

HENRY BLOSSOM

CHECKERS: A
HARD-LUCK
STORY

Henry Blossom

Checkers: A Hard-luck Story

«Public Domain»

Blossom H.

Checkers: A Hard-luck Story / H. Blossom — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

I	5
II	9
III	14
IV	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	21

Henry M. Blossom

Checkers: A Hard-luck Story

I

I had never before attended the races. "The sport of kings" is not popular in Boston, my former home, but here in Chicago every one turns out on Derby Day, if at no other time. And so, catching something of the general enthusiasm, my friend Murray Jameson, who by the way is something of a sport, and I, who by the same token am not, found ourselves driving a very smart trap out Michigan avenue, amidst a throng of coaches, cabs, breaks and buggies, people and conveyances of every description – beautiful women beautifully costumed, young men, business men, toughs and wantons – all on their way to Washington Park, and all in a fever of excitement over the big race to be run that afternoon – the great American Derby.

"Now Jack," said Murray, as in due process we reached our box and sat gazing at the crowds about and below us, "it strikes me that we should have a small bet of some sort on the different races, just to liven things up a bit. What say we go down into the betting ring and have a look at the odds?"

"As you like," I answered, rising to show my willingness; "but you will have to do the necessary, I do n't know one horse from another."

"The less you know the more apt you are to win," said Murray airily; "but if you say so, I 'll make one bet for both of us, share and share alike. No plunging goes to-day though, Jack; we do n't want to gamble. We 'll have up a couple of dollars, just to focalize the interest. If we lose it won't amount to much, and if we win – we win.

"But just a word of warning before we go down. Keep your eye on your watch and your money, or you 'll get 'touched;' and if we should chance to be separated in a crowd, be careful not to let anyone 'tout' you."

Now, if there 's one thing I am especially proud of, it is my ability to take care of myself in any company, and Murray's patronizing manner, in view of my professed ignorance, rather galled me.

"The man who gets my watch or money is welcome to it," I answered shortly, buttoning my coat about me as we walked along; "and as for being 'touted' – well, I 'll try to take care of that."

Whether to be 'touted' was to be held up, buncoed, or drugged and robbed, I had no definite notion; but I took it to be a confidence game of some sort and despised it accordingly.

Just here, following Murray, I elbowed my way into the hottest, best-natured, most conglomerate crowd it was ever my lot to mingle with. Merchants, clerks and gilded youths, laborers, gamblers, negroes, and what-not, money in hand, pushed, pulled and trod upon each other indiscriminately in their efforts to reach the betting stands.

The book-makers, ranged along in rows, stood on little platforms in front of their booths, taking the crowd's money and calling out the amount and nature of each bet to assistants within who scratched off and registered corresponding pool-tickets which were quickly returned to the struggling bettors.

On a blackboard at the end of each booth were posted the names of the horses with their jockeys. Against these names the book-makers chalked up their figures, increasing or lessening the odds from time to time as the different horses were fancied or neglected in the betting.

"There 's nothing in this race but Maid Marian," said Murray, scanning the blackboards critically; "but 4 to 5 is the best I see on her, and I want even money or nothing" – the which was largely Greek to me until by questioning and deduction I found the situation in English to be as follows:

Maid Marian was judged on breeding and past performance to be much the best horse in the race, so much so that although about to run with five or six other racers, the book-makers demanded odds from those who bet on her in the ratio of 5 to 4.

When I asked Murray why they did not offer \$1 to \$1.25 he replied that "halves and quarters did n't go," and pointed out a sign which read: "No bets taken under \$5." There were several smaller "books," however, which took \$2 bets, and did a thriving business.

The crowd by this time had become absolutely dense. Murray was suddenly dragged away by a current in the mob which set towards a book-maker who had chalked up "even money, Maid Marian."

I followed long enough to see the "booky" change again to "4 to 5" before Murray reached him; and then, believing myself about to be crushed to death, I forced my way to the edge of the ring and stood hoping that my friend would do likewise.

A very "horsey" individual, wearing an owner's badge, and a most disreputable-looking negro were discussing the forthcoming race just behind me.

"Dat Maid Marian ain't got no license to win dis race – a mile 's too fah fo' her, suah," said the darkey. "Sister Mary 'll win – dat 's who 'll win."

"Naw! naw!" drawled the other. "Senator Irby 'll come purty near gettin' de coin, wid Peytonia fer an outside chance. I see Peytonia work a mighty fast mile yesterday mornin', and I 'm jes' takin' a flyer on her to win today for luck."

I glanced at the nearest blackboard – Peytonia 200 to 1!!!

Would they dare to lay such odds against a horse that had even the slightest chance of winning? It seemed most unlikely, and yet – I hesitated. There must be a possibility, or why was the horse in the race? My sporty-looking friend had said she was fast and had bet upon her himself. Perhaps I had chanced upon some inside information; and, after all, \$2 was not a very serious matter whether I won or lost.

I started toward the betting stand, but suddenly stopped short. No, Murray was to make one bet for both of us, and had undoubtedly done what he thought was best – I would abide by his judgment.

But did he know what I knew – where could he be?

The crowd, which was now surging out of the betting ring toward the fence and up into the grand stand, thinned out rapidly; but I held my place, hoping to catch sight of Murray.

"Come on here and make your bets," yelled the book-makers, with whom business had begun to grow slack; "they 're at the post – they 'll be off in a minute."

I accepted the invitation. Rushing up to the nearest stand, I handed up two silver dollars. "Peytonia," I said, with all the nonchalance I could assume.

"Peytonia," repeated the book-maker; "four hundred to two," and in a moment more I was the possessor of a fantastically-colored piece of card-board, on which was scribbled in pencil "Peyt. – 400-2."

