

The Lord of Falconbridge

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THE LORD OF FALCONBRIDGE. A LEGEND OF THE RING.

By A. CONAN DOYLE.



TOM CRIBB, Champion of England, having finished his active career by his two famous battles with the terrible Molineux, had settled down into the public-house which was known as the Union Arms, at the corner of Panton Street in the Haymarket. Behind the bar of this hostelry there was a green baize door which opened into a large, red-papered parlour, adorned by many sporting prints and by the numerous cups and belts which were the treasured trophies of the famous prize-fighter's victorious career. In this snuggerly it was the custom of the Corinthians of the day to assemble in order to discuss, over Tom Cribb's excellent wines, the matches of the past, to await the news of the present, and to arrange new ones for the future. Hither also came his brother pugilists, especially such as were in poverty or distress, for the Champion's generosity was proverbial, and no man of his own trade was ever turned from his door if cheering words or a full meal could mend his condition.

On the morning in question—August 25th, 1878—there were but two men in this famous snuggerly. One was Cribb himself—all run to flesh since the time, seven years before, when, training for his last fight, he had done his forty miles a day with Captain Barclay over the Highland roads. Broad and deep, as well as tall, he was little short of twenty stone in weight; but his heavy, strong face and lion eyes showed that the spirit of the prize-fighter was not yet altogether overgrown by the fat of the publican. Though it was not eleven o'clock, a great tankard of bitter ale stood upon the table before him, and he was busy cutting up a plug of black tobacco and rubbing the slices into powder between his horny fingers. For all his record of desperate battles, he looked what he was—a good-hearted, respectable householder, law-

abiding and kindly, a happy and prosperous man.

His companion, however, was by no means in the same easy circumstances, and his countenance wore a very different expression. He was a tall and well-formed man, some fifteen years younger than the Champion, and recalling in the masterful pose of his face and in the fine spread of his shoulders something of the manly beauty which had distinguished Cribb at his prime. No one looking at his countenance could fail to see that he was a fighting man by profession; and any judge of the fancy, considering his six feet of height, his thirteen stone of solid muscle, and his beautifully graceful build, would admit that he had started in his career with advantages which, if they were only backed by the driving-power of a stout heart, must carry him far. Tom Winter, or Spring—as he chose to call himself—had indeed come up from his Herefordshire home with a fine country record of local successes, which had been enhanced by two victories gained over formidable London heavy-weights. Three weeks before, however, he had been defeated by the famous Painter, and the set-back weighed heavily upon the young man's spirits.

"Cheer up, lad," said the Champion, glancing across from under his tufted eyebrows at the disconsolate face of his companion. "Indeed, Tom, you take it over-hard."

The young man groaned, but made no reply.

"Others have been beat before you and lived to be Champions of England. Here I sit with that very title. Was I not beat down Broadwater way by George Nicholls in 1805? What then? I fought on, and here I am. When the big Black came from America it was not George Nicholls they sent for. I say to you—fight on, and, by George, I'll see you in my own shoes yet!"

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spread of his shoulders something of the manly beauty which had distinguished Cribb at his prime. No one looking at his countenance could fail to see that he was a fighting man by profession, and any judge of the fancy, considering his six feet in height, his thirteen stone solid muscle, and his beautifully graceful build, would admit that he had started his career with advantages which, if they were only backed by the driving power of a stout heart, must carry him far. Tom Winter, or Spring—as he chose to call himself—had indeed come up from his Herefordshire home with a fine country record of local successes, which had been enhanced by two victories gained over formidable London heavy-weights. Three weeks before, however, he had been defeated by the famous Painter, and the set-back weighed heavily upon the young man's spirit.

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Tom Spring shook his head. "Never, if I have to fight you to get there, Daddy."

"I can't keep it for ever, Tom. It's beyond all reason. I'm going to lay it down before all London at the Fives Courts next year, and it's to you that I want to hand it. I couldn't train down to it now, lad. My day's done."

"Well, Dad, I'll never bid for it till you choose to stand aside. After that, it is as it may be."

"Well, have a rest, Tom; wait for your chance, and, meantime, there's always a bed and crust for you here."

Spring struck his clenched fist on his knee. "I know, Daddy! Ever since I came up from

Fownthorpe you've been as good as a father to me."

"I've an eye for a winner."

"A pretty winner! Beat in forty rounds by Ned Painter."

"You had beat him first."

"And by the Lord, I will again!"

"So you will, lad. George Nicholls would never give me another shy. Knew too much, he did. Bought a butcher's shop in Bristol with the money, and there he is to this day."

"Yes, I'll come back on Painter, but I haven't a shilling left. My backers have lost faith in me. If it wasn't for you, Daddy, I'd be in the kennel."

"Have you nothing left, Tom?"

"Not the price of a meal. I left every penny I had, and my good name as well, in the ring at Kingston. I'm hard put to it to live unless I can get another fight, and who's going to back me now?"

"Tut, man! the knowing ones will back you. You're the top of the list, for all Ned Painter. But there are other ways a man may earn a bit. There was a lady in here this morning—nothing flash, boy, a real tip-top out-and-outer with a coronet on her coach—asking after you."

"Asking after me! A lady!" The young pugilist stood up with surprise and a certain horror rising in his eyes. "You don't mean, Daddy—"

"I mean nothing but what is honest, my lad. You can lay to that!"

