

White Fred Merrick

Hard Pressed



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Fred M. White

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CHAPTER I

A MODERN SPORTSMAN

IT was a gala night at the National Opera House, and the theatre was crammed from floor to roof, for Melba was sustaining a new part, and all London had gathered to listen. It was rarely indeed that so fashionable an audience assembled in February. The boxes were ablaze with diamonds. On the grand tier, however, there was one box which was not filled with gaily garbed women and which attracted attention by the fact that its sole occupants were a girl and two men. Though she was quietly dressed and wore no ornaments except flowers, nevertheless a good many women envied May Haredale; for the box belonged to Raymond Copley, who was quite the last thing in the way of South African millionaires. He was a youngish, smart-looking Englishman of the florid type, was becoming known as a sportsman and, according to all accounts, was fabulously rich. He was supposed to have discovered diamonds in Rhodesia, a stroke of fortune which put him in a position, it was alleged, practically, to dictate terms to the De Beers Company, and those "in the know" in the City declared he had come out of a negotiation for amalgamation with two millions of money in his pocket.

Be that as it may, he had purchased a fine old estate within twenty miles of London, and lavished large sums upon his racing stud, and people began to court his acquaintance. He was on very friendly terms with his near neighbour, Sir George Haredale, of Haredale Park, which accounted for the fact that the Baronet and his only daughter were availing themselves of Copley's hospitality that evening.

May Haredale ought to have been enjoying herself. She did not have many opportunities for pleasures of this kind, for, sooth to say, Sir George Haredale was a poor man. He had a constant struggle to keep up appearances, and most of his friends wondered how he managed to pay the expenses of his racing stable. But the Haredales had been kings of the turf for a hundred years or more, and Sir George clung desperately to this last vestige of the family greatness. The whole estate was going to rack and ruin, the gardens and grounds were neglected, the conservatories were empty, the carpets and old furniture were faded and worn. But the stables left nothing to be desired. How near they were to the verge of collapse only Sir George himself knew.

He had few rich and influential friends. He did not care for moneyed men, as a rule, and so the old county families were surprised to see the intimacy that had grown up between him and Raymond Copley. They professed not to understand it, but one or two shrewd observers declared that May Haredale was at the bottom of it, and that Copley was over head and ears in love with the girl.

It would have been strange were it otherwise. She was just the sort of girl to attract a man like Copley. She was tall, well formed and exceedingly pretty, though cold and haughty at the mere suggestion of a liberty.

What she thought of Copley she had never been heard to say. She had not many friends in her own circle. She was perfectly happy and contented so long as she had a good horse and the promise of a day with the hounds. Most people deemed her rather distant and reserved, but a few hinted that May Haredale could be chummy enough when she chose. Others, however, had noticed a great change in the girl during the past two years. There was a time when she had been one of the merriest madcaps, and then, all at once, she seemed to grow up and become staid and dignified. And it was not altogether the weight of family trouble which bore her down, for, as a matter of fact, she had no idea how desperate Sir George's fortunes were.

She appeared on friendly terms with Copley, but, though for the past twelve months he had been a familiar visitor at Haredale Park, he did not think that he was making much progress in her good graces. Clever as he was, the girl managed to keep him at a distance without wounding his pride, and as time went on he found himself more and more infatuated with May Haredale.

He belonged to the class of man who never counts the cost of anything and is ready to go any lengths in the pursuit of a fancy. He thought he had been extremely patient, and told himself earlier in the evening that before the week was out things would have to be settled one way or the other. And he was not without weapons, either. Sir George could have unfolded a tale in that respect had he chosen to do so. The Baronet was proud, but there are times when pride has to take a second place, and such a crisis in his affairs had arrived. May would have been surprised to learn that Copley could at any moment sell the old home over their heads and turn them out to shift as best they might.

She sat with her face on her hand, looking at the stage, but she was not listening to Melba's marvellous voice. Her mind had gone back to a somewhat similar scene two years ago when she was last in the same opera house. How different things had seemed then! How much happier she had been in those days! She roused herself presently to find that Copley was addressing her.

"Oh, I beg pardon," she said. "I suppose the singing carried me away. What were you saying?"

Copley uttered something appropriate. There was a hard look in his eyes as he took in the details of May's fresh beauty. She was just the wife for him. She had a fine appearance and good breeding and would take him into certain houses the *entrée* of which had as yet been denied him. They were going on afterwards to supper at the Carlton, and before he slept that night Copley would know his fate; indeed, he knew it already. He had a kind of instinct that May disliked him. But that, after all, was a small matter. When she learned the truth there would be no alternative. That her dislike might turn into hatred mattered nothing to Copley. He bent down already with an air of possession which brought a faint flush into May's cheeks. She was feeling rebellious.

"You are enjoying it?" he asked.

"Oh, yes. I should be a strange creature if I didn't. I have so few treats like this."

"Isn't that your own fault?" Copley returned. "Surely, you must know that if you only liked to say the word – "

A sudden outburst of applause drowned the rest of his speech, but to all intents May heard everything that he had to say. She blamed herself that she had not shown this man earlier that her feelings towards him were merely conventional. And now she would have to make up her mind one way or the other. Copley stood with a smile upon his face, evidently very sure of his ground. A longing to get away, to be alone with herself, came over May Haredale. In a way she was grateful to Copley for saying no more. She was glad when the performance was over and they began to move towards the stairs. Here a stranger bustled up and touched Copley on the arm. As he turned to the intruder his face changed. May thought he looked almost alarmed, but it was a trifle and she only noticed it vaguely. The recollection was to come back to her later.

"One moment, Sir George," Copley said. "Would you mind waiting for me in the vestibule? It is a little business affair which won't detain me five minutes."

Sir George passed on with his daughter, leaving the two men together. Copley turned sharply round upon his companion.

"Now what is it?" he asked curtly.

"Oh, I thought you would like to know," the other said. "I only got back last night. The first man I met this morning in the City was Aaron Phillips."

"You don't mean that," Copley exclaimed.

"I do, indeed. It is a thousand pities I haven't managed to find you before to-day. I have been chasing you from place to place in the most maddening fashion. However, Phillips is here, and so I thought I would come and warn you. No, no, I have made no mistake."

"But the thing is impossible, Foster. You know as well as I do that Phillips was killed – "

"Well, so we imagined. Anyway, the beggar's back again, and there's no getting away from it. And if he is allowed to talk, and we don't square him – "

"Square him! Why, it would cost half a million!"

"Well, suppose it does. Won't it be cheap at the price? Wouldn't it be better for us to plank that money down than be standing in – but you know what I mean. It's a most infernal piece of ill luck, but, after all, your position is by no means a bad one. You go everywhere, you are eagerly sought after. Besides, who is to know whether you are a millionaire or a pauper? You've got the reputation of being a rich man, and with brains like yours – "

"I can't stop now," Copley said hurriedly. "I have some people supping with me at the Carlton, and it is impossible to put them off."

The other man grinned.

"I understand," he said. "I guessed who the lady was. I'll come round to your rooms at half-past twelve or a quarter to one, and then we can talk the thing over quietly. You can see for yourself that the matter won't keep."

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

MEANWHILE, Sir George and his daughter were waiting impatiently for Copley. As they stood, the fashionable stream hurried by them. The road outside was crammed with cabs and 'buses and motors, for all the theatres were discharging their audiences. The street was one seething mass when Copley joined his friends. They pressed together towards the pavement, and Copley could scarcely conceal his annoyance that his car was not in attendance. He supposed there was some misunderstanding and suggested that it would save time if they took a cab.

"We might have some difficulty in getting two cabs," he said. "One of us had better walk."

"I'll walk," Sir George answered. "I haven't had any exercise to-day, and it will give me an appetite for supper."

May looked up vaguely alarmed. She had no fancy for a drive to the Carlton in the company of Raymond Copley.

"Wouldn't it be better to walk along till we come to the end of the street?" she proposed. "There would be more chance of getting a cab when we are out of the crush."