Suddenly there was a roar of excitement.

"They 're off," was the cry from a thousand throats, and I and the other tardy ones rushed to find a favorable spot from which to view the race.

I had n't time to hunt up our box; so making for the fence, I forced my way in next to the rail just as the horses, all in a bunch, swung recklessly around the first turn.

As the race progressed they began to string out, one horse very clearly taking the lead.

"The Maid's in front, Senator Irby second," yelled an enthusiast just beside me. "Where's Sister Mary? Maid Marian 's quittin'. There 's Flora Thornton. Go on, you Flora. Maid Marian 's out of it. The Senator 's leadin'. Flora is second. *Just look at Peytonia.*

I leaned over the rail, my heart in my mouth. Down the stretch they came at a terrible pace; some three were in front, running almost as one. In a breath they were by us and under the wire, but which of the three was first I could not determine.

Instantly there was a babel of voices, in which Senator Irby, Peytonia and Flora Thornton were severally declared to have won, and a general movement toward the judges' stand was inaugurated for the purpose of learning "the official."

I had scarcely gone a dozen yards before I ran across Murray, viciously elbowing his way through the crowd.

There was something so irresistibly funny in the expression of rueful chagrin which sat upon his good-natured face, that I forgot my excitement and began to laugh immoderately.

"Now, what do you think of that for luck?" he exclaimed on catching sight of me; "Senator Irby, a stake-horse, to be beaten out by an old dog like Peytonia? It's enough to –"

"Peytonia!" I echoed breathlessly, "did Peytonia win?"

"Of course she won. Did n't you see the race?"

For a moment I simply could n't speak, but clasping the tighter my precious ticket, I swallowed heroically at the lump in my throat, while Murray, unmindful of my silence, continued.

"You see, Jack, after I left you, I got it straight from a friend of mine that Maid Marian was out of condition, which left the race, it seemed to me, a walk-over for Senator Irby. Well, it looked like a good chance to make a 'killin',' and I put twenty on him at two and a half to one. Of course I could n't figure on getting nosed out by a hundred to one shot, but that's the luck I always play in. Well, I 'll get it back on the third race; I've got a 'cinch' in that. You understand though, Jack," he added, stopping suddenly, "you have only a dollar's interest in the losing – I had no right to bet but \$2, as was originally agreed."

Just here I foresaw a peculiar complication, and I was glad that, in my desire to appear properly nonchalant, I had not as yet announced my good fortune.

"Why, Murray," I exclaimed, slipping my ticket into my pocket, "you are absolutely absurd. We agreed to share and share alike in the day's transactions, and I shall insist upon it. Suppose Senator Irby had won instead of losing, would you have offered me but a dollar's interest in the winning, simply because I did n't know you were going to bet so much?"

"Of course not, you should have had your half; but that is a very different thing."

"Different in result perhaps, but not in principle; besides, come to think of it, I made a little bet myself."

"You did – how much?"

"Oh, only \$2."

"Two dollars, eh? Well! That makes us twenty-two out altogether. Eleven apiece, if you insist upon it, although –"

"I do insist upon it; so that's settled, and now –"

"By the way, Jack, what did you bet on?"

This was the moment of my triumph. Handing him the ticket with an air of assumed carelessness, I covertly watched with keenest relish his changes of expression, as he ran the gamut of varied emotion from idle indifference to supreme excitement.

"Jack!" he exclaimed at last, grabbing my arm. "Jack, my boy! Did you know –" Just here I laughed and gave the thing away, and then we both laughed, while Murray improvised superlative similes anent my luck, and upbraided me for my duplicity.

"Ahem! two dollars – twenty-two out – eleven apiece, eh, Murray?" I chuckled mockingly. "Come on now, old man, and show me how to cash this ticket;" and we made our way toward the betting ring.

We experienced no delay in getting the money, as not one in a thousand had won on the race, and the cashiers at the back of the stands had little or nothing to do.

I found great difficulty, however, in making Murray accept his rightful half of the spoils; but out of his own mouth I judged him, and in the end prevailed.

The next race, the second, we decided not to bet upon, as the horses were, according to Murray, only a lot of "selling-platers," and we needed a little respite from the crowd.

So we sought our box, and in highest spirits sat watching the masses surge to and fro, while the freshening breeze blew strong and cool, and brought up dark clouds which looked like rain.

"The race after this is the Derby, you know," said Murray, glancing at his programme. "Now I do n't want to influence you, old man, but I really believe that Domino will win. He's the best horse in the race, and with Taral to ride him he ought to be first under the wire. This time, though, you shall bet for yourself, as you have the proverbial beginner's luck. Ah, they're off! By Jove! that's a beautiful start."

"Selling-platers" or not, the second race was a pretty one and I enjoyed it thoroughly, from start to finish.

Is there any more pleasurable or intensely interesting sight than that of a well-appointed race between a number of sleek-limbed thoroughbreds? The multi-colored satins of the plucky little jockeys, the whitened fences and the trim greensward lend a picturesqueness; the buzz and hum of the restless, pushing, ill-assorted crowd adds an excitement to an ensemble, in my opinion, altogether fascinating.

II

And now for the Derby – the great stake race worth so many thousands of dollars to the winner; the much-talked-of race, in which the most noted horses in the country, East and West, were to compete for supremacy in fleetness and endurance, and the most celebrated jockeys to vie with each other in their peculiar generalship.

Leaving our box, we joined in the crush and forced our way into the betting-ring. The crowd was enormous, the interest intense. One had but to listen for a moment to hear every horse in the race enthusiastically spoken of as "sure to win."

As it was simply useless in that crush to try to keep together, Murray and I decided to go our several ways, and meet in good time at a place agreed upon.

