a couple of days or so. There was no one but he to see after the funeral. He could do no good by returning to Nyra. Quamina, by the speed with which he travelled, would, in all probability, get to London quicker than he could by the mail coach. The negro would be so eager to tell his mistress what had happened that he would not waste a minute.

The next morning the lawyer from Bristol came. Stephen, the previous night, had taken him the news.

"You'd better look over all papers and take charge of them. I know nothing of Mr. Halstead's affairs."

"You ought to know," returned the lawyer with a queer smile. "You're the person most concerned."

"How so?"

"Because you've inherited everything. By a will executed a year ago Mr. Halstead made you sole heir. Whether he intended any alteration by writing that he would see me yesterday, I can't say. He was always sending me notes about his will and countermanding his instructions the next day. I suppose he acted according

to his mood—never the same for long. That's my reading of it, Mr. Ralstone. Anyway, you're a rich man and I congratulate you."

Jack at first was staggered. The news seemed too good to be true. He had no objection to being rich, but what gave him the most pleasure was that he could repay every farthing of the money, and more, of which Simon had robbed Nyra's father.

The story that Squire Halstead had been found dead was speedily in everybody's mouth, and three days later Holbrook village church, where the funeral service was held, was filled with the villagers and many of the gentry round about. Jack Ralstone, the cricketer, sportsman, and all-round athlete, had hosts of friends and was welcome wherever he went.

The funeral was over; Ralstone, after thanking those whom he knew personally for their presence, was about to return to the Manor House, intending to take the Bristol mail that night for London, when he caught sight of Sir Phineas Tenbury. Tenbury was in the shade of an old cypress, leaning against the trunk. A sneer hovered about his lips, and his eyes, their baggy lids drooping, were fixed superciliously on Ralstone. For a moment or two the latter was taken aback. So much had happened during the last few days he had almost forgotten his enemy.

Sir Phineas was apparently expecting him to make the first move, but Ralstone ignored him, whereupon the baronet advanced, raising his hat with elaborate politeness. Ralstone made no sign, but simply awaited him.

"May I add my congratulations to those of your friends?" said Sir Phineas in a tone of studied smooth-

ness.

"You may do what you please. I presume that I don't owe your intrusion here to that intention."

"Well, hardly. Perhaps you'd like to know *why* I've intruded, as you're pleased to put it."

His silky urbanity irritated Ralstone intensely, but as probably this was Tenbury's purpose, he kept his temper.

"Sir Phineas Tenbury is versed in the etiquette of affairs of honour. He ought to know that the principals, before meeting on the field, don't approach each other save through their seconds. Lord Walsham will be happy to listen to any communication you may give to Captain Charteris."

"Suppose we drop etiquette, my dear Ralstone. I've fulfilled my obligations and I owe you nothing. Why should we not finish the affair without further delay? Our quarrel is not a mere fashionable exchange of shots."

"I quite agree. I don't intend it should be."

"Then why talk of seconds? Why not settle the thing quietly between ourselves—unless, of course, you're afraid——"

"Afraid, Sir Phineas? Of you?"

Ralstone threw an infinitude of contempt into his words. Tenbury's lips whitened.

"Oh, I know you can use your hands, but when hands are holding pistols it's a different matter."

"It's all the same to me. Why don't you come to the point? What do you propose?"

"Thanks for the question. The answer's ready. If you're agreeable we might decide the affair to-night at my place. It's but twelve miles or so from here, an easy ride for your black nag. I believe you've ridden the Bath

Road before now."

Tenbury's manner had become intolerably insulting, though he had not raised his voice nor dropped its oiliness.

"I've heard you possess some kind of shed not far away. I've no doubt it's good enough for the purpose. You're the challenged party and have the choice weapons. Swords or pistols?"

"Pistols would probably suit you. It would be fairer. I understand you've lately exercised your muscles somewhat in the prize ring. You'd be hardly in a condition to handle a blade."

"Pray don't consider me. As you've evidently thought out the arrangements, perhaps you've brought the weapons. Had I known I should have the pleasure of meeting you to-day, I should have been prepared. My duelling pistols are in London."

"So I anticipated. Mine are at your service. You can take your choice. I believe they are in excellent order."

"No doubt. What time will be most convenient to you?"

"Twelve o'clock, if equally agreeable to yourself. We're not likely to be interrupted at that hour."

"I am your servant, sir."

And without another word Ralstone, after raising his hat, not to be outdone in the farce of politeness by his adversary, turned on his heel.

* * *

"You know the way to Sir Phineas Tenbury's place, Stephen?"

"The Den? Course I does, Master Jack. It won't be the barrownite's long. He'll have to give it up to the mortgagees, I'm told."

Tenbury's temporal affairs did not interest Ralstone, and he rode on in silence, Stephen keeping alongside, but just half a length or so in the rear. It was about half-past eleven when they reached the by-road leading to the Den. It was a hot night and the close air, the solitude and the stillness were oppressive.

"Here we are, sir," said Stephen suddenly, and drew rein at the broken lodge gates. "D'ye see yon light? That's the place."

Ralstone dismounted.

"I'll walk to the house," said he. "Wait here with the horses. If I don't come back you'll take these two letters to whom they are addressed."

One was for Lawyer Knowles of Bristol, the other for Nyra at King Street, Covent Garden.

"If 'ee don't come back, sir," Stephen was beginning, when Jack stopped him peremptorily and strode on. Stephen was aghast, but there was something in his young master's manner which prevented him asking questions.

Ralstone pushed his way amid the tangle of growth to the cottage and rapped at the door with his riding whip. He heard a bolt shot back and Sir Phineas stood in the doorway.