"You said I could earn a bit."

"So, perhaps, you can. Enough, anyhow, to tide you over your bad time. There's something in the wind there. It's to do with fightin'. She asked questions about your height, weight, and my opinion of your prospect. You can lay that my answers did you no harm."

"She ain't making a match, surely?"

"Well, she seemed to know a tidy bit about it. She asked about George Cooper, and Richmond the Black, and Tom Oliver, always comin' back to you, and wantin' to know if you were not the pick of the bunch. And trustworthy. That was the other point. Could she trust you? Lord, Tom, if you was a fightin' archangel you could hardly live up to the character that I've given you."

A drawer looked in from the bar. "If you please, Mr. Cribb, the lady's carriage is back again."

The Champion laid down his long clay pipe. "This way, lad," said he, plucking his young friend by the sleeve towards the side window. "Look there, now! Saw you ever a more slap-up carriage? See, too, the pair of bays—two hundred guineas apiece. Coachman, too, and footman—you'd find 'em hard to beat. There she is now, stepping out of it. Wait here, lad, till I do the honours of my house."

Tom Cribb slipped off, and young Spring remained by the window, tapping the glass nervously with his fingers, for he was a simple-minded country lad with no knowledge of women, and many fears of the traps which await the unwary in a great city. Many stories were afloat of pugilists who had been taken up and cast aside again by wealthy ladies, even as the gladiators were in decadent Rome. It was with some suspicion therefore, and considerable inward trepidation, that he faced round as a tall veiled figure swept into the room. He was much consoled, however, to observe the bulky form of Tom Cribb immediately behind her as a proof that the interview was not to be a private one. When the door was closed, the lady very deliberately removed her gloves. Then with fingers which glittered with diamonds she slowly rolled up and adjusted her heavy veil. Finally, she turned her face upon Spring.

"Is this the man?" said she.

They stood looking at each other with mutual interest, which warmed in both their faces into mutual admiration. What she saw was as fine a figure of a young man as England could show, none the less attractive for the restrained shyness of his manner and the blush which flushed his cheeks. What he saw was a woman of thirty, tall, dark, queen-like, and imperious, with a lovely face, every line and feature of which told of pride and breed, a woman born to Courts, with the instinct of command strong within her, and yet with all the softer woman's graces to temper and conceal the firmness of her soul. Tom Spring felt as he looked at her that he had never seen nor ever dreamed of any one so beautiful, and yet he could not shake off the instinct which warned him to be upon his guard.

Yes, it was beautiful, this face— beautiful beyond belief. But was it good, was it kind, was it true? There was some strange subconscious repulsion which mingled with his admiration for her loveliness. As to the lady's thoughts, she had already put away all idea of the young pugilist as a man, and regarded him now with critical eyes as a machine designed for a definite purpose.

"I am glad to meet you, Mr.—Mr. Spring," said she, looking him over with as much deliberation as a dealer who is purchasing a horse. "He is hardly as tall as I was given to understand, Mr. Cribb. You said six feet, I believe?"

"So he is, ma'am, but he carries it so easy. It's only the beanstalk that looks tall. See here, I'm six foot myself, and our heads are level, except I've lost my fluff."

"What is the chest measurement?"

"Forty-three inches, ma'am."

"You certainly seem to be a very strong young man. And a game one, too, I hope?"

Young Spring shrugged his shoulders.

"It's not for me to say, ma'am."

"I can speak for that, ma'am," said Cribb.

"You read the Sporting Chronicle for three weeks ago, ma'am. You'll see how he stood up to Ned Painter until his senses were beat out of him. I waited on him, ma'am, and I know. I could show you my waistcoat now—that would let you guess what punishment he can take."

The lady waved aside the illustration. "But he was beat," said she, coldly. "The man who beat him must be the better man."

"Saving your presence, ma'am, I think not, and outside Gentleman Jackson my judgment would stand against any in the ring. My lad here has beat Painter once, and will again, if your ladyship could see your way to find the battle-money."

The lady started and looked angrily at the Champion.

"Why do you call me that?"

"I beg pardon. It was just my way of speaking."

"I order you not to do it again."

"Very good, ma'am."

"I am here incognito. I bind you both upon your honours to make no inquiry as to who I am.

If I do not get your firm promise, the matter ends here."

"Very good, ma'am. I'll promise for my own part, and so, I am sure, will Spring. But if I may be so bold, I can't help my drawers and potmen talking with your servants."

"The coachman and footman know just as much about me as you do. But my time is limited, so I must get to business. I think, Mr. Spring, that you are in want of something to do at present?"

"That is so, ma'am."

"I understand from Mr. Cribb that you are prepared to fight any one at any weight?"

"Anything on two legs," cried the Champion. "Who did you wish me to fight?" asked the young pugilist.

"That cannot concern you. If you are really ready to fight any one, then the particular name can be of no importance. I have my reasons for withholding it."

"Very good, ma'am."

"You have been only a few weeks out of training. How long would it take you to get back to your best?"

"Three weeks or a month."



"HERE ARE FIVE POUNDS AS A GUARANTEE."

"Well, then, I will pay your training expenses and two pounds a week over. Here are five pounds as a guarantee. You will fight when I consider that you are ready, and that the

circumstances are favourable. If you win your fight, you shall have fifty pounds. Are you satisfied with the terms?"