Now, although I had said nothing about it, I had quite decided not to bet upon this event. I had found the second race upon which I had no bet infinitely more enjoyable than the first, despite the good fortune chance had thrust upon me; and reasonably so, I think, for with any kind of a wager up one's interest naturally centers in the performance of one horse, and the beauty of the race, as a race, is to a great extent lost sight of.

With something of this idea in mind, I stood watching the frantic efforts of the crowd to reach the betting stands, wondering idly the while where all the money so recklessly offered came from in these days of universal hard times, when I was suddenly accosted by an unknown youth who asked to see my programme for a minute, explaining at the same time that "some guy had pinched his, coming through the crowd."

I silently complied.

He studied the programme briefly, smiled a satisfied smile, and returned it.

"There 's a good thing coming off in the fourth," he remarked in a confidential manner. "If I can see you somewhere just before the race I 'll put you on. It 'll be a 'hot one.'"

I thanked him.

"The owner himself is going to 'put me next,'" he continued; "it 'll be a 'lead-pipe.'"

I began to be interested. "I should like to know it," I replied, "and I will wait for you after the Derby. I may not bet on it myself, but I have a friend who doubtless will, if you will give him the information."

"I 'll give it to him if he 'll go down the line, but it's going to win a city block, and we ought to make a killin' on it. I went broke myself, on Senator Irby, or I 'd have gone home to-night with a bankroll."

"Well," I replied, "we 'll see when the time comes. Now, what do you fancy to win the Derby?"

He lighted a cigarette and puffed it a moment in silence.

"It's a dead-tough race," he at last remarked, "and I would n't play it with counterfeit money. There 's no use in playing any race unless you 've got some information. These geezers that play every race go broke. But it's an easy game to beat if you just stay off till you 're next to something good, and then plug it hard. Why, if I could shake the faro-bank and crap-game, I 'd have money to burn ice with.

"Y' see, take a big stake-race like this, where every horse is a 'cracker-jack,' they 're all of 'em good, and they 've all got a chance, and you just take my advice and stay off. We 'll have something good in the fourth that we know, and we just won't do a thing to it. Well, I must hurry down to the paddocks to see a stable boy I know; if I hear anything I 'll come back and tell you. But be sure and be here for the next with your friend, 'cause it's all over now, but cashing the ticket – so long;" and he dodged away through the crowd.

Oddly enough, it did not at the moment strike me as in the least peculiar that I should have been conversing on a basis of perfect equality with a companion of stable boys and a frequenter of gambling hells. Nothing further.

The spirit of easy, good-natured camaraderie was in the very air; and in the singleness of purpose which animated all – the picking of the winner – all ranks seemed leveled, all social barriers cast aside.

Again, he had proved in our few minutes' talk a new, and to me an interesting, type; and I resolved to keep the appointment, if for nothing more than to study him further.

He was a young man, certainly not over twenty-three, short, slight, and becomingly dressed. His face was thin, smooth-shaven and red, but somehow peculiarly prepossessing. His deep blue eyes and long black lashes might have atoned for much less attractive features; and the lines which ran from his well-shaped nose to the corners of his clear cut lips suggested a hard lived life which I afterwards learned did not belie them.

A glance at my watch discovered the fact that it lacked but a few minutes of my appointment with Murray, and I began to slowly edge my way to the point of our rendezvous.

I reached it promptly on the minute and stood awaiting his tardy coming, when suddenly my arm was grasped and I turned to find my new acquaintance.

He was all excitement and breathing hard, as though in the greatest possible hurry.

"Come here," he said in a low quick voice; and he beckoned me into a quiet corner. "I 've been looking for you everywhere. Now listen a minute and do n't ask questions; Domino's got a 'dickey' leg, and he won't be a thing but last. Garrison tells me that Senator Grady is going to win in a common canter. Richard Croker 's in the ring, and the 'bookies' are swipin' it off the boards. Hurry and get in with your money while there 's a chance to get the odds;" and he started into the betting ring as though fully expecting I would follow.

His manner was intensely earnest, and his hurried words and furtive looks were at once impressive and convincing. I felt my latent sporting spirit rising strong again, and I began the simple process of arguing myself out of my former position.

Some Frenchman, I think, has somewhere said, "A man is his own worst sharper." However that is, in an argument with one's self the other side is usually silenced. And so it chanced that, a few minutes later, I again held a penciled ticket, which this time called for \$60 to be paid in the event of certain contingencies, and for which I had given \$20 of my former winnings. I had also given my Mentor an extra five to bet for the boy from whom he had received such timely and valuable information.

Such reckless plunging I can only excuse upon the grounds of having been forced into it; for not the least of this versatile youth's many and varied gifts was the power, not uncommon amongst waiters and shop-keepers, of shaming his whilom client out of anything approaching pettiness, by the assumption of that air of blended superiority and indifference we have all felt the force of at times.

I had drawn forth my roll with the laudable intention of chancing a two or perhaps a five, when I was met with the startling proposition that I "bet fifty each way, to win and for place," and this was followed by so convincing an array of figures, weights, times and distances, that a compromise of \$20 to win, and a five-dollar bet for the boy, "who could n't leave the paddocks, but had been promised that the right thing would be done by him," seemed the least I could do, consistent with my dignity and self-respect.

And now to hurry back to Murray. We found him standing watch in hand, and he began to smile when he saw my companion.

"Well! well!" he exclaimed in a bantering tone; "so you 've fallen a prey to Checkers, have you? What loser has he touted you onto, that's 'going to win in a walk, hands down'?"