Without waiting for a reply she stepped on to the pavement. In his aggressive way Copley elbowed a clear path. The road seemed to be fuller than ever of vehicles. Then there rose the quick cry of a woman's voice, the sound of clashing metal, and before any one could realize it two motors had overturned. Instantly all was confusion, and five minutes later May found herself on the other side of the street alone and presenting a somewhat conspicuous figure in her evening dress and cloak.

She was not frightened or alarmed. She had too much pluck and courage for that. She thought the best thing would be to turn down this dark side street and make her way to the Haymarket.

She walked quietly and fearlessly along, the road getting narrower as she went. She passed one or two men who made audible remarks upon her appearance, but she did not heed them. And, then, almost before she knew what had happened, a man by her side began to pester her with remarks which brought the blood flaming to her face. That the nighthawk was not sober did not tend to improve the situation.

She looked about for some one to appeal to, and with sudden thankfulness heard steps hurrying behind. Next moment she saw her tormentor lying on his back in the gutter with another man standing over him.

"I am glad to be of assistance to you," the stranger said. "If you will allow me to walk with you as far as the corner of the street I will call a cab. I suppose you got separated from your party and this fellow followed you."

"That is so," May replied. "I cannot sufficiently thank you."

She paused in the midst of her speech, for her rescuer's face was shining out clear and distinct in the lamplight. At the same instant the stranger turned and their eyes met.

"Harry," the girl murmured, "Harry!"

"Well, yes," the stranger laughed awkwardly. "This is rather an unexpected meeting, isn't it?"

May made no reply at the moment. She was studying her companion intently. She noticed how white his handsome face was. There was the suspicion of suffering in his eyes. His dress was neat, but worn and shabby, and yet there was an unmistakable air about Harry Fielden which proclaimed that he had been accustomed to better things. He stood half-defiant, half-smiling, and yet he held up his head as if he had nothing to be ashamed of.

"Where have you been for the last two years?" May asked.

Harry Fielden shrugged his shoulders.

"It would be difficult to tell," he said. "In the first place, I tried Australia. But things were worse there than they are here. America I could not stand at any price; then I went to South Africa, where I managed to starve. I had one slice of fortune, but was cruelly used by a man I trusted. And now, if it be possible, I am poorer than ever. I am trying to get employment at a stud farm or racing stable. It is the only thing I really know."

May Haredale listened with trembling lips. Raymond Copley would have been surprised had he seen the expression on her face. He might have been uneasy, too.

"I am very sorry," the girl remarked. "Oh, my dear boy, how foolish you have been! To think what you wasted! To think of that beautiful old house!"

"I try not to think of it," Fielden said. "I was all the fool you took me for, and worse. It was my misfortune that I had no one to look after me. When I came into a fine property at the age of twenty-one I had no knowledge of the world. And every blackguard and sponger who came along I accepted at his own valuation. Well, it is an old story, May – a fool and his money are soon parted. But, thank goodness! I never did anything to be ashamed of. I never wronged man or woman and I pulled up in time to pay all my debts. There is nothing left now but the old house, and that I couldn't sell because it is not worth any one's while to buy it. More for the sake of sentiment than anything else I have managed to pay my subscriptions to my clubs. I still have the freedom of Tattersall's and Newmarket, though I have known what it is to sleep out of doors, but not till this minute did I fully realize what I threw away. Ah, we were good friends in those days, May."

May Haredale nodded. It was difficult to speak at that moment, for she and Harry Fielden had been more than friends. They had been brought up together from childhood, and had been together at many a dance and tennis party and many a clinking run with the hounds. Nothing had ever passed between them, but it was a tacit understanding that Fielden and May Haredale would wait for one another.

When the crash came and Fielden disappeared, May had made no sign, but from that time she was more sedate and seemed to have left her old life and spirits behind her.

"I had not forgotten you," she murmured presently. "We must try to do something for you, Harry. I will speak to father. And then there is Mr. Copley. He has a fine establishment near us and one of the largest racing stables in the kingdom. But you don't know him. He is a South African millionaire who has come into our neighbourhood since your time."

"Oh, I have met some of them," Fielden said grimly. "They don't think so much of them out there as folk do at home. I fancy I know the name. I wonder if it is the same Copley I met on the Rand – but, no, that is out of the question. So you think he might find me something to do? You don't know what heartbreaking work it is, seeking occupation and finding none. And I am anxious to work, goodness knows. I am young and strong, steady and trustworthy, and there is no man living who knows more about horses than I do. I wonder if you would mind speaking to this man for me. I've got no pride now. I have had that knocked out of me. But perhaps you would not like me to come down into the old neighbourhood again. You might not care for it."

"Oh, my dear boy," May said reproachfully. "How can you talk like that! You know that there are some friends who were ready to do anything for you. But you would not give them a chance. You disappeared without so much as saying good-bye."

"Well, you can understand my feelings," Fielden answered. "However, I've got to go down to the old place to-morrow, in any case. There are some things in the house that I need, and I shall hope to meet Joe Raffle. It was very good of you to take Joe into your service. It was awfully kind of your father to buy most of my horses. I hope there is a Derby winner amongst them."

"We think so," May exclaimed. "We have great hopes of a Blenheim colt. He hasn't been seen in public since the Middle Park Plate which he won handsomely enough. We think he is the best horse we ever had, and people appear to be of the same opinion. If he doesn't win the Derby I don't know what will become of us. But get Raffle to take you over to Mallow's to-morrow and he will show

you the colt. It's only a matter of a few hundred yards, as you will recollect, from our lodge gates to Mallow's stables. Mallow is only a small trainer, but he suits us and is not expensive. I wish you would stay down for a day or two. We shall be back to-morrow night, and my father will be disappointed if he doesn't see you. And now, really – "

"I am sorry," Fielden said. "I have no right to keep you talking here. Come along and I will get you a cab. And if I can manage to stay at the old place over to-morrow I will come and see you. How jolly if one of my colts should win the Derby for Sir George!"

There was a tender smile on May's lips and a dash of colour in her face as she drove presently to the Carlton. Sir George was waiting with fussy anxiety. Copley looked disturbed and rather ill-tempered. They accepted May's explanation. Naturally, they put down her heightened colour and sparkling eyes to the excitement of her adventure.

CHAPTER III

A LIVING FORTUNE

HARRY FIELDEN would have shirked the visit if he could, but there was nobody whom he could trust to go down to the old home and procure the papers he required. He was glad to see Herons Dyke again, but, at the same time, he was half ashamed to meet the old faces. Many would have welcomed him gladly, but he had made an utter failure of his life, and pride stood in the way of meeting these acquaintances.

There was nothing left but the house. Long ago the estate had passed into the hands of strangers. The stables had fallen into decay. The tan track round the park was overgrown with weeds and grass. He was surprised to find himself unrecognized. A dozen people passed him with no more than a casual glance. He had forgotten that two years' "roughing it" had changed him from a handsome boy into a stern, resolute man, with an expression far beyond his age. Even his moustache had altered him. It was true that May Haredale had recognized him readily enough, but that, surely, was different.

He would go as far as Haredale Park Farm and look at the horses. He was all the more ready to do this, because he felt assured he would pass for a total stranger. It was possible Joe Raffle might identify him, but, then, the old head groom had known him ever since he could walk. And now Joe was Sir George Haredale's trusted right-hand man and had been so for the last eighteen months, since the death of his predecessor. It had always been a consolation to Fielden to know that Raffle had gone on to Mallow's, with the stud which had once been his property. They had not been a very brilliant lot and few of the horses had ever paid for their keep; but Raffle believed in the Blenheim blood and had always prophesied that some of the colts would do great things at the proper time.

Fielden was amused to see the suspicious glances cast at him by more than one of the lads. Presently Raffle came himself, a short, sturdy man, bent with age, whitehaired, but with cheeks rosy as a winter apple. He was about to ask Fielden's business sharply, when his face changed and he led Fielden to one side. The old man was moved and with difficulty held his voice steady, but his keen blue eyes gleamed with pleasure.

"I never expected to see this day, Master Harry," he said. "And one of those lads wanted to order you off the premises. Just think of it! And they told me you were dead. I met a man in London who said he knew for a fact that you were drowned in the Modder in South Africa."