"Very handsome, ma'am, I'm sure."

"And remember, Mr. Spring, I choose you, not because you are the best man—for there are two opinions about that—but because I am given to understand that you are a decent man whom I can trust. The terms of this match are to be secret."

"I understand that. I'll say nothing."

"It is a private match. Nothing more. You will begin your training tomorrow."

"Very good, ma'am."

"I will ask Mr. Cribb to train you."

"I'll do that, ma'am, with pleasure. But, by your leave, does he have anything if he loses?"

A spasm of emotion passed over the woman's face and her hands clenched white with passion.

"If he loses, not a penny, not a penny!" she cried. "He must not, shall not lose!"

"Well, ma'am," said Spring, "I've never heard of any such match. But it's true that I am down at heel, and beggars can't be choosers. I'll do just what you say. I'll train till you give the word, and then I'll fight where you tell me. I hope you'll make it a large ring."

"Yes," said she; "it will be a large ring."

"And how far from London?"

"Within a hundred miles. Have you anything else to say? My time is up."

"I'd like to ask, ma'am," said the Champion, earnestly, "whether I can act as the lad's second when the time comes. I've waited on him the last two fights. Can I give him a knee?"

"No," said the woman, sharply. Without another word she turned and was gone, shutting the door behind her. A few moments later the trim carriage flashed past the window, turned down the crowded Haymarket, and was engulfed in the traffic.

The two men looked at each other in silence.

"Well, blow my dicky, if this don't beat cockfightin'!" cried Tom Cribb at last. "Anyhow, there's the fiver, lad. But it's a rum go, and no mistake about it."

After due consultation, it was agreed that Tom Spring should go into training at the Castle Inn on Hampstead Heath, so that Cribb could

drive over and watch him. Thither Spring went on the day after the interview with his patroness, and he set to work at once with drugs, dumb-bells, and breathers on the common to get himself into condition. It was hard, however, to take the matter seriously, and his good-natured trainer found the same difficulty.

"It's the baccy I miss, Daddy," said the young pugilist, as they sat together on the afternoon of the third day. "Surely there can't be any harm in my havin' a pipe?"

"Well, well, lad, it's against my conscience, but here's my box and there's a yard o' clay," said the Champion. "My word, I don't know what Captain Barclay of Ury would have said if he had seen a man smoke when he was in trainin'! He was the man to work you! He had me down from sixteen to thirteen the second time I fought the Black."

Spring had lit his pipe and was leaning back amid a haze of blue smoke.

"It was easy for you, Daddy, to keep strict trainin' when you knew what was before you. You had your date and your place and your man. You knew that in a month you would jump the ropes with ten thousand folk round you, and carrying maybe a hundred thousand in bets. You knew also the man you had to meet, and you wouldn't give him the better of you. But it's all different with me. For all I know, this is just a woman's whim, and will end in nothing. If I was sure it was serious, I'd break this pipe before I would smoke it."

Tom Cribb scratched his head in puzzlement.

"I can make nothing of it, lad, 'cept that her money is good. Come to think of it, how many men on the list could stand up to you for half an hour? It can't be Stringer, 'cause you've beat him. Then there's Cooper; but he's up Newcastle way. It can't be him. There's Richmond; but you wouldn't need to take your coat off to beat him. There's the Gasman; but he's not twelve stone. And there's Bill Neat of Bristol. That's it, lad. The lady has taken into her head to put you up against either the Gasman or Bill Neat."

"But why not say so? I'd train hard for the Gasman and harder for Bill Neat, but I'm blowed if I can train, with any heart when I'm fightin'

nobody in particular and everybody in general, same as now."

There was a sudden interruption to the speculations of the two prize-fighters. The door opened and the lady entered. As her eyes fell upon the two men her dark, handsome face flushed with anger, and she gazed at them silently with an expression of contempt which brought them both to their feet with hangdog faces. There they stood, their long, reeking pipes in their hands, shuffling and downcast, like two great rough mastiffs before an angry mistress.

"So!" said she, stamping her foot furiously. "And this is training!"

"I'm sure we're very sorry, ma'am," said the abashed Champion. "I didn't think—I never for one moment supposed—"

"That I would come myself to see if you were taking my money on false pretences? No, I dare say not. You fool!" she blazed, turning suddenly upon Tom Spring. "You'll be beat. That will be the end of it."

The young man looked up with an angry face.

"I'll trouble you not to call me names, ma'am. I've my self-respect, the same as you. I'll allow that I shouldn't have smoked when I was in trainin'. But I was saying to Tom Cribb here, just before you came in, that if you would give over treatin' us as if we were children, and if you would tell us just who it is you want me to fight, and when, and where, it would be a deal easier for me to take myself in hand."

"It's true, ma'am," said the Champion. "I know it must be either the Gasman or Bill Neat. There's no one else. So give me the office, and I'll promise to have him as fit as a trout on the day."

The lady laughed contemptuously.

"Do you think," said she, "that no one can fight save those who make a living by it?"

"By George, it's an amateur!" cried Cribb, in amazement. "But you don't surely ask Tom Spring to train for three weeks to meet a Corinthian?"

"I will say nothing more of who it is. It is no business of yours," the lady answered fiercely. "All I do say is, that if you do not train I will cast you aside and take some one who will. Do not think you can fool me because I am a woman. I

have learned the points of the game as well as any man."