"Now, there's a guy that makes me sick," interrupted Checkers, ignoring the question. "Because he dropped a couple of 'bones' not long ago at the Harlem track, he made a roar that's echoing still between this and the Rocky Mountains. The next time I saw him I gave him a 'good thing' he could have win out on, but he would n't touch it. He don't know the right way around the track. The book-makers call him 'Ready-Money' – he 's so easy."

"Come off now, Checkers," laughed Murray, "you know you never guess 'em right; the only time your horses win is when the others all fall down. But really, Jack, what did you play?"

"I 'm playing Senator Grady, Murray; our friend here told me he could n't lose."

"Well, he may be right," said Murray thoughtfully, "but I 'm not playing the race that way. Domino first, and Despot third, is the way I figure it ought to come. Grady I think will get the place, but the odds are better on Despot for third. Well, let's go up in the grand-stand now, and see them all parade to the post."

We chanced to find a place for three, in the seats almost opposite the judges' stand, for I had taken Checkers with me for the pleasure I found in hearing him talk.

As yet I had n't made up my mind about Checkers, and I was anxious to question Murray privately concerning him. He certainly did not look like a "tout," for the meaning of the word as applied to that genus now came to me. Rather, he seemed to be playing a fantastic rôle. He played it well, I confess, but there was a whimsical air about all that he said and did which puzzled me greatly. His slang, however, was natural. Of that there could be no doubt, and he used it with a native grace, a varied inflection and appositeness which made it seem a part of him, and therefore robbed it of objection.

In fact I afterwards discovered, and I grew to know him very well, that in all his slang there was a pertinence which took a short cut to the gist of things; a humor, dry and sometimes broad, but never vulgar, and seldom profane.

The bugle calling the horses to the post sounded soon after we took our seats, and shortly they began to appear parading in order past the grand-stand.

Domino, Dorian and Senator Grady, the three eastern horses, favorites in the betting, were cheered as they passed to the very echo; while others of the eight had their many supporters, who had backed their belief with some share of their wealth, at longer and much more interesting odds.

"There's the baby'll get the dough," said Checkers, as Senator Grady passed. "He's the finest that ever came over the pike. How on earth are they going to beat him?"

I glanced at Murray, who simply smiled and fixed his eyes upon Domino.

The horses were soon lined up for the start, and after three or four attempts, the starter caught them well in motion, dropped the flag, and the race was "off."

"Domino in the lead," laughed Murray. "I hope he keeps it all around."

Checkers was muttering under his breath some words of – well, disapprobation.

"Now look at that start and burst out cryin'," he groaned in a bitter tone. "Grady absolutely last, and Domino gets off in front. That starter never was any good; talk about his startin' a race, why! that bloke could n't start a fire;" and he lighted another cigarette by way of partial consolation.

The horses were nearing the grand-stand now, which was for them the half-mile post, for the race was to be a mile and one-half, or once and one-half around the track. Their positions had changed since the drop of the flag, for as they passed us Alcenor led, Resplendent was second, Prince Carl third, and Senator Grady was now a good fourth.

"Say! girls, look at Grady," yelled Checkers excitedly. "Why, he 'll back in by twenty lengths. There's the place to have him laying, third or fourth, till they hit the stretch; then Garrison will cut him loose, and beat 'em all in a grand-stand finish. Those dogs in front can't hold that pace; they 'll throw up their tails and quit at a mile;" and Checkers puffed the cigarette between his yellow, smoke-stained fingers, with a look of placid unconcern which I myself was far from feeling.

Suddenly he jumped to his feet with an exclamation of surprise. Grady had suddenly gone to the front as though the others were standing still, and it looked as though his jockey, Garrison, intended to make it a runaway race. At the mile he led by a length and a half, and it seemed to me he would surely win.

The crowds in their intense excitement bustled and buzzed like so many bees. Cries of "Grady!" filled the air, and thousands yelled in frenzied glee. I confess I lost my self-control and whooped as loudly as any one.

"D 'ye see," said Checkers, "that's what it is to have reliable information. Talk about Domino's winning, why, he can't beat a fat man up a hill;" and he cast a pitying glance at Murray, and climbed on his seat for a better view.

Across the level stretch of greensward the horses looked almost like playthings. Up the back stretch on they went, with Grady now a length in front. The others were rapidly closing up, and the final struggle was soon to begin. At the further turn it seemed to me they slackened up for a breathing spell; but on they came again faster and faster, with Grady but half a length in front.

The noisy chatter suddenly ceased and an interested silence fell upon all. My heart was beating a wild tattoo. I felt as though I were burning up.

Murray was wholly occupied in helping Domino along, by calling his name in a low, quick voice, and energetically snapping his fingers (a process commonly known as "pulling," and thought by the cult to be efficacious).

I glanced at Checkers. Disappointment was clearly written across his face.

"We 're up against it," he said despondently. "Garrison 's give us the double-cross. He had no business settin' the pace. There 's some one going after him now. Go on, you Grady! Wiggle yourself! They 've collared him! They 're passing him!" And sure enough some fleet-limbed bay was drawing ahead of our beautiful brown in a way that left us little hope of ever getting in front again.

Around the turn and into the stretch, nearer they raced in a cloud of dust. The leader was gaining at every jump, but Grady hung to second place. Taral now called upon Domino, and at once the colt responded gamely. But his time had gone, and the gallant horse that never before had lost a race fell back with the others, hopelessly beaten, and Taral, seeing that all was lost, pulled up and galloped slowly in. Martin on Despot came out of the bunch, and, passing Prince Carl, set sail for Grady, while Garrison, riding as though for his life, made every effort to hold his own.

Within one hundred yards of the wire the leader had six lengths to spare. His jockey was riding in leisurely fashion, glancing around from time to time, to watch the struggle that Despot was making to wrest the place from Senator Grady.