Fielden's face grew stern for a moment.

"Your friend wasn't far wrong, Joe," he said grimly. "It was a near thing. But that is too long a story to tell now. I came down on business, and I don't know whether I was glad or sorry to find that no one recognized me."

"Miss May would have been glad to see you," Raffle said.

"Oh, we have already met. That was an accident, too. I told her I was coming to-day, and she gave me a cordial invitation to look at the horses. I couldn't resist a chance like that. Well, Joe, I hope that Sir George has done better with the Blenheim stock than I did. I understand he didn't give much for them. I am told he bought the whole lot, lock, stock and barrel, for a bagatelle. And now they say there is a Derby winner amongst them. Is that a fact, Joe? Or is it one of the fairy tales one is always hearing in regard to turf matters?"

Raffle lowered his voice impressively.

"It is no fairy tale, Mr. Harry," he said. "Barring accidents, we are going to win the Derby this year with a colt locally bred and locally trained. It is a Blenheim colt, too, and if you hadn't been unfortunate he would have been yours. He's only once been seen in public yet, and nobody but ourselves knows what he can do. Still, people will get talking and our horse stands at a short price in the betting."

"I am glad to hear it," Fielden said heartily. "I am especially glad to hear it for Sir George's sake. You know almost as much about the family as I do. You know what Sir George could do with the money. We don't want to gossip, but I know Sir George is a good master to you and that his interests are yours."

"That's true, Mr. Harry. I'd do anything for Sir George, who has been a rare good master to me. But he ain't you, sir, and he ain't the old squire, either. You see, I served under a Fielden from the time I was ten years old till I was close on seventy, and it was a bit of a wrench leaving Herons Dyke. And when I heard you were dead, it seemed to me, sir, that I had nothing else left to live for. I ain't one to show my feelings much, sir, but when I saw you in the yard just now I could have burst out crying like a kid. You ought never to have gone away, sir. You ought to have stayed here and faced it out. But, perhaps, you did well in South Africa. Maybe you have come back with a fortune. I'd like to hear you say so."

"I think I am rather worse off than when I went out," Fielden smiled. "I had a fortune in my grasp, but was robbed by a pair of murderous scoundrels, who will have something to answer for later. And now, take me round and show me the horses. Let me see this Blenheim colt of which such great things are expected."

Raffle led the way across the fields to the neat yard along the range of stables where Mallow trained for a small owner or two. Whatever the condition of the house and grounds, there was nothing lacking in the stables. They came at length to a loose box a little apart from the rest, and Raffle stripped the clothing off a great raking chestnut horse, showing a skin like satin gleaming in the sunlight. The expression on Raffle's face was almost motherly. His eyes shone as he laid his hand upon the horse's glossy neck.

"There," he said proudly, "look at that! You are most as good a judge of a horse as I am, tell me if he doesn't look all the way a Derby winner. Just cast your eye over those shoulders, look at those quarters. And a real tryer he is, too, and as good-tempered as a lamb. I always knew we should do great things some day with one of the Blenheim colts, but I never expected anything quite as good as this."

A quarter of an hour later the two left the box. So far as Fielden could see, Raffle had not overestimated the chances of the Blenheim colt. If everything went well for the next three months, Sir George's fortunes would be restored and there would be no more poverty at Harefield Park.

Fielden was extravagant in his praise, but there was no answering enthusiasm upon Raffle's part. He was moody and thoughtful. There was something almost guilty in the glance that he turned upon Fielden.

"What's the matter?" the latter asked.

"No man ever yet did a foolish thing without being found out," Raffle muttered. "Let's walk across the park where we can be alone, because there is something I must say to you. If you hadn't turned up yet, Mr. Harry, it would have been all right, but seeing you have turned up, why, it's all wrong and I am bound to tell you. When you went away, you left your affairs in a muddle. There was money coming to you from Weatherby's, though perhaps you didn't know it, and up to this year they have kept up your subscriptions to one or two races, the Derby amongst others. Oh, I knew it, and I am going to tell you now why I kept the knowledge to myself. The year you went away so sudden you nominated more than one colt for the Derby and, of course, the money was all right. Well, after you disappeared and they said you was dead, nothing seemed to matter and I thought no more about things. Sir George took over your 'osses, and it was only when this Blenheim colt began to shape so well that I began to ask myself a few questions. It was easy to bamboozle Sir George, because he is the worst man of business in the world. And I can prove every bit of it, sir; I can prove every word I am saying. And therefore it comes about that this Blenheim colt – this one that's going to win the Derby – belongs to you, or at any rate he was nominated in your name, which comes to the same thing. I daresay you will ask me why I have done this, and why I kept the secret, and I'll tell you. I really did it for the sake of Miss May. I would do anything for her, anything to put Sir George on his

legs again. You see, I thought you was dead and out of the way and, after all said and done, I was doing nobody any harm by keeping my mouth shut. And yet now you have come back home again I feel a bit of a scoundrel."

"It seems incredible," Fielden exclaimed; "it is a strange discovery for a pauper to make."

"Well, sir," Raffle said doggedly, "there it is, and this wonderful chance is entirely in your own hands, pauper or no pauper."

CHAPTER IV

A GREAT TEMPTATION

AS yet Fielden could not realize it. The thing was so unexpected he found it hard to grasp Joe Raffle's meaning. He was too conventional to have much imagination. He had not thought it possible that fortune could have devised a method of restoring his old prosperity. But after the first shock of discovery it seemed feasible. Similar things had happened before, though, perhaps, not exactly on lines such as these.

And now the position of things as they were at the time he left was coming back to him. He had a vivid recollection of the night when he first stood face to face with ruin, when he knew that he had come to the end of his tether. For Harry Fielden had not drifted into a mess with his eyes shut. He had known that things were getting desperate and had staked pretty well everything on a certain race and his horse had lost. When things came to be settled up there was just enough to pay his creditors in full. He recalled how he sat down one night with pencil and paper and worked out the whole thing fairly and squarely. He had had friends to dinner that evening. It was daybreak before the last hand had been played and Fielden found himself alone to face the dreaded disaster.

How clearly it all returned to him now! He had not felt disposed to sleep, but had gone up to his room in the silent house and refreshed himself with a bath and changed his clothes, after which he had come down to the dining-room again. He had thrown back the curtains and opened the windows to admit the sunshine of a perfect day – the day of his ruin!

But he had done nothing to be ashamed of. He had not disgraced himself, and no friend or tradesman was the poorer for his rashness. So leaving his affairs to the family solicitors, he quietly vanished from the scene of his folly.

He did not know then – indeed, he did not know fully now – that out of a sum of money waiting at his banker's his various subscriptions and racing liabilities were being paid, for it had never occurred to him to withdraw the various orders he had given to his banker.

Obviously Joe Raffle was speaking the truth as to the Blenheim colt, though the other part of the business still remained a mystery. But if he could believe his ears aright, then at that moment he was not an outcast and pauper, but one of the most envied men who had ever set foot upon a racecourse. At the lowest estimate, he was worth five thousand pounds. He could sell the Blenheim colt with all his engagements for such a figure before the day was out. He might return to the old house and restore some of its glories. He might have enough to keep him comfortably, and, above all, acquire a position that would entitle him to go to Sir George Haredale and ask for the hand of his daughter.

This was all very well from one point of view, but there was another side. His prosperity would be Sir George's ruin. Still, the temptation was dazzling, and for a few minutes Fielden was afraid to trust himself to words.

"You have done very wrong, Raffle," he said presently.

Joe scratched his head contritely.