"I saw that the very first word you spoke," said Cribb.

"Then don't forget it. I will not warn you again. If I have occasion to find fault I shall choose another man."

"And you won't tell me who I am to fight?"

"Not a word. But you can take it from me that at your very best it will take you, or any man in England, all your time to master him. Now, get back this instant to your work, and never let me find you shirking it again." With imperious eyes she looked the two strong men down, and then, turning on her heel, she swept out of the room.

The Champion whistled as the door closed behind her, and mopped his brow with his red bandanna handkerchief as he looked across at his abashed companion. "My word, lad," said he, "it's earnest from this day on."

"Yes," said Tom Spring, solemnly, "it's earnest from this day on."

In the course of the next fortnight the lady made several surprise visits to see that her champion was being properly prepared for the contest which lay before him. At the most unexpected moments she would burst into the training quarters, but never again had she to complain of any slackness upon his part or that of his trainer. With long bouts of the gloves, with thirty-mile walks, with mile runs at the back of a mailcart with a bit of blood between the shafts, with interminable series of jumps with a skipping-rope, he was sweated down until his trainer was able to proudly proclaim that "the last ounce of tallow is off him and he is ready to fight for his life." Only once was the lady accompanied by any one upon these visits of inspection. Upon this occasion a tall young man was her companion. He was graceful in figure, aristocratic in his bearing, and would have been strikingly handsome had it not been for some accident which had shattered his nose and broken all the symmetry of his features. He stood in silence with moody eyes and folded arms, looking at the splendid torso of the prize-fighter as, stripped to the waist, he worked with his dumbbells.

"Don't you think he will do?" said the lady.

The young swell shrugged his shoulders. "I don't like it, cara mia. I can't pretend that I like it."

"You must like it, George. I have set my very heart on it."

"It is not English, you know. Lucrezia Borgia and Mediaeval Italy. Woman's love and woman's hatred are always the same, but this particular manifestation of it seems to me out of place in nineteenth-century London."

"Is not a lesson needed?"

"Yes, yes; but one would think there were other ways."

"You tried another way. What did you get out of that?"

The young man smiled rather grimly, as he turned up his cuff and looked at a puckered hole in his wrist.

"Not much, certainly," said he.

"You've tried and failed."

"Yes, I must admit it."

"What else is there? The law?"

"Good gracious, no!"

"Then it is my turn, George, and I won't be balked."

"I don't think any one is capable of balking you, cara mia. Certainly I, for one, should never dream of trying. But I don't feel as if I could co-operate,"

"I never asked you to."

"No, you certainly never did. You are perfectly capable of doing it alone. I think, with your leave, if you have quite done with your prize-fighter, we will drive back to London. I would not for the world miss Goldoni in the Opera."

So they drifted away; he, frivolous and dilettante, she with her face as set as Fate, leaving the fighting men to their business.

And now the day came when Cribb was able to announce to his employer that his man was as fit as science could make him.

"I can do no more, ma'am. He's fit to fight for a kingdom. Another week would see him stale."

The lady looked Spring over with the eye of a connoisseur.

"I think he does you credit," she said at last. "Today is Tuesday. He will fight the day after tomorrow."

"Very good, ma'am. Where shall he go?"

"I will tell you exactly, and you will please take careful note of all that I say. You, Mr. Cribb, will take your man down to the Golden Cross Inn at Charing Cross by nine o'clock on Wednesday morning. He will take the Brighton coach as far as Tunbridge Wells, where he will alight at the Royal Oak Arms. There he will take such refreshment as you advise before a fight."



"DON'T YOU THINK HE WILL DO?" SAID THE LADY.

He will wait at the Royal Oak Arms until he receives a message by word, or by letter, brought him by a groom in a mulberry livery. This message will give him his final instructions."

"And I am not to come?"

"No," said the lady.

"But surely, ma'am," he pleaded, "I may come as far as Tunbridge Wells? It's hard on a man to train a cove for a fight and then to leave him."

"It can't be helped. You are too well known. Your arrival would spread all over the town, and my plans might suffer. It is quite out of the question that you should come."

"Well, I'll do what you tell me, but it's main hard."

"I suppose," said Spring, "you would have me bring my fightin' shorts and my spiked shoes?"

"No; you will kindly bring nothing whatever which may point to your trade. I would have you wear just those clothes in which I saw you first, such clothes as any mechanic or artisan might be expected to wear."

Tom Cribb's blank face had assumed an expression of absolute despair.

"No second, no clothes, no shoes—it don't seem regular. I give you my word, ma'am, I feel ashamed to be mixed up in such a fight. I don't know as you can call the thing a fight where there is no second. It's just a scramble—nothing more. I've gone too far to wash my hands of it now, but I wish I had never touched it."