Whipping and spurring they thundered past us, fighting it out to the finishing post. By it they flashed, the bay horse first, Grady second and Despot third. Garrison's riding had saved him the place, but the race had been won by "a rank outsider."

For a moment or two the crowd was silent – dumb with surprise and disappointment. Few, if any, cheered the winner; thousands inwardly cursed the favorites.

Quickly the word was passed along, "Rey El Santa Anita wins."

"Lucky Baldwin's horse," said Checkers. "The odds were an easy fifty to one. Grady second! D 'ye see, if you 'd have played him for place as I wanted you to, we 'd have saved our stake. But you would n't 'thaw out,' and now your ticket's a souvenir. We 'd have win as it was with a good boy up. That settles Garrison for me. There 's a jockey that ought to be driving cows instead of riding a sprinter like Grady, and pumping him out in the first three-quarters. Domino last! That 'good thing.' Well; I knew from the start that he was a 'lobster.'"

Murray flushed up. "Well, any way, I won on Despot for third," he said, "enough to put me ahead on the race, and cover your losing on Grady, Jack. But, Jove, what a harvest the bookies have reaped. There were thousands of dollars bet on Domino and the other favorites, and there probably were n't a dozen bets in all on Rey El Santa Anita. It's a terrible thing this gambling, Jack, when you come to look it square in the face. Just think of the money gone to swell the pile of a lot of miserable gamblers, and think of the poor deluded mortals who play this game day after day, constant in the fatuous hope of some day making a brilliant coup, and squaring themselves on their years of losing. Fortune 'jollies' them along with temporary small successes, and having gained their confidence proceeds to throw

them down the harder. Disappointment, misery, embezzlement, suicide, follow it all as effect follows cause – and still the game goes on."

"Well, anyway, I 'm glad we touched them, and we 'll take good care that they do n't get it back. By Jove, it's nearly 4 o'clock. I 'm afraid we ought to be going, Jack. It's a long drive in, and recollect we have a date for dinner to-night. Come on, I 'll cash this Despot ticket, and then we 'll make a start for home."

"Home!" exclaimed Checkers. "You're not going home? Why this is the race I 've been waiting for. You do n't want to miss a lunch like this. It's a puddin'; it's a tapioca. Honest, it's a regular gift; the chance of your life to make a 'killin'."

But to all his entreaties we lent a deaf ear though he talked with a masterful eloquence. I confess, however, to one more weakness. I gave him a ten which he swore to return. (Murray was standing in line with his ticket.) He said he would "play it carefully, and gradually win himself out of the hole." I felt at the time that I was a "sucker," but somehow he had a persuasive way.

III

A number of weeks had come and gone ere I again laid eyes upon Checkers, and then it chanced most unexpectedly.

I had stayed at my office late one evening, finishing up some odd jobs which I had allowed to accumulate. The additional work and the lateness of the hour lent a keen edge to my appetite, and I decided to dine down town and perhaps drop into one of the theaters.

As I hastened along on my way to Kinsley's (I am not a member of the down-town clubs) a figure stepped out of a neighboring doorway, and brushed against me in passing. It was Checkers. I knew him at once. But I gave no sign of recognition and hoped to escape him unobserved. A futile hope, for he knew me as quickly, and in an instant was by my side.

"Why, Mr. Preston," he exclaimed grabbing and shaking my passive hand. "Say, on the dead, I'm glad to see you; why is it you have n't been out to the track? I've had 'something good' nearly every day. I wish I had seen you an hour ago. I've been playing 'the bank,' and they've cleaned me flat. They say that's the squarest game on earth, but the cards do run dead wrong for me. Where you going – to eat? Well, say, as the tramp says, 'Me stomach tinks me troat's cut.' Back me against a supper, will you? It's a hundred to one I get the best of it." And so he rattled on and on, never waiting for his questions to be answered, careless and slangy as ever.

As I turned into Kinsley's I hesitated, as to whether simply to dismiss him straight, or to give him a dollar and tell him to go and satisfy his evident hunger. He saw me pause and read my thoughts, but he did not propose thus to be disposed of.

"Come on," he said, starting quickly ahead and entering the elevator. "We're going up to the café, ain't we?"

I was greatly minded to turn on my heel and tell him to go to the deuce, if he chose. But his manner was wholly ingenuous, and "after all," I said to myself, "I'm tired and he's amusing. It's something after 8 o'clock and no one will be here at such an hour." At all events I disliked a scene, and so I simply acquiesced, and took him to a quiet corner of the large dining-room, where I seated myself in such a way as to have my back to whomsoever might come in.

Without consulting the taste of my guest, I ordered a steak with mushrooms, potatoes, a salad, dessert and a bottle of claret, and began to read the evening paper.

For perhaps ten minutes we both were silent. I glanced at Checkers several times as I folded my paper in or out. He seemed to be lost in a reverie. But at last his thoughts came back to earth, and glancing up he said very softly, "The last time I took supper here was with my wife a year ago."

"Your wife," I exclaimed, starting with surprise. "You do n't mean to tell me you have a wife?"

"I had a wife," he answered sorrowfully, "but –"

"I beg you pardon, Checkers," I said, "I hope I have n't hurt your feelings."

"No, you have n't hurt them," he replied. "I've got my feelings educated. I've had so many ups and downs I've learned to take my medicine. But I'll bet I've had the toughest luck of any guy that ever lived. A' year ago I had money, a wife and friends, and was doing the Vanderbilt act. In two short weeks I lost them all. I've been 'on my rollers' ever since."

"But say, you wouldn't have known me if you'd seen me here with my wife that time – my glad rags on, a stove-pipe lid, patent leather kicks and a stone on my front. We came to Chicago to take in the Fair, and dropped in here to eat, one night."