"I know it, sir," he admitted. "I didn't realize how wrong I had behaved till I saw you come in the stable yard, and you could have knocked me down with a feather. But what else could I do? You had gone away and I heard you were dead. I had to believe it, because the man who told me gave me chapter and verse for it, and I felt as if I had lost a child of my own. By-and-by I was comfortably settled in Sir George's employ, having as much money as I needed for my wants, and never, so far as I knew, a single relation in the world. I said nothing about the colt, because I hadn't much opinion of it at first. Then I began to get as fond of Miss May as I used to be of you, sir. An idea came to me one night when I was sitting over my pipe – and, bear in mind, nobody else knew – and that was that, bar accidents, I had a Derby winner in the stable. For Miss May's sake I was willing to do

much. There was no chance of anybody finding it out. And, after all, I was doing nothing wrong. You see, in the first place, nobody will be a penny the worse. As to Sir George and yourself, there is no reason why you shouldn't make a large fortune. It makes no difference to me, of course; I am long past troubling about that sort of thing. But now that I know you are alive it is another matter. Still, the colt's keep hasn't been much, and it's only a matter of luck that he don't happen to belong to Sir George. Besides, Sir George is expecting to win a fortune, and he is not the man to grudge you your share. You will have to tell him what I've told you, sir, and if Sir George wants proofs I shall have them ready when the time comes."

"Nobody knows anything of this?" Fielden asked.

"Not a soul, sir," Raffle said solemnly. "Nobody even guesses it, and if you hadn't turned up I should have gone down to my grave with the secret unspoken. Because, as I said before, sir, there's no harm done, and nobody any the worse. But, seeing that you have come back, why, the truth must be told."

"And what will Miss Haredale say?" Fielden asked.

Raffle's face paled perceptibly.

"Ah, well, sir," he said, "that won't be very pleasant. I'd do anything in the world for Miss May, but she isn't you, and that makes a difference. Of course, I know what you would do if you had your own way. You would just say nothing about it and let Sir George put the money in his pocket. You would rather starve than do anything you didn't consider right. I can see it in your face now, I can tell by your eyes. But it isn't going to be, sir. You'll excuse me for speaking so plainly, but I couldn't rest comfortably in my grave if I thought you were in want, when, by every right, you ought to have a fortune in your pocket. It's no use you arguing, Mr. Harry, if you don't tell the truth, I shall."

The old man's voice shook strangely as he spoke. His lips were quivering, but there was an air of determination about him which there was no mistaking. Nobody knew better than Fielden how obstinate Joe Raffle could be. There was nothing to gain by threats, and sternness would be worse than useless.

"I am certain you have acted for the best," Fielden said soothingly. "And, as you say, there is nothing wrong in this little scheme of yours. Why, you might have kept the colt yourself and made a fortune over him. But, to use a pet expression of your own, my dear Joe, what you have told me has knocked me all of a heap. I must have time to think it over. I should be sorry to spoil an interesting situation like this by doing anything rash. Besides, there is plenty of time between now and the Derby – pretty well three months, isn't it? Has the colt any other engagements before Epsom?"

"Only two," Raffle explained. "And then he'll be an eye-opener to some people. Now don't you do anything foolish, sir. If you go the right way about it you've got a hundred thousand pounds in your pocket."

"Oh, I'll do nothing rash," Fielden laughed. "You needn't be afraid of that. But I must have time to think this matter over. I shall stay down here a day or two, though I had intended to go back to London to-morrow. I don't mind so much now that I find nobody identifying me, and there are several things at the house I want to gather together. I had no idea the old furniture was left. I suppose they didn't sell it because they had no instructions from me, and enough was saved from the wreck to pay my creditors without it. I'll come round in the morning and see you again, Joe. To-night I believe I am dining with Sir George. If anybody asks you who I am, you had better say my name is Field; it sounds like Fielden and is easy to remember. Seeing that I am so changed, nobody will connect me with the old family. Now I must be off."

In a thoughtful mood Fielden turned towards the old house. He was glad no one recognized him, for the knowledge was likely to make his task all the easier. He had the key of the house in his pocket. The mansion appeared to have been left exactly as he last saw it. There was not even a caretaker on the premises. The estate around Herons Dyke had long passed into the possession of strangers. It presented a striking contrast to the neglected grounds and grass-covered paths which

surrounded the old mansion where, for the last three hundred years, the Fieldens had kept open house and dispensed a lavish hospitality. But those days were gone for ever, they would never come back again, unless, perhaps —

"What a chance!" Fielden muttered to himself. "What a wonderful stroke of fortune! And yet, I don't see how I can do it. There is no honourable course but silence."

CHAPTER V

THE SHADOW OF DOUBT

THERE were many things in the place which Fielden had forgotten. Here were boxes of cigars and cigarettes, while cards still lay scattered about and the glasses had not been removed. Fielden had learnt much in the hard school of adversity, and he began to realize that he had about him the means to secure a considerable sum of money. Despite the dust and gloom and air of decay, the library was intact. Fielden was surprised at this, for he had frequently heard his father say that the books were valuable. Perhaps it had occurred to nobody to look for rare books in the house of a man who gave himself over entirely to sport, but here they were and possibly a little later they might appear to advantage in a London auction-room. Fielden was not so sanguine as he once had been, but at a modest computation he thought they would fetch at least a thousand pounds.

He went up to his bedroom and began idly turning out the drawers. At any rate he would be able to cut a presentable appearance at Haredale Park. He might venture in the open, too, for it was nearly dark. The lights of Haredale gleamed hospitably as he walked up the drive. He had had no formal invitation, nothing save May Haredale's suggestion, but he knew Sir George well enough to be sure of his reception.

It all looked strangely familiar as the butler opened the door and asked his name. Fielden knew the butler's face well, but it was plain the latter did not recognize him. Yes, Sir George and Miss Haredale were at home. They had arrived from London late in the afternoon, but, so far as the butler knew, did not expect any guest. Still, so many people came and went to that hospitable house that the advent of a stranger caused no surprise in the butler's mind.

"If you will give me your name, sir," he suggested.

"Oh, tell Miss Haredale that Mr. Field is here. She expects me, because – "

Fielden broke off suddenly, for May Haredale came across the hall at that moment. She smiled a welcome and held out her hand. She dismissed the butler, after giving instructions to him to take the visitor's bag upstairs.

"I was almost afraid you wouldn't come," she said. "I feared you would be too proud or something equally absurd."

"I plead guilty," Harry Fielden smiled. "Really I don't think I should have had courage to come, only I found that not a soul knew me with the exception of Joe Raffle. I have passed a score of people to-day whom I know intimately. But it is just as well, May. Why, even Mason, your butler, looked at me as if I were a perfect stranger."

"But I recognized you," May said quietly.

"Ah, you recognized me, and I was glad of that. I don't think I can tell you how happy that made me. When we met in London I felt for the first time for more than two years that I was not alone in the world. It makes one hard and bitter to be always amongst strangers who care nothing for one, to feel that if one dropped dead in the street no one would feel even a pang of regret. But I ought not to be talking like this. There is one thing I am going to ask you and Sir George, and that is, to keep my identity a secret. It is possible I may be here a good deal off and on, and that is why I am going to drop the last two letters of my name and call myself Field."

It was with mixed feelings that Fielden stood by his dressing-table adjusting his black evening tie an hour later. His surroundings were bringing back his boyhood's associations vividly, every object was growing familiar. It was just the same when he came down to the drawing-room and found Sir George waiting him.

Here was a change, at any rate. Those around him daily might not have seen much difference, but to Fielden Sir George had grown old and bent. There were lines of care about his eyes and his

manner was painfully nervous. In this old man there was no suggestion of one of the finest sportsmen and most fearless riders in the county. Fielden had learnt much in the light of bitter experience. He knew great mental anxiety when he saw it, and he needed no one to tell him that he was face to face with it now. But Sir George's welcome was hearty. The ring in his voice and the pressure of his hand left nothing lacking in the way of sincerity.

"Ah, my boy, this is an unexpected pleasure," he said. "I don't think you really know how glad I am to see you. You are almost the only one of the old stock left except ourselves. One by one they have passed away, and of the score of houses where I used to go as a boy there isn't one to-day which is not inhabited by new people. Most of them are sportsmen of a sort, but they haven't the old feeling for it. Well, perhaps I am a bit old-fashioned. And how you have changed! I give you my word for it, I should not have known you from Adam. Yet it seems only the other day that you came into one of the finest properties and proceeded to get rid of it after the manner of your kind. How we missed you! But it is no use crying over spilt milk. I hoped at one time that you and May – God bless me, what am I talking about! May tells me that you don't want to be known by your own name, and that we are to speak of you as Mr. Field. Perhaps it is natural. Now you are here, you had better stay a few days, and I'll see if I can find something for you to do. A friend of mine lives close by, Mr. Raymond Copley. He is new since your time, is very rich, has a fancy to keep a stable, and is looking for some one he can rely upon to take the entire management. He has had one or two men who have robbed him. I am sure I can recommend you; with all your folly and extravagance you never forgot what is due to your name."