In spite of all professional misgivings on the part of the Champion and his pupil, the imperious will of the woman prevailed, and everything was carried out exactly as she had directed. At nine o'clock Tom Spring found himself upon the box-seat of the Brighton coach, and waved his hand in goodbye to burly Tom Cribb, who stood, the admired of a ring of waiters and ostlers, upon the doorstep of the Golden Cross. It was in the pleasant season when summer is mellowing into autumn, and the first golden patches are seen amid the beeches and the ferns. The young country-bred lad breathed more freely when he had left the weary streets of Southwark and Lewisham behind him, and he watched with delight the glorious prospect as the coach, whirled along by six dapple greys, passed by the classic grounds of Knowle, or after crossing Riverside Hill skirted the vast expanse of the Weald of Kent. Past Tonbridge School went the coach, and on through Southborough, until it wound down a steep, curving road with strange outcrops of sandstone beside it, and halted before a great hostelry, bearing the name which had been given him in his directions. He descended, entered the coffee-room, and ordered the underdone steak which his trainer had recommended. Hardly had he finished it when a servant with a mulberry coat and a peculiarly expressionless face entered the apartment.

"Beg your pardon, sir, are you Mr. Spring—Mr. Thomas Spring, of London?"

"That is my name, young man."

"Then the instructions which I had to give you are that you wait for one hour after your

meal. After that time you will find me in a phaeton at the door, and I will drive you in the right direction."

The young pugilist had never been daunted by any experience which had befallen him in the ring. The rough encouragement of his backers, the surge and shouting of the multitude, and the sight of his opponent had always cheered his stout heart and excited him to prove himself worthy of being the centre of such a scene. But his loneliness and uncertainty were deadly. He flung himself down on the horse-hair couch and tried to doze, but his mind was too restless and excited. Finally he rose, and paced up and down the empty room. Suddenly he was aware of a great rubicund face which surveyed him from round the angle of the door. Its owner, seeing that he was observed, pushed forward into the room.

"I beg pardon, sir," said he, "but surely I have the honour of talking to Mr. Thomas Spring?"

"At your service," said the young man.

"Bless me! I am vastly honoured to have you under my roof! Cordery is my name, sir, landlord of this old-fashioned inn. I thought that my eyes could not deceive me. I am a patron of the ring, sir, in my own humble way, and was present at Moulsey in September last, when you beat Jack Stringer of Rawcliffe. A very fine fight, sir, and very handsomely fought, if I may make bold to say so. I have a right to an opinion, sir, for there's never been a fight for many a year in Kent or Sussex that you wouldn't find Joe Cordery at the ring-side. Ask Mr. Gregson at the Chop-house in Holborn and he'll tell you about old Joe Cordery. By the way, Mr. Spring, I suppose it is not business that has brought you down into these parts? Any one can see with half an eye that you are trained to a hair. I'd take it very kindly if you would give me the office."

It crossed Spring's mind that if he were frank with the landlord it was more than likely that he would receive more information than he could give. He was a man of his word, however, and he remembered his promise to his employer.

"Just a quiet day in the country, Mr. Cordery. That's all."

"Dear me! I had hoped there was a mill in the wind. I've a nose for these things, Mr.

Spring, and I thought I had a whiff of it. But, of course, you should know best. Perhaps you will drive round with me this afternoon and view the hop-gardens—just the right time of year, sir."

Tom Spring was not very skilful in deception, and his stammering excuses may not have been very convincing to the landlord, or finally persuaded him that his original supposition was wrong. In the midst of the conversation, however, the waiter entered with the news that a phaeton was waiting at the door. The innkeeper's eyes shone with suspicion and eagerness.

"I thought you said you knew no one in these parts, Mr. Spring?"

"Just one kind friend, Mr. Cordery, and he has sent his gig for me. It's likely that I will take the night coach to town. But I'll look in after an hour or two and have a dish of tea with you."

Outside the mulberry servant was sitting behind a fine black horse in a phaeton, which had two seats in front and two behind. Tom Spring was about to climb up beside him, when the servant whispered that his directions were that he should sit behind. Then the phaeton whirled away, while the excited landlord, more convinced than ever that there was something in the wind, rushed into his stable-yard with shrieks to his ostlers, and in a very few minutes was in hot pursuit, waiting at every cross-road until he could hear tidings of a black horse and a mulberry livery.

The phaeton meanwhile drove in the direction of Crowborough. Some miles out it turned from the high-road into a narrow lane spanned by a tawny arch of beech trees. Through this golden tunnel a lady was walking, tall and graceful, her back to the phaeton. As it came abreast of her she stood aside and looked up, while the coachman pulled up the horse.

"I trust that you are at your best," said she, looking very earnestly at the prize-fighter. "How do you feel?"

"Pretty tidy, ma'am, I thank you."

"I will get up beside you, Johnson. We have some way to go. You will drive through the Lower Warren, and then take the lane which skirts the Gravel Hanger. I will tell you where to stop. Go slowly, for we are not due for twenty minutes."

Feeling as if the whole business was some extraordinary dream, the young pugilist passed through a network of secluded lanes, until the phaeton drew up at a wicket gate which led into a plantation of firs, choked with a thick undergrowth. Here the lady descended and beckoned Spring to alight.

"Wait down the lane," said she to the coachman. "We shall be some little time. Now, Mr. Spring, will you kindly follow me? I have written a letter which makes an appointment."

She passed swiftly through the plantation by a tortuous path, then over a stile, and past another wood, loud with the deep chuckling of pheasants. At the farther side was a fine rolling park, studded with oak trees, and stretching away to a splendid Elizabethan mansion, with balustraded terraces athwart its front. Across the park, and making for the wood, a solitary figure was walking.

The lady gripped the prize-fighter by the wrist. "That is your man," said she.