"You're punctual," was all that the baronet said. He pointed along the passage and Ralstone followed him.

"I apologise for asking you to fight in the kitchen, but it is the largest room in the place," said he when they were in the brick-paved apartment.

The kitchen was almost bare of furniture. A rough deal table was at one side and on it were a couple of tallow candles and a square, flat mahogany box. A grandfather's clock ticked solemnly next the big fireplace. It pointed to a quarter to twelve. Not a word was said on either side until Sir Phineas opened the mahogany box. It contained a couple of duelling pistols.

"I give you your choice," he went on. "I think you'll find them to your liking. They're Joe Manton's best."

Ralstone nodded. He felt in a strange quiescent mood. So far as his sensations guided him, his pulses were beating as evenly and as regularly as the ticking of the old clock. Nothing seemed to be of the least consequence. He was in the hands of fate. He took the pistol nearest him and looked at it as a matter of form. In reality he was perfectly indifferent.

"As we've no one to drop the handkerchief, I had to think of another way of signalling. I suggest we wait until the clock begins to strike twelve and at the final stroke both fire. Is that agreeable?" continued Sir Phineas.

"As you please," rejoined Ralstone, shrugging his shoulders.

The room was about twenty feet by fifteen and the positions were fixed at its longest length. Some eighteen feet separated the two men, and good shots as they were they could hardly miss. The candles lighted them equally.

The preliminaries occupied nearly ten minutes, and each in his place awaited the clang of the clock. They stood sideways, their pistol arms hanging down. Their demeanour towards each other had all through been absolutely correct. There was not the slightest sign that

each was thirsting for the other's blood. Ralstone found himself wondering why he was so calm. To him the whole thing was a dream—a piece of acting. It was quite unreal.

Suddenly he started. Every nerve in his body quivered. The clock had commenced to chime. Had it been the signal to fire his hand would have been so unsteady he must have missed his aim. But there was yet time to recover himself. All at once he heard Tenbury's voice—harsh, rasping, metallic.

"Perhaps you'd like to know that whatever happens," he was saying, "Nyra is mine—mine at this very moment."

"You lie," Ralstone retorted.

It dawned upon him that the singular method Tenbury had adopted for their final meeting was intended to unsteady him—that his present boast had the same object. If so, it had failed. The words acted upon Ralstone both as a tonic and a stimulant. All his momentary loss of control was gone. The one thought—the one desire was to see the boaster dead at his feet. Sir Phineas grinned at Ralstone's defiance, and a hideous grin it was, the white lips stretched tightly over the teeth.

"So you think. You're wrong. Nyra is in my safe keeping, thanks to the wily old hag who saw you and the girl on Waterloo Bridge, cooing like turtle doves—who followed you both to King Street—who enticed her out of the house and caged the pretty bird. She has now no young Lochinvar to gallop away with her."

The clock had ceased to chime. Its striking had begun. Sir Phineas went on jeering between the strokes. Ralstone never heeded him. Nothing mattered now but

death. Three more clangs and all would be over.

Ten—eleven—Sir Phineas swiftly raised his pistol, his finger on the trigger. He had treacherously anticipated the signal and was taking careful aim, when the door was burst open and a girl, her hair dishevelled, her feet bare, rushed in. A report—a scream—a second report—the fall of a heavy body—the sonorous note of the twelfth stroke. Then … Nyra, the blood streaming from a wound in her shoulder, was in Ralstone's arms, and Sir Phineas was lying dead on the hearthstone, a bullet through his brain.

* * *

Sir Phineas had spoken the truth. Sally Winch faithfully fulfilled her mission. Nyra, once in her clutches, had been conveyed to the Den, and her possession was to be the crowning triumph after he had disposed of his rival. But this part of his infamy had led to his undoing. Escaping from her prison in an upper room, she had entered the kitchen at the critical moment and had not only disturbed Tenbury's aim, but had received the bullet—happily a flesh wound only—intended for Jack Ralstone. It was one of those coincidences of which life is full, and for which there is no accounting, for she was wholly in ignorance of the duel and that her lover was facing death.

Nemesis had indeed overtaken Sir Phineas. It followed even the four thousand pounds, the proceeds of the pearls, of which he had so basely robbed Lady Barbara. The money did nobody any good. Ralstone would have nothing to do with it, and he sent the cheque back to Fauntleroy's bank on which it was drawn. Within a

few months it went into the pit of the liabilities which the forger, Henry Fauntleroy, dug for himself and his deluded depositors.

The law, of course, had to take note of the baronet's death, but when the story of his infamy was made known Jack Ralstone became the hero of the hour. On the day of his trial—as a necessary formality he had to answer the charge of manslaughter—the Court of the Old Bailey was crowded by his fellow Corinthians, together with a goodly sprinkling of P.R. men marshalled by Spring, and when Corinthian Jack stepped from the dock a free man a cheer went up that scandalised the Recorder and the Bench of Aldermen. The Corinthians would have celebrated the occasion by a fistic display at the Fives Court but Jack shook his head.

"No, no," he cried. "I've a much more important thing to think about. I'm going to be married and you must all come to the wedding!"

That wedding was a merry time and no one added more to the mirth than did Quamina, whose rolling black eyes and gleaming teeth were everywhere in evidence to show his joy at the triumph of his mistress and his gratitude to her husband.

The years rolled on, but amid their happiness Jack and Nyra could not forget their old days of peril. Rarely did they visit London but they wandered over the bridge, ever dear to them as the scene of their first exchange of confidences, and of the dawning of a love which, beginning in shadow, ended in sunshine.

THE END

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