"You are very good, sir," Fielden answered. "The post you speak of would be a perfect boon to me. Besides, it is about the only thing I am capable of doing properly. But who is Mr. Copley and where did he make his money?"

"South Africa, I believe. He is a millionaire with a taste for sport, not exactly what you would call a gentleman, but I believe him to be a thoroughly good fellow. I don't mind telling you, between ourselves, that I am under obligations to him. Things haven't gone very well with me, and I don't know how I should have pulled through if it hadn't been for Copley. He has been very generous and I only wish May could be more cordial towards him. I can't think why she doesn't like the man. It would be a splendid thing for her – But, there. I am rambling again."

Fielden turned his face aside. He was feeling a strange pain at his heart which he could not account for. But he understood what Sir George intended to convey. Beyond all doubt, Sir George Haredale was under great obligations to this newcomer and was warning Fielden there must be no more nonsense between May and himself. He was telling the latter precisely what his hopes for his daughter were.

Of course there was nothing in it that Fielden could resent. He had had his opportunity and deliberately lost it. It was only during the last twenty-four hours that he realized what his feelings towards May were. If he had not been a fool, he would be rich and prosperous at this moment, with May for his wife.

The strange sensation was with him all through dinner. He tried in vain to shake it off. It was not a cheerful meal, on the whole, for every now and then Sir George lapsed into moody silence and May's gaiety was fitful. The evening dragged on till ten o'clock before Sir George came into the drawing-room with slightly flushed face and eyes that were too bright. May looked anxiously at her father. So here, Fielden thought, was another skeleton in the closet. The discovery was a fresh stab to him. His own selfishness and folly were a reproach. It was a relief when the door bell clanged and the butler announced that Mr. Copley would like to speak to Sir George.

"Ask him in," Sir George said unsteadily.

Fielden glanced at May. He could see that her face had changed slightly and her eyes grown hard and cold. Then the door opened and Copley came in, big and self-important, with the air of a man entirely at home. There was something in his appearance which jarred upon Fielden, something

that aroused a pang beyond mere jealousy. As Copley bent over May Haredale's hand and murmured something which he intended for a compliment, Fielden started back for a moment.

"This is my young friend, Mr. Harry Field," Sir George said. "Harry, let me introduce you to Mr. Copley. I think I have found the very man you want for your stables, Copley. He is the son of an old pal of mine and has all the game at his finger-tips."

Copley threw a half-contemptuous glance at Fielden and did not hold out his hand, for which discourtesy Harry felt grateful.

"Excuse me a moment," Fielden said. "I have forgotten something. I'll be back presently."

With his head in a whirl Fielden walked into the library. He was fighting hard for the mastery of himself.

"Good God!" he muttered, "so it's that blackguard! What a blessing he doesn't know me by sight! Raymond Copley and May Haredale! Not if it costs me my life!"

CHAPTER VI

A TRIAL SPIN ON THE DOWNS

HARRY FIELDEN spent a sleepless night and was glad when it was time to come down to breakfast. He congratulated himself upon the way he had restrained himself on the previous evening. He had even forced himself to be polite to Copley, though his one impulse had been to take him by the throat and choke the life out of him. His very presence in a house like Haredale Park was an outrage. He wondered what Sir George would say if he had known the real character of his guest. Possibly Fielden would have spoken freely, had not he remembered what Sir George had said as to the relationship existing between himself and Raymond Copley. Plainly the master of Haredale Park was under the scoundrel's thumb. No doubt he had lent him money, and probably the price of the assistance was to be May Haredale's hand. There had been no mistaking Copley's manner towards her. His air of cool proprietorship had sent the blood humming in Fielden's head and caused it to tingle in his finger-tips. Harry had to smile complacently whilst every instinct in his nature was crying out against the villain's presence. He had only to speak and he knew that Sir George would do his duty at any cost.

But he dared not speak. He had no desire to ruin the man who had been so kind to him. It was far better to play a waiting game. But come what might, May Haredale should never marry that man. Sir George should be ruined a thousand times over and Haredale Park pass into the hands of strangers before that catastrophe occurred.

It had been a relief to hear Copley say that he would not be down again till the end of the week. Therefore he had three days in which to think of some scheme. It was a bright, fresh February morning, with a touch of frost in the air, but the diamonds were growing soft and yielding to the sunshine. May Haredale was in excellent spirits. It was impossible not to catch the infection of her gaiety. Fielden put trouble on one side. There would be time for that later, he thought, as they rode out together over the Downs. They were out again in the afternoon and it was dark before they returned. It was like old times for Fielden to feel a good horse under him. The exercise and motion drove all gloomy thoughts away. Still, from time to time the shadow of distress lay heavily upon his shoulders.

He strolled round to Mallow's after tea to have a pipe and chat with Raffle. Everything appeared to be going well, and the old man was in high glee.

"We shall try the colt at daybreak," he said. "Would you like to come and have a look, Mr. Harry? I daresay there will be one or two people about, but I don't think they'll learn much. I've got a plan of my own on foot, and after to-morrow I shouldn't be surprised if you found the colt going a little queerly in the betting."

Raffle chuckled as he spoke, but refused to be more explicit.

"Oh, never you mind, sir," he said. "There are some things it is as well not to talk about. If you like to turn out to-morrow as soon as it is light, I think I can show you something worth looking at."

Fielden nodded approvingly. He woke fairly early with the pale dull light of the wintry morning streaming through his window, crept downstairs into the deserted hall and let himself out by a side door. The grey mist hanging over the Downs lifted as the sun began to make his influence felt. A little later Fielden discerned a group of figures faintly sketched against the skyline, and could see two horses in their clothing. Then he picked out the form of Joe Raffle. There was a stretch of turf between two banks of gorse, and the horses began to move along the flat expanse. Fielden strolled up to the group, and was amused to see the suspicious glances turned in his direction.

"That's all right, Mr. Mallow," Raffle muttered. "This gentleman is a friend of mine. Now, sir, will you go on to the top of the Downs and wait for us by the boundary stone? That will be the

winning post. No reason, I suppose, to ask you if you know which is the colt and which is the old horse. That's pretty plain even in this light."

"That's right enough," Fielden smiled.

He walked rapidly towards the improvised winning-post, unslung his glasses and fixed them steadily upon the little specks in the distance. Presently they made a move in his direction and grew larger as they came along. Fielden could hear the thud of hoofs upon the turf. Then they flashed by him, the old horse lengths ahead. It came as a surprise to the watcher, for he had expected an entirely different result. What was Mallow doing? What scheme had that wily man in his brain? Fielden stepped aside into the gorse, so as to be out of the wind which had already extinguished two matches he had used in his attempt to light a cigarette. As he stooped, he heard voices from somewhere close by. The voices carried clear enough in the silence of the spot, and Fielden could hear every word. With an instinct of caution which he could not have explained he crouched down behind the thick shelter of a bush.

He thought he had recognized one of the voices and now he felt sure of it. It was Raymond Copley beyond a doubt. Who the other man was Fielden had not the slightest idea.

"Now what does that mean?" Copley was asking.

"What does it mean?" the other man exclaimed with a sneer. "Why, it is as plain as the nose on your face. I felt certain what was going to happen when I advised you to come here this morning. The boy told me there was going to be a trial, and I wanted you to see for yourself. You are always too sanguine in these matters, Copley, and that's a fact. Now what do you think of the chances of your friend Sir George's colt?"

"I don't know what to say," Copley muttered. "The colt seemed to be beaten fairly and squarely. I suppose there is no faking about it."