"We sat at that table over there; I remember it as though it was yesterday. I ordered all kinds of supper, and at last the waiter brings in some cheese and crackers. It was a kind of a greenish, mouldy cheese – Rocquefort! Yes, I believe that's it. I goes against a little piece of it, and 'on the grave,' I like to fainted. Good! Well, maybe you think it's good, but scratch your Uncle Dudley out of any race where they enter Rocquefort."

"Yes; those were happy days for me. I hate to think about them now. I had a good time while it lasted, though, and when they got me 'on the tram,' I had to go to hustlin'. Well, here comes supper. Excuse me now, while I get busy with a piece of that steak."

"But, Checkers," I expostulated, "I 'd like to hear the particulars. You must have an interesting story to tell. And if you don't mind – "

"Oh, I do n't know. It's a hard luck story. I've had the hot end of it most of my life. But you can see for yourself that I'm no 'scrub.' I come from good people, and I 've lived with good people. I can put up a parlor talk, or a bar-room talk. I've seen it all. But of course when a fellow 'hits the toboggan,' he gets to going down mighty fast."

"I appreciate all that, my boy," I said, "or I should n't have brought you here; and now if you will, while we are eating our dinner, give me a little sketch of how it all happened."

"Well, there is n't very much to tell as I know of – at least, anything that would interest you. To look back now it kind of seems as though things just pushed themselves along.

"You see, in the first place, my father and Uncle Giles, his brother, both fought in the war. Well, father got shot and came home a cripple. About ten years afterwards I was born. Then father died, and mother got a pension. She had some little money besides. After the war Uncle Giles came back and hung around our house. He was 'flat,' and he couldn't get a job. But he finally got some pension-shark to push a pension through for him, and after that he 'pulled his freight' and went to Baltimore to live. Mother and I stayed here in Chicago.

"Well, I went to school until I was twelve, and then I went to work in a store. Mother's health was very bad, though, and at last we went South on account of her lungs. We went to San Antonio, and at first the air kind of did her good. I gets a job in a dry goods store, and things are rollin' pretty smooth, when one night mother takes to coughing, has a hemorrhage and dies.

"There's no use trying to tell you my feelings. Mother was dead and I was alone. There was hardly a soul to come to her funeral. The minister and a few of the neighbors came in – my God, it was simply awful. I was still a kid, only fifteen, you see, and I felt the terrible lonesomeness of it.

"Well, mother had saved considerable money – twenty-six hundred dollars in all. I sold our furniture and came to Chicago, and went to board with some friends of the family. I worked more or less for two or three years; but my money made me kind of 'flossy,' and whenever I 'd feel like it, I 'd just throw up the job and quit.

"After a while I got so I did n't try to work. I fell in with a gang of sports that used to hang around the pool-rooms, and pretty soon 'your little Willie' was losing his money right and left. The local meeting came along, and I took to going out to the track. I was nearly broke when one day a tout tried to 'get me down' on a 'good thing' he had. I told him I would n't play it, but I afterwards shook him and put twenty on it – I 'm a goat if it did n't win, and I pulled down a thousand. I looked for the guy who gave me the tip, but I could n't find him anywhere. I guess he fell dead with surprise himself – at least I 've never seen him since.

"Now, about that time, I had to quit the family I was living with. They broke up housekeeping and moved away, leaving me on a cold, cold world. After that I did nothing but play the races. I followed them from town to town – St. Louis, Louisville, Cincinnati, New Orleans – winning a little now and then, but up against it most of the time.

"I got the malaria down south, and I took a notion I 'd go to Hot Springs. You ever been there? No? Well say, you talk about your sportin' life – there is the onliest place to see it. Every kind of a gamblin' game you ever heard of runnin' wide – and everybody goes against 'em.

"I had heard that some of the games were crooked, and I thought I 'd be foxy and leave them alone. I left my leather full of bills with the clerk up in the hotel safe.

"A little more potato, please. Thanks, I am hungry, and that's no dream.

"Well, as I was saying, one day at the bath I meets a young guy in the cooling-room, and he springs a system to beat roulette, which figures out a mortal cinch. I do n't remember the system now,

but I recollect we tried it ourselves on a private wheel, and it could n't lose. The only trouble with it was that with luck against us we might get soaked in doubling up before we win. But we made up our minds to begin it small, and be content with a little profit.

"We had a bank-roll of \$600 – four from me and two from him. I was to have two-thirds of the profits, because I risked two thirds of the stuff.

"It was Thursday night we set to try it. Thursday was always my Jonah day. I wanted to wait until Saturday, but he did n't want to wait that long. I was to do the playing while he kept tab and told me what to do each whirl.

"Well, we buys a stack of a hundred chips, and runs them up to two hundred and fifty. I says, 'let's quit,' but he was stuck on pushing our luck while it came our way. We played along for half an hour, and hardly varied \$50; then, all at once, we 'struck the slide,' and I had to buy another stack. We lost that; bought another and lost it, and stood in the hole \$300.

"All the while we were playing the system, and I had a 'hunch' that if we kept on it would pull us out. So I starts to buy another stack when Kendall – his name was Arthur Kendall – stops me and says he wants to quit. Quit, with half our money gone! I was so sore I could have smashed him. And while we stood there arguing, without a nickel on the board, the wheel was rollin' dead our way – enough to have put us ahead of the game.

"I gave him his hundred, and told him to 'take it and chase himself' – I was through with him. I stuck to the game until five in the morning. They got every cent I had in the world.