They were standing under the shadow of the trees, so that he was very visible to them, while they were out of his sight. Tom Spring looked hard at the man, who was still some hundreds of yards away. He was a tall, powerful fellow, clad in a blue coat with gilt buttons, which gleamed in the sun. He had white corded breeches and riding-boots. He walked with a vigorous step, and with every few strides he struck his leg with a dog-whip which hung from his wrist. There was a great suggestion of purpose and of energy in the man's appearance and bearing.

"Why, he's a gentleman!" said Spring. "Look 'ere, ma'am, this is all a bit out of my line. I've nothing against the man, and he can mean me no harm. What am I to do with him?"

"Fight him! Smash him! That is what you are here for."

Tom Spring turned on his heel with disgust. "I'm here to fight, ma'am, but not to smash a man who has no thought of fighting. It's off."

"You don't like the look of him," hissed the woman. "You have met your master."

"That is as may be. It is no job for me."

The woman's face was white with vexation and anger.

"You fool!" she cried. "Is all to go wrong at the last minute? There are fifty pounds here they are in this paper—would you refuse them?"

"It's a cowardly business. I won't do it."

"Cowardly? You are giving the man two stone, and he can beat any amateur in England."

The young pugilist felt relieved. After all, if he could fairly earn that fifty pounds, a good deal depended upon his winning it. If he could only be sure that this was a worthy and willing antagonist!



"HE AT ONCE QUICKENED HIS PACE AND SPRANG OVER THE STILE WHICH SEPARATED THEM."

"How do you know he is so good?" he asked.

"I ought to know. I am his wife."

As she spoke she turned, and was gone like a flash among the bushes. The man was quite close now, and Tom Spring's scruples weakened as he looked at him. He was a powerful, broad-chested fellow, about thirty, with a heavy, brutal face, great thatched eyebrows, and a hard-set mouth. He could not be less than fifteen stone in weight, and he carried himself like a trained athlete. As he swung along he suddenly caught a glimpse of Spring among the trees, and he at once quickened his pace and sprang over the stile which separated them.

"Halloa!" said he, halting a few yards from him, and staring him up and down. "Who the devil are you, and where the devil did you come from,

and what the devil are you doing on my property?"

His manner was even more offensive than his words. It brought a flush of anger to Spring's cheeks.

"See here, mister," said he, "civil words is cheap. You've no call to speak to me like that."

"You infernal rascal!" cried the other. "I'll show you the way out of that plantation with the toe of my boot. Do you dare to stand there on my land and talk back at me?" He advanced with a menacing face and his dog-whip half raised. "Well, are you going?" he cried, as he swung it into the air.

Tom Spring jumped back to avoid the threatened blow.

"Go slow, mister," said he. "It's only fair that you should know where you are. I'm Spring, the prize-fighter. Maybe you have heard my name."

"I thought you were a rascal of that breed," said the man. "I've had the handling of one or two of you gentry before, and I never found one that could stand up to me for five minutes. Maybe you would like to try?"

"If you hit me with that dog-whip, mister—"

"There, then!" He gave the young man a vicious cut across the shoulder. "Will that help you to fight?"

"I came here to fight" said Tom Spring, licking his dry lips. "You can drop that whip, mister, for I will fight. I'm a trained man and ready. But you would have it. Don't blame me."

The man was stripping the blue coat from his broad shoulders. There was a sprigged satin vest beneath it, and they were hung together on an alder branch.

"Trained are you?" he muttered. "By the Lord, I'll train you before I am through!"

Any fears that Tom Spring may have had lest he should be taking some unfair advantage were set at rest by the man's assured manner and by the splendid physique, which became more apparent as he discarded a black satin tie, with a great ruby glowing in its centre, and threw aside the white collar which cramped his thick muscular neck. He then, very deliberately, undid a pair of gold sleeve-links, and, rolling up his shirt-sleeves, disclosed two hairy and muscular

arms, which would have served as a model for a sculptor.

"Come nearer the stile," said he, when he had finished. "There is more room."

The prize-fighter had kept pace with the preparations of his formidable antagonist. His own hat, coat, and vest hung suspended upon a bush. He advanced now into the open space which the other had indicated.

"Ruffianing or fighting?" asked the amateur, coolly.

"Fighting."

"Very good," said the other. "Put up your hands, Spring. Try it out."

They were standing facing one another in a grassy ring intersected by the path at the outlet of the wood. The insolent and overbearing look had passed away from the amateur's face, but a grim half-smile was on his lips and his eyes shone fiercely from under his tufted brows. From the way in which he stood it was very clear that he was a past-master at the game. Tom Spring, as he paced lightly to right and left, looking for an opening, became suddenly aware that neither with Stringer nor with the redoubtable Painter himself had he ever faced a more business-like opponent. The amateur's left was well forward, his guard low, his body leaning back from the haunches, and his head well out of danger. Spring tried a light lead at the mark, and another at the face, but in an instant his adversary was on to him with a shower of sledge-hammer blows which it took him all his time to avoid. He sprang back, but there was no getting away from that whirlwind of muscle and bone. A heavy blow beat down his guard, a second landed on his shoulder, and over went the prize-fighter with the other on the top of him. Both sprang to their feet, glared at each other, and fell into position once more.