"Faking! Sir George and his trainer between them haven't got brains enough for that. They belong to the old-fashioned school who pride themselves upon doing everything above board. And a precious good job for you and me, because they find the money to keep and train horses and we sail in when it comes to making a book. Perhaps you're sorry you had anything on the Blenheim colt."

"Oh, you were quite right to bring me here," Copley replied. "I owe you one for this day's work. But the worst of it is I have backed that horse for a big stake, just when I don't know where to turn for ready money. If anybody knew my present position, a good many people would be anxious to have an interview with Raymond Copley, the South African millionaire. Then there's that scoundrel Phillips to be reckoned with. But come along, let us go before anybody sees us. After breakfast –"

"Breakfast be hanged!" the other man broke out impatiently. "What's the use of worrying about breakfast with a bit of information like this in our pockets? The delay of half an hour may make all the difference in the world. Besides, there may be a dozen other people watching for all we know."

"Well, what do you suggest?" Copley asked.

"Suggest, who wants to suggest anything? What we have to do is to get back to your place as soon as possible and take the motor straight to town. By ten o'clock we can get our commission on the market at our own price. Then we can have as much breakfast as you like. That's the worst of you, Copley. You always think everything can wait. Now come on."

The voices died away in the distance, and then Fielden straightened himself again. He was somewhat mystified by what he had seen. He was puzzled to know what Joe Raffle and Mallow were driving at. But no doubt the old man would tell him at the first opportunity. Some clever scheme was in the wind. It was just possible, too, that Raffle expected that Copley and his friend would be there. It was more than possible that Raffle knew the class of scoundrel he had to deal with. The old man was coming down the wide stretch of turf, and Fielden looked eagerly towards him. As he vaulted a patch of gorse, his left foot dropped on something soft, like a bundle, and he was thrown violently to his knees. Then he turned to find that he had stumbled upon the figure of a man lying at the foot of the gorse bush, snugly rolled up in a railway rug. Here was another tout, beyond doubt, another

of the hateful tribe which has always been the detestation of every racing man. Fielden turned upon him savagely and demanded what he was doing there. He bent over the stranger threateningly, and the latter rose to his feet.

"Keep your temper," he said. "I'm doing no harm. I'm not the only one who has earned a bit on the Downs this morning. Hands off, please. Why, bless my soul! if it isn't Mr. Fielden."

Harry stared in amazement at the mention of his name. For a moment he did not recognize the dark unshaven features of the man. They seemed familiar, yet somehow he failed to connect them with time, or space, or locality.

Then it suddenly came to him.

"Aaron Phillips!" he exclaimed. "Now is it Luck that has sent you here, or Coincidence?"

CHAPTER VII

A LEAF FROM THE PAST

AARON PHILLIPS was standing up with something like a smile upon his face. He was a short, slim person, swarthy and foreign-looking, except for the pair of keen blue eyes which bespoke the Anglo-Saxon in his blood. From the roots of his hair across to his left temple was a long, angry red furrow which looked like a comparatively freshly-healed wound. As to the rest, he was fairly well dressed, with that indescribable air of nattiness which usually pertains to those who belong to the *genus* "horsey."

"Glad to meet you, Mr. Fielden," he grinned.

"I shall be obliged if you won't use that name here," Harry replied. "For the present my name is Field, and I want you not to forget it. But how did you manage to get home again? I thought you were dead."

Phillips indicated the scar on his forehead.

"It was a near thing, Mr. Fielden, I beg pardon, Field. It wasn't the fault of those scoundrels, I can tell you. They left me for dead, and if I hadn't been picked up by some of the boys I should have died of starvation on the veldt. As it was, I had a very close shave, and so did Copley and Foster, for the matter of that. Our friends chased them all across the Colony and how they managed to escape was a mystery to me. Still, perhaps it is as well. There are more ways than one of taking revenge."

The little man's eyes gleamed as he spoke. He glanced meaningfully at Fielden and jingled a few coppers in his pocket.

"Make them pay for it, you mean," Fielden smiled.

"That's it, sir, you've got it first time. Now, as you know perfectly well, there are a dozen or more people out yonder who would give a good round sum to have Copley on the end of a rope, or within reach of a revolver shot. They are not the sort to give information to the police, because that is not the way we used to do things. Still, if I like to open my mouth widely enough I could make it deuced hot for Copley & Co. I could have them conveyed to Cape Town, and it wouldn't take me long to find evidence enough to give those two chaps ten years on the Breakwater. Yes, sir, I'd have done it, too, but there's a better way than that. It took me the best part of a year or more to scrape enough money together to pay my passage home. I had heard some queer stories about Copley, and I wanted to find out if they were true. What do I see when I reach London? Why, Copley with a set of offices in the city – Copley with a suite of rooms at a palatial hotel – Copley with a place in the country and a string of race-horses. Oh, I tell you, Mr. Fielden – Field, I mean – I rubbed my hands when I heard of it. Thinks I to myself, 'This is a better game than handing Copley over to the South African police.' I don't quite know yet how Copley has managed it, but here he is ruffling it with the best, spending money like water, and going to marry the daughter of a baronet in these parts."

Fielden's face flushed angrily. He winced at this home thrust on Phillips' part. So already people were coupling May Haredale's name with Copley. It had not occurred to him that things had gone as far as that. However, Phillips could not be expected to know this. He was merely innocently repeating local gossip.

"I suppose you mean to have some of this money?" he asked.

"If you don't mind my using the expression, I am going to blackmail Copley. I am not afraid of the blackguard here. There is no chance of his trying on any of his murderous tricks in England. He knows I have come back, but as yet I have not waited upon him. I have had a hint to call from Foster, but I am not taking any of that, thank you. You don't catch me dropping into a police trap with a chance of being prosecuted and hustled out of the country before I know where I am. When I do strike it will be in a different way altogether. For the present, I have been looking around asking questions,

because, you see, it will be of considerable advantage to me to find out where Copley is getting his money. That he is earning it honestly I don't believe. He couldn't do it if he wanted to. He is the sort of blackguard who would rather make five pounds dishonestly than a tenner by legitimate business."

"I suppose you never found those plans?" Fielden asked.

Phillips swore heartily.

"Never, sir," he said. "They were in my portmanteau, as you know. I had the portmanteau in my possession when those blackguards attacked me, and they had to leave without it, so closely were they pressed. But when I was well again I asked for my baggage and no one could tell me what had become of it. It vanished in a most mysterious manner. If you ask me, the portmanteau was stolen by one of those thievish Kaffre boys. It makes me wild when I think of it. Probably it is concealed in a Kaffre hut. In the old portmanteau is a scrap of paper which is worth hundreds of thousands to us. I say us, because it is yours just as much as it is mine. I don't belong to your class, Mr. Fielden, but you played the game and were always a white man. And if those papers ever do come to hand, I shall do the fair thing by you. It doesn't follow because I happen to be the son of a sporting publican that I don't know the difference between right and wrong. But what's the good of worrying about that? We shall never see those papers again, and as far as we are concerned that diamond mine might never have existed. But what are you doing here?"

"I used to live close by," Fielden explained. "Most of this was once my property. Sir George Haredale's trainer employs an old servant of mine and I came out this morning to see that trial. I might ask you the same question."

Phillips' blue eyes twinkled.

"Bit of a disappointment, wasn't it?" he asked.

"What do you know about it?" Fielden demanded.

"Oh, well, sir, we are not partners in this job, at any rate. If you like to keep your counsel, I am perfectly willing to keep mine. Old Raffle is as straight as they make 'em, but he is a downy old fox all the same, and pretty neatly he drew the feather over Copley's eye this morning. Oh, yes, I heard all those blackguards had to say; in fact, I followed them here. I am glad I came, because I heard something that confirmed my suspicions."

"You mean as to Copley's movements?"