"Well, I went to the hotel and went to bed, but I lay there wondering how I was going to dig up the money to pay my bill, and give me a start when my luck turned again. The longer I wondered the tougher it seemed. Finally I ordered an absinthe frappé – it kind of gave me a new idea. I 'd put up a song to my Uncle Giles, and try to make a little 'touch.'

"I had n't seen or heard of him for half a dozen years, but I thought after all we had done for him, he could n't hardly lay down on his nephew.

"Well, I wrote him a letter that would have brought tears to a pair of glass eyes. Say, it was the literary effort of my life. Of course, I did n't just stick to the facts. Then I goes down and gets me a little breakfast, and begins to feel like myself again.

"This was Friday. Saturday my hotel bill was coming due. I had to make a killin' somehow to get my trunk and clothes away.

"I chased myself from joint to joint, but I could n't get next to anything. There was n't a thing I could hock nor no one that I could 'give the borry.' Have you ever been flat broke, Mr. Preston, with not a nickel in your jeans; no one to stake you; no place to go, and nothing to keep you from starving to death? You haven't, eh? Well, then you do n't begin to know what trouble is. You feel as though every one had you 'sized,' or as though you were going to be arrested. You can't help thinking about the stuff you blew so reckless when you were flush – the night you got out and spent a hundred, and say, if you only had it now! You take a paralyzed oath on your mother that if you ever get right again you'll 'salt your stuff' and be a 'tight-wad' – and then you remember you 're broke again. I 've been up against some dead tough luck, and I 've had some fancy crimps put in me, but somehow I 've never felt so 'on my uppers' as I did at the Springs that night.

"Say, if this hard-luck story of mine gets tiresome to you, ring me off. I did n't think I 'd be so long in getting to where my troubles began."

I assured him that I felt the tale immensely interesting, as indeed I did, not only in its mere detail, but taken in connection with the youth who sat there, telling me his story in his naïve way, as unconcerned as though he had the Bank of England to draw upon. With not a penny in his pocket, or for aught I knew a place to sleep, it certainly seemed that, with the sparrows, he leaned most heavily on Providence.

"Let 's have the rest of it, Checkers," I said; "I 'm anxious to hear how you raised the wind."

He sipped his coffee and puffed his cigarette with a retrospective air, inhaling the smoke at every draught, or blowing it forth in little rings which he watched as they circled off into space.

I waited in silence.

"Well," he continued, "it was nothing but 'gallop on after the torch.' About 10 o'clock I blew into a joint that I had n't been to – a gambling house. There was a gang around the faro-bank, and I shoved in to see what was going on. I hope I may drop if Kendall was n't sitting there, howling, paralyzed full. He had a lot of chips in front of him, playin' 'em like a drunken sailor. He had down bets all over the board, and, honest, it gave me heart disease to see him play. He puts a stack on the ace to win. In a minute or two another player coppers it, and takes it down. I jumps in and grabs him by the arm. 'Hold on,' I hollered, 'Arthur, here's a piker that's touchin' you for your chips.'

"Say, there was trouble right away. The piker made a smash at me. I dodged and caught him an upper cut, and the bouncer grabbed him and threw him out. This sort of sobered Arthur up, and for a while he played 'em 'cagey.' I goes over by him, and puts up a bluff to the gang that I 'm a friend of his. You see I wanted to get him out before they got his money away. It was a 'pipe' he'd lose it all the minute his luck turned. But as long as I was n't playing myself, I knew I 'd better not get too gay, but I watched his bets, and stacked his chips, and saw that no one pinched his sleepers.

"Well, every few minutes he 'd call for a drink, and what do you think he was drinking? Sherry. Did you ever get a jag on sherry? Well, neither did I, but it gives you a 'beaut.' Arthur had a 'carry-over' that lasted him for about three days. He 'd slap his chips down any old place. It was the funniest thing you ever saw. But he was playing in drunken luck, and I let him do what he wanted to.

"Well, to make a long story short, I finally 'cashed him in' for \$200. I got him into a hack, and took him to my room. But say, when I got that boy undressed and abed and asleep, I 'll tell you like these: I was just three minutes ahead of a fit, and the fit was gaining on me fast. I had to take a couple of absinthes before I could get myself together. But you ought to have seen Kendall in the morning. He had a horrible 'sorry' on. The wheels were buzzing around in his head until I believe if he 'd have put his fingers in his ears, they 'd have been cut off – I do on the square. He could n't remember a thing he 'd done, except that he started out on a 'sandy' after he left me playing roulette – the night before, you recollect, and he got a 'package' aboard that he ought to have made at least two trips for.

"I gave him his money, and told him where I found him, and how I saved it for him, and he began to cry like a baby. You see his nerves were all to pieces. He wanted me to take him home; nothing would do but he must go home. He felt too rocky to go alone, and besides he could n't trust himself. He begged me for God's sake not to leave him or he 'd get full again, or shoot himself.

"I found out afterward that he had solemnly promised his girl that he 'd never get drunk again. That's what it was that gave him that awful 'sorry.' You know how it is when you love a girl. While you 're with her it seems dead easy to live decent, and do what 's right, and you promise anything. Then some day you get out with the gang and 'fall,' and the next morning R. E. Morse is sitting up on the edge of your bed giving you the horrible ha-ha.

"Well, anyhow, I finally agreed to take him home. He lived in Clarksville, Ark. He gave me the roll to pay our bills with and buy the tickets and one thing and another, while he went down to the bath to boil out. But say, the hardest job of my life was not to 'pinch' that coin and 'duck.' It was mine by rights. He 'd never have kept it if I had n't jumped in and saved it for him. But, thank God, I can say one thing, I never stole a cent in my life. I may have separated three or four guys from their stuff, perhaps, at different times; but they always got a run for their money, and if they dropped it it was n't my fault. So I just could n't bring myself to do it. And I was thankful afterwards that I did n't.