There could be no doubt that the amateur was not only heavier, but also the harder and stronger man. Twice again he rushed Spring down, once by the weight of his blows, and once by closing and hurling him on to his back. Such falls might have shaken the fight out of a less game man, but to Tom Spring they were but incidents in his daily trade. Though bruised and winded he was always up again in an instant. Blood

was trickling from his mouth, but his steadfast blue eyes told of the unshaken spirit within.

He was accustomed now to his opponent's rushing tactics, and he was ready for them. The fourth round was the same as to attack, but it was very different in defence. Up to now the young man had given way and been fought down. This time he stood his ground. As his opponent rushed in he met him with a tremendous straight hit from his left hand, delivered with the full force of his body, and doubled in effect by the momentum of the charge. So stunning was the concussion that the pugilist himself recoiled from it across the grassy ring. The amateur staggered back and leaned his shoulder on a tree-trunk, his hand up to his face.

"You'd best drop it," said Spring. "You'll get pepper if you don't."

The other gave an inarticulate curse, and spat out a mouthful of blood.

"Come on!" said he.

Even now the pugilist found that he had no light task before him. Warned by his misadventure, the heavier man no longer tried to win the battle at a rush, nor to beat down an accomplished boxer as he would a country hawbuck at a village fair. He fought with his head and his feet as well as with his hands. Spring had to admit in his heart that, trained to the ring, this man must have been a match for the best. His guard was strong, his counter was like lightning, he took punishment like a man of iron, and when he could safely close he always brought his lighter antagonist to the ground with a shattering fall. But the one stunning blow which he had courted before he was taught respect for his adversary weighed heavily on him all the time. His senses had lost something of their quickness and his blows of their sting. He was fighting, too, against a man who, of all the boxers who have made their names great, was the safest, the coolest, the least likely to give anything away, or lose an advantage gained. Slowly, gradually, round by round, he was worn down by his cool, quick-stepping, sharp-hitting antagonist. At last he stood exhausted, breathing hoarsely, his face, what could be seen of it, purple with his exertions. He had reached the limit of human endurance. His opponent stood waiting for him,

bruised and beaten, but as cool, as ready, as dangerous as ever.

"You'd best drop it, I tell you," said he. "You're done."

But the other's manhood would not have it so. With a snarl of fury he cast his science to the winds, and rushed madly to slogging with both hands. For a moment Spring was overborne. Then he side-stepped swiftly; there was the crash of his blow, and the amateur tossed up his arms and fell all asprawl, his great limbs outstretched, his disfigured face to the sky.

For a moment Tom Spring stood looking down at his unconscious opponent. The next he felt a soft, warm hand upon his bare arm. The woman was at his elbow.

"Now is your time!" she cried, her dark eyes aflame. "Go in! Smash him!"

Spring shook her off with a cry of disgust, but she was back in an instant.

"I'll make it seventy-five pounds—"

"The fight's over, ma'am. I can't touch him."

"A hundred pounds—a clear hundred! I have it here in my bodice. Would you refuse a hundred?"

He turned on his heel. She darted past him and tried to kick at the face of the prostrate man. Spring dragged her roughly away, before she could do him a mischief.

"Stand clear!" he cried, giving her a shake. "You should take shame to hit a fallen man."

With a groan the injured man turned on his side. Then he slowly sat up and passed his wet hand over his face. Finally, he staggered to his feet.

"Well," he said, shrugging his broad shoulders, "it was a fair fight. I've no complaint to make. I was Jackson's favourite pupil, but I give you best." Suddenly his eyes lit upon the furious face of the woman. "Hulloa, Betty!" he cried. "So I have you to thank. I might have guessed it when I had your letter."

"Yes, my lord," said she, with a mock curtsey. "You have me to thank. Your little wife managed it all. I lay behind those bushes, and I saw you beaten like a hound. You haven't had all that I had planned for you, but I think it will be some little time before any woman loves you for the sake of your appearance. Do you remember

the words, my lord? Do you remember the words?"

He stood stunned for a moment. Then he snatched his whip from the ground, and looked at her from under his heavy brows.

"I believe you're the devil!" he cried.

"I wonder what the governess will think?" said she.

He flared into furious rage and rushed at her with his whip. Tom Spring threw himself before him with his arms out.



"NOW IS YOUR TIME!" SHE CHIED, HER DARK EYES AFLAME. "GO IN! SMASH HIM!"

"It won't do, sir; I can't stand by."

The man glared at his wife over the prize-fighter's shoulder.

"So it's for dear George's sake!" he said, with a bitter laugh. "But poor, broken-nosed George seems to have gone to the wall. Taken up with a prize-fighter, eh? Found a fancy man for yourself!"

"You liar!" she gasped.

"Ha, my lady, that stings your pride, does it? Well, you shall stand together in the dock for trespass and assault. What a picture—great Lord, what a picture!"

"You wouldn't, John!"

"Wouldn't I, by—! you stay there three minutes and see if I wouldn't." He seized his clothes from the bush, and staggered off as swiftly as he could across the field, blowing a whistle as he ran.

"Quick! quick!" cried the woman. "There's not an instant to lose." Her face was livid, and she was shivering and panting with apprehension. "He'll raise the country. It would be awful—awful!"

She ran swiftly down the tortuous path, Spring following after her and dressing as he went. In a field to the right a gamekeeper, his



"HE FLARED INTO FURIOUS RAGE AND RUSHED AT HER WITH HIS WHIP."

gun in his hand, was hurrying towards the whistling. Two labourers, loading hay, had stopped their work and were looking about them, their pitchforks in their hands.