"To be sure. I wanted to know where Copley is getting his money. I know he isn't paying his tradesmen, but that doesn't matter, for a man with a reputation for wealth can get as much credit as he likes. But Copley is flying at high game and must have the command of a good deal of ready cash. Now where does it come from? What sort of a swindle is on? Why were they so anxious to watch the trial of the Blenheim colt this morning? And, by the way, Mr. Fielden, you must give old Raffle a hint to keep his eye on the stable lads. Somebody has been betraying confidence. It doesn't matter this time, because Copley was fooled this morning as easily as if he had been a schoolboy. But I am getting a bit away from the point. I was going to tell you where Copley got his money. Well, it's a betting swindle, one of the biggest and most ingenious that has been attempted on the turf for many a long day. I just heard enough to put me on the track. But I've my work cut out before I reach the bottom of it. You have no occasion to love Copley – "

"Indeed, I haven't," Fielden said bitterly. "I have every reason for disliking the man, every reason for exposing him before Miss – well, before things have gone too far. If I can help you, I will do so cheerfully."

"That's right," Phillips said approvingly. "Now where can I see you for half an hour in the course of the afternoon? We mustn't stay talking here. There is old Raffle."

Fielden thought it over for a moment or two. He was glad enough to meet this old South African comrade of his again. In several respects Phillips was anything but a desirable acquaintance. His upbringing had been none too strict, but, at the same time, he had a rough code of honour, and it was one of his proudest boasts that he never forgot a friend or a favour. Probably he had had his own

reasons for leaving England suddenly, and no doubt those reasons had something to do with the turf. At any rate, he had a profound and intricate knowledge of racing matters, and there was no swindle or trick with which he was not familiar.

"You had better meet me at Heron's Dyke," Fielden said. "You can be outside in the road about a quarter to five. There is nobody on the premises. I have the key in my pocket, and I daresay I shall manage to get a light from somewhere."

Phillips disappeared amongst the high gorse. As Fielden stepped into the open he saw Raffle looking about for him. There was a shrewd smile on the old man's face, and he did not appear in the least disconcerted by the result of the trial.

"Well?" Fielden asked. "What about your Derby winner now?"

Raffle's eye contracted in a wink.

"It's all right, sir," he said. "The trial was a great success. Did you happen to see anybody in the gorse?"

"Yes," Fielden replied. "I saw Mr. Copley."

"And a friend," Raffle chuckled. "I know all about it. And between you and me, sir, I got this up for the benefit of Mr. Copley, who is about the greatest rascal unhanged, and that's saying a good deal. It was high time you came back."

CHAPTER VIII

ROGUES IN COUNCIL

RAFFLE strode sturdily along, refusing to say another word. What deep-laid schemes the old man had in his mind Fielden could only faintly guess. At any rate it was good to know that Raffle was satisfied, and that some careful plan was afoot with a view to Copley's discomfiture.

"Perhaps you are wise to keep your own counsel," Fielden said. "But I've learnt something this morning, too, Raffle. There is somebody in the stable who is disclosing secrets, and the sooner you know it the better."

"I know it already," Raffle grinned. "It is all part of the scheme. They have got hold of one of the boys, and I am watching him carefully. I let him take away just as much information as I like. Don't you worry about me, Mr. Harry. I haven't been at this game for fifty years without learning a thing or two. I have always made it a rule to go straight myself, but that is no reason why I should keep my eyes closed to the doings of other people."

"Quite right," Fielden said approvingly. "But what do you know about Mr. Copley? He is a stranger in these parts."

"That may be, sir, but he is no stranger to me. I never forget a face, and I've been on every racecourse in the country during the last five and twenty years. The first time I saw Mr. Copley, he was being shown round the stables by Sir George. I didn't like him, and I didn't like his manner, and thinks I to myself, 'I wonder where I've seen *you* before?' Suddenly there flashes into my mind a little incident that happened at Lincoln. I can see it as plain as I can see this book in my hand. And then I knew that Mr. Copley, the African millionaire, was one and the same with the welsher that I had seen half killed at Lincoln a good many years ago. Well, it wasn't for me to say anything about it, because I can find you a score of men to-day, rich and prosperous men, who started life amongst the scum of the racecourse. I have been making a few inquiries amongst my old pals, and it is just as I expected. Mr. Copley may be a rich man now, but he is just as big a scamp as ever he was, and Sir George ought to know it. I tell you, Mr. Harry, it fairly makes my blood boil to see that blackguard swaggering about here and hanging around Miss May as if she belonged to him. It fair spoils my enjoyment and my food, it does. But you see how difficult it is for a man in my position to interfere. But your case is different."

Fielden shook his head sadly. His case was very different indeed. More and more bitterly did he blame himself for the heedless, senseless folly which had brought him to his present pitch. How changed things might have been if he had only shown ordinary prudence! What would he gain if he went to Sir George with these vague stories about Copley? He could not doubt but that Sir George was deeply in Copley's debt, and that Copley had brought this about so that, when the time came, he could force May to marry him. These painful thoughts were uppermost in his mind as he strode back to the house. He could not shake them off, though May rallied him on his quietness and offered him the proverbial penny for his thoughts.

"I know what is the matter," she said gaily. "You are fretting because you have nothing to do. But that won't be for long. Do you know that we are dining with Mr. Copley to-night, and that you have been included in the invitation? Mr. Copley telephoned from London this morning, and you were especially mentioned by name. I am sure if I put in a word for you the post will be as good as yours. Before long you will be occupying an important place in the racing world, and the rest is in your own hands. You have the consolation, too, of knowing that no one has recognized you."

It was on the tip of Fielden's tongue to refuse. It was repugnant to his instincts to take service with a man like Copley. Yet, on the other hand, it was fair enough to fight this fellow with his own weapons. Through him Fielden had lost the chance of his lifetime. But for him and his rascally

associates, Fielden and Phillips would have been rich men to-day. Moreover, if something were not done speedily, a fate which was worse than death awaited May Haredale. To turn his back upon a chance like this would be to precipitate the very calamity which he was most anxious to avert. Copley was the type of strong man who always gets his way. He was not the least scrupulous as to his methods, and Sir George Haredale was bound to him hand and foot. It would be far better to seize this coign of vantage, especially as Copley had not the smallest idea of the bitter enemy he was maintaining under his roof.

Meanwhile, Copley and his friend Foster had returned from town. They reached Copley's establishment, Seton Manor, just before dark. They had not lost any time. Apparently they had done their work fairly well, for, according to the late evening papers, the Blenheim colt had receded steadily in the betting. People were asking themselves what had happened. Most of the public knew and respected Sir George Haredale. Not the faintest shadow rested on his reputation, and this fact had had somewhat of a steady effect on the market. But though a certain division had rushed in at these improved prices to back their fancy, there seemed to be an unlimited amount of money ready to be laid against the horse. At any rate, Copley was fairly satisfied. He had invested several thousand pounds against the Blenheim colt, which, in his opinion, was already as good as out of the running altogether.

He came into what he called his library just before dinner and found Foster awaiting him. Both were in evening dress, both exceedingly shiny and glossy, and both carried more jewellery than was in accordance with good taste. The guests were not expected for half an hour, so Copley helped himself liberally to brandy and soda and lighted a fresh cigarette.

"Any letters?" he asked.

"Nothing of importance," Foster replied. "When I left you this morning I went round to see if I could see anything of Phillips. He wasn't at his lodgings, and they said he wasn't expected back till to-morrow. Now what are you going to do about that chap?"

"Oh, let him go to the devil!" Copley growled.

"My dear Copley, why do you always talk like that? Why do you think that every man is a fool except yourself? You appear to be very prosperous. Nobody can deny your courage. And because you are not afraid of Phillips you seem to think he isn't dangerous. I think he is. Suppose he goes to Scotland Yard and lays his information before the people there, and suppose they communicate with the authorities in Cape Town, the result will be an application for your arrest, and once you get out there you know what will happen. It will be all U.P."

"Thinking about your own skin," Copley sneered.