"The happiest year I ever had came to me on account of that trip – and the unhappiest. But I would n't give up the pleasant memories if I had to go through twice the troubles again.

"'The banister of life is full of slivers,' as old man Bradley used to say, and when a fellow 'hits the slide,' he's apt to pick up a splinter or two. But I 'll tell you, if you 've only got some happy times

that you 've had with your mother or sisters, your wife, or your girl, to look back to and think about, when you 're in hard luck, it's a kind of a bracer, and saves your life – "

He suddenly stopped. I followed his gaze, and turning around saw Murray and three other friends coming toward me. I felt it an ill-timed interruption; but I ordered cigars and liquid refreshments, and introduced, all but Murray, to Mr. Edward Campbell, which I had learned was the proper name of my little friend.

I was needed, Murray explained, "to make the fifth man in some game of theirs which could not be played to advantage with less;" and knowing that I was to work late, they had taken a chance of finding me here.

In vain I begged to be excused, pleading indisposition, the lateness of the hour, anything and everything which might have served to drive them off. But "the evening was young," "the table was ready," and I "ought to be accommodating," and so I said good-bye to Checkers, and slipping him a dollar, told him to come to my office next day, and I would talk with him of another matter.

He thanked me, saying he would be there, and shaking my hand, bid us all good night. Then tiptoeing back he whispered in my ear: "Say, I want to give you a little advice: Never come in on less than jacks, and never raise a one-card draw, unless you 've got a 'pat' yourself. If you stick to that you 'll have the coin when the rest of the gang are 'on the tram.'"

IV

The following morning at about 10 o'clock Checkers sauntered into my office; his hands in his pockets; his hat on the back of his head; smoking the ubiquitous cigarette.

I was busy at the time with my morning's mail.

Picking up the daily paper he tilted back comfortably in a chair, and interested himself in the sporting news.

"Well, Checkers," I said, when at last I had finished, "How are you this morning, my boy?"

"If I felt any better I could n't stand it," he answered, throwing down the paper. "But you do n't look very fit. How did you come out with the boys last night?"

"About even," I replied, deprecatorily.

He smiled in a most exasperating way.

"Now I'll tell you," he said growing suddenly confidential. "There 's a 'hot thing' coming off to-day, and I want you to put a swell bet on it. They've been laying dead with it all the meeting – pulled his head off his last two outs – but to-day they 've got him in a good soft spot, and they 're going to 'put it over the plate.'"

"Checkers," I said, "I want you to understand, once and for all, that I am no gambler. I went to the races Derby Day, as I would go to any other show, and now and then I play a little quarter limit game with my friends. But even that I do n't approve of. I tell you I consider gambling the most insidious of all the vices, and it's on just that point that I want to talk to you.

"I want you to give up that kind of life, get a position in some good house, and begin to make a man of yourself. I tell you you 're too bright a boy to be throwing yourself away as you are. Suppose your 'good thing' wins to-day – suppose you do make some money on it – you will lose it on something else to-morrow. You are simply living from hand to mouth, growing older every day with nothing to show for the time you have spent.

"Now, what I propose is simply this. I shall look about among all my friends in the wholesale lines, and try to find you a position where you can learn some business from the beginning. If you are industrious and quick it will be but a comparatively short time when you 'll have a chance to go on the road, or something of that sort. Now, what do you say?"

I can't say that Checkers seemed wholly delighted. He looked anywhere but into my eyes and finally said he "would like a job, but he did n't believe I could get him one."

I replied that I was sure I could, as my uncle was a wholesale dry-goods merchant, and I had several friends who were heads of departments in other large stores of various kinds.

"Well, we 'll try it and see," he said resignedly, "but I 'll tell you just about how it is. A guy goes into a wholesale house and he starts at the bottom in some department. He gets up at the break of day, and he works like the devil after a Christian. If he has good luck he do n't get 'fired,' but he never gets a raise on earth, unless the mug above him dies, or breaks down his health and has to quit.

"Why, I knew a joker who worked in a certain big store in this town for fifteen years. He lived somewhere way out in the suburbs, and he told me he had to get down so early, that when he was coming home at night he used to meet himself starting down in the morning. Well, one day some one gave him a pass to the Harlem track – one Saturday afternoon. He went to the races for the first time in his life. I got ahold of him and made him win three hundred dollars with a five-dollar bill, and you ought to have heard the talk he put up. 'Has this game been going on all this time,' he says, 'with me doing the Rip Van Winkle act? Why, I 'd be worth all kinds of money now, if I 'd had any sense.' And Monday he went down and threw up his job, and started in to play the ponies. Of course he went broke, but not long ago he struck a streak, and made a killin'. He started in to making a book, and now he's got a stable with five good sprinters, and a twenty thousand dollar bank-roll. If he had stuck to his job in that store, he 'd have probably had nervous prostration by this time."

"But the case you cite, Checkers, is one in a thousand," I said, smiling broadly in spite of myself. "While that one man may have made a success of a very questionable sort through unusual luck, or unusual shrewdness, there have numberless others gone to ruin – utter, irretrievable ruin, by giving way to their passion for gambling.

"If you object to a wholesale house, I may perhaps find something else for you to do. But it seems to me to be simply a shame that a boy of your ability and brains should be content to be nothing but a tout, and herd with the riff-raff and scum of creation. Now, once and for all, if you desire to better yourself, I shall be glad to help you; but otherwise I must simply refuse to have you about me any longer. Think it over and come in to-morrow, and tell me your decision. Now, you must excuse me as I have an engagement with this gentleman," and I turned to greet a friend whose timely arrival saved me from the "touch" which I could see Checkers was nerving himself to make.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.