But the path was empty, and the phaeton awaited them, the horse cropping the grass by the lane-side, the driver half asleep on his perch. The woman sprang swiftly in and motioned Spring to stand by the wheel.

"There is your fifty pounds," she said, handing him a paper. "You were a fool not to turn it into a hundred when you had the chance. I've done with you now."

"But where am I to go?" asked the prize-fighter, gazing around him at the winding lanes.

"To the devil!" said she. "Drive on, Johnson!"

The phaeton whirled down the road and vanished round a curve. Tom Spring was alone.

Everywhere over the countryside he heard shoutings and whistlings. It was clear that so long as she escaped the indignity of sharing his fate his employer was perfectly indifferent as to whether he got into trouble or not. Tom Spring began to feel indifferent himself. He was weary to death, his head was aching from the blows and falls which he had received, and his feelings were raw from the treatment which he had undergone. He walked slowly some few yards down the lane, but had no idea which way to turn to reach Tunbridge Wells. In the distance he heard the baying of dogs, and he guessed that they were being set upon his track. In that case he could not hope to escape them, and might just as well await them where he was. He picked out a heavy stake from the hedge, and he sat down moodily waiting, in a very dangerous temper, for what might befall him.

But it was a friend and not a foe who came first into sight. Round the corner of the lane flew a small dog-cart, with a fast-trotting chestnut cob between the shafts. In it was seated the rubicund landlord of the Royal Oak, his whip going, his face continually flying round to glance behind him.

"Jump in, Mr. Spring jump in!" he cried, as he reined up. "They're all coming, dogs and men! Come on! Now, hud up, Ginger!" Not another word did he say until two miles of lanes had been left behind them at racing speed and they were back in safety upon the Brighton road. Then he let the reins hang loose on the pony's back, and he slapped Tom Spring with his fat hand upon the shoulder.

"Splendid!" he cried, his great red face shining with ecstasy. "Oh, Lord! but it was beautiful!"

"What!" cried Spring. "You saw the fight?"

"Every round of it! By George! to think that I should have lived to have had such a fight all to myself! Oh, but it was grand," he cried, in a frenzy of delight, "to see his lordship go down like a pithed ox and her ladyship clapping her hands behind the bush! I guessed there was something in the wind, and I followed you all the way. When you stopped, I tethered little Ginger

in a grove, and I crept after you through the wood. It's as well I did, for the whole parish was up!"

But Tom Spring was sitting gazing at him in blank amazement.

"His lordship!" he gasped.

"No less, my boy. Lord Falconbridge, Chairman of the Bench, Deputy Lieutenant of the County, Peer of the Realm—that's your man."

"Good Lord!"

"And you didn't know? It's as well, for maybe you wouldn't have whacked it in as hard if you had; and, mind you, if you hadn't, he'd have beat you. There's not a man in this county could stand up to him. He takes the poachers and gipsies two and three at a time. He's the terror of the place. But you did him—did him fair. Oh, man, it was fine!"

Tom Spring was too much dazed by what he heard to do more than sit and wonder. It was not until he had got back to the comforts of the inn, and after a bath had partaken of a solid meal, that he sent for Mr. Cordery the landlord. To him he confided the whole train of events which had led up to his remarkable experience, and he begged him to throw such light as he could upon it. Cordery listened with keen interest and many chuckles to the story. Finally he left the room and returned with a frayed newspaper in his hand, which he smoothed out upon his knee.

"It's the *Pantiles Gazette*, Mr. Spring, as gossiping a rag as ever was printed. I expect there will be a fine column in it if ever it gets its prying nose into this day's doings. However, we are mum and her ladyship is mum, and, my word! his lordship is mum, though he did, in his passion, raise the hue and cry on you. Here it is, Mr. Spring, and I'll read it to you while you smoke your pipe. It's dated July of last year, and it goes like this—

"FRACAS IN HIGH LIFE.—It is an open secret that the differences which have for some years been known to exist between Lord F—and his beautiful wife have come to a head during the last few days. His lordship's devotion to sport, and also, as it is whispered, some attentions which he has shown to a humbler member of his household, have, it is said, long alienated Lady F—'s affection. Of late she has sought consolation and friendship with a gentleman

whom we will designate as Sir George W—n. Sir George, who is a famous ladykiller, and as well-proportioned a man as any in England, took kindly to the task of consoling the disconsolate fair. The upshot, however, was vastly unfortunate, both for the lady's feelings and for the gentleman's beauty. The two friends were surprised in a rendezvous near the house by Lord F—himself at the head of a party of his servants. Lord F—then and there, in spite of the shrieks of the lady, availed himself of his strength and skill to administer such punishment to the unfortunate Lothario as would, in his own parting words, prevent any woman from loving him again for the sake of his appearance. Lady F—has left his lordship and betaken herself to London, where, no doubt, she is now engaged in nursing the damaged Apollo. It is confidently expected that a duel will result from the affair, but no particulars have reached us up to the hour of going to press."

The landlord laid down the paper. "You've been moving in high life, Mr. Thomas Spring," said he.

The pugilist passed his hand over his battered face. "Well, Mr. Cordery," said he, "low life is good enough for me."