"Well, and what if I am? I haven't got a sanguine temperament like yours. Of course, we could buy Phillips off; at least we could buy him off for the time being and keep his mouth shut till we devised some plan for getting rid of him altogether. But he is a cunning devil, is Aaron Phillips, and has learnt how to profit by past experience. It is no use asking him to come to your hotel. He isn't going to walk into a trap like that, and he isn't going to wait much longer, either. If we could give him a thousand pounds just to go on with, why – "

"A thousand devils," Copley exclaimed furiously. "Where am I going to get a thousand pounds? I mean, where am I going to get it just at this moment? I've got this place here, which isn't paid for. I managed to get the bank to advance the money till I could complete the purchase, and the furnishing was an easy matter. One can get as much credit as one likes in this country, provided one winks at extortionate charges. As I will never pay for the stuff at all, the West End tradesmen can charge what they please. But the fact remains that though people are tumbling over one another to get my custom I am fairly at my wits' end for ready cash. Of course, it will be all right when the flat season begins in earnest. With any luck there'll be a hatful of money to share between us before the October meeting at Newmarket. We ought to make over a thousand pounds at Mirst Park on Saturday week. I suppose

you've got it all ready. Got the telephone in place? The worst of this game is that one has to take so many people into one's confidence."

"That's all right," Foster explained. "Everything is in its place now. I went down to Mirst Park the day before yesterday. The house is finished and all the workmen have gone. The telephone is in good order, because I tried it. The man who fixed up the extension from the hall to the roof was a bit curious, but I managed to put him off the scent by some lie about the doctor's orders and a patient who had been recommended to try outdoor treatment. But we ought to have a mechanic of our own, Copley. If any hint of our little secret leaked out, the man who fixed that extended telephone would be certain to see it, and naturally he would ask himself a question or two. The fewer outsiders we have to deal with the better."

"There's no doubt of that," Copley agreed. "Then there's nothing to settle now. Did you rehearse the bit in Covent Garden?"

"Oh, yes. I was in the office we have taken next door to the Post Club, and went through the whole thing with Radley, who was stationed outside. There wasn't a hitch anywhere. I don't see why we shouldn't clear a thousand pounds; indeed, we might make a great deal more. But perhaps it would be just as well to be on the safe side. It would be a fatal mistake to arouse the suspicions of the bookmakers at the beginning, and if this scheme breaks down we've got another one."

Copley smiled as he finished his brandy and soda. He threw the end of his cigarette into the grate as the door bell rang.

"Come along," he said. "Here are our guests. Let us go into the drawing-room and wait for them. We must assume respectability even if we have it not."

CHAPTER IX IN THE TOILS

IN spite of his dislike of Copley, Fielden could not see much to object to in his manner as he came forward to receive his guests. He was, perhaps, a trifle loud and domineering, perhaps a little too familiar in the way in which he held May Haredale's hand in his. Foster more or less obliterated himself. It was his rôle in company to play the confidential servant. He was quiet and subdued, though nothing escaped his sharp glance. The dinner was excellent. Everything was in good taste, as Fielden was forced to admit. The talk, for the most part, was lively and was kept principally to the topic of sport. Afterwards there was a move towards the billiard-room, and ere he realized it, Fielden found himself engaged in a game of pool with Sir George and Foster, while May Haredale and Copley looked on. A moment or two later these two vanished on a pretext of Copley's that he wished to show May some sporting pictures he had lately acquired. The pictures were duly inspected, but Copley made no move to rejoin the party.

"Hadn't we better go back?" May suggested.

Copley turned an admiring glance upon the girl. There was no mistaking the expression of his face. May had more than her fair share of courage, but she was feeling a bit restless and nervous. She was wondering why she disliked this man so much. She had had nothing but kindness and courtesy at his hands. She knew that he had helped her father more than once. Yet her instinct told her that Copley was not to be trusted. There was a boldness about him that repelled her, something in his glittering eye from which she recoiled. Now she knew almost before the words were spoken what Copley was going to say.

"The others are not likely to miss us for a bit," he said. "Besides, there is something I have to talk to you about. To be perfectly candid, I asked you over here this evening on purpose. I wonder why it is that you avoid me so."

"I was not aware of it," May murmured.

"But, indeed, you do. I have noticed it more than once. Surely you must know why I come so frequently to Haredale Park. I am not much of a ladies' man, Miss May, and I never have been. I have led a rough kind of life. I know so little of the atmosphere of drawing-rooms. But every man recognizes, when the time comes, when he meets with the woman who is made for him alone, and that is the point I have reached. I think I could provide you all you need. You will have a fine house and a good position, and everything you want. I daresay this is a rough way of putting it, but it is none the less sincere for that."

It was sincere enough, as May had to admit. Copley's assurance had vanished. He was speaking from his heart. The man was rogue and scoundrel through and through, but had fallen deeply in love with May Haredale. He was prepared to go any lengths to make her his wife. It was the only piece of honesty and sincerity that he had ever displayed since he was old enough to know the distinction between right and wrong.

May stood silent and trembling. She was not insensible to the compliment Copley was paying her. She knew that he meant every word he said, and she knew, too, that there must be a hard fight before she could convince him that the thing he so ardently desired was impossible. She had an uneasy feeling, too, that Copley had not yet played all his cards. "I ought to thank you, I suppose," she said. "In a sense you are doing me an honour, and this is the first time that any man has asked me such a question, and naturally I feel disturbed. But what you ask of me is quite impossible."

"Why impossible?" Copley asked grimly. "Oh, I didn't expect you to jump at me; I know you are not that sort of girl. Perhaps that is one of the main reasons why I am so anxious to make you my wife. But if there is no one else – "

"There is no one else," May said with a sorrowful sincerity which was not lost upon her companion. "There is no one else, and there never will be. If it is any sort of consolation to you, Mr. Copley, I shall never marry."

"Never is a long day," Copley smiled. "At any rate, as long as there is nobody else in question I shall feel encouraged to go on. I am a very persistent man, and in the end I always get my own way. I'll ask you again in a week or two, and, perhaps, when you have had time to think it over –"

"No, no," May said firmly. "There must be no thinking it over. I could not marry you. I could not care for you enough for that and I would never marry a man to whom I could not give myself wholly and entirely. It is the same to-day, it will be the same next year. Mr. Copley, I ask you not to allude to this distressing topic again. If you do, I shall have no alternative but to treat you as a stranger."

There was no mistaking the sincerity of May's words. Her natural courage and resolution had come back to her. She met Copley's glance without flinching. Her little mouth was firmly set. Even Copley, with all his egotism and assurance, knew that the last words had been said.

A sudden blind rage clutched him. His thin veneer of gentility vanished. He stretched out a hand and laid it upon the girl's arm.

"So you mean to defy me," he said hoarsely.

"Defy you!" May cried, indignantly. "What do you mean? Have you forgotten that you are a gentleman? Anybody would think to look at you and hear you speak that you were playing the villain in some sensational melodrama. You have paid me the compliment of asking me to be your wife, and I have done my best to decline in such a manner as to give you as little pain as possible. You will be good enough to take me back to the billiard-room and not to allude to this matter again."

Copley laughed derisively. He had forgotten himself. The love and passion in his heart had died away to a sullen anger. Never since he had known May Haredale had he felt such a wild longing to possess her. Well, if the girl would have it, then he must speak openly and freely. She must be made to understand that here was her master, whose lightest wish she must learn to obey.

"You don't understand," he said. "I suppose you think you have only to raise your hand and pick and choose. Ah, you are mistaken, my dear young lady. If you don't believe me, ask Sir George. He promised to speak to you on my behalf, but I see he hasn't done so. Probably he shirked it. Now I shall have to tell you myself. Do you know that at the present moment I am master of Haredale Park? I don't imagine you are acquainted with business, but you know that your father is not a rich man. Has that fact escaped you?"

"I am aware of it," May said coldly.

"Very well, then. Where do you suppose he has found the money to pay his racing debts? Do you suppose it dropped from the clouds? During the last twelve months, your father has had from me something like thirty thousand pounds. Even a rich man can't always put his hand on large sums of money like that. And I should have refused to part with the money if it had not been for your sake. But when a man is in love, he is guilty of all sorts of follies and extravagances and when a man like me is in love he does not stick at trifles. Now try to realize my position. Try to realize that if I say the word there is an end to Haredale Park as far as you are concerned. I am not boasting. I could turn you both out to-morrow if I chose, and what would become of you then? Ask yourself the question. You needn't answer it now; you can take time to do so."

May Haredale trembled from head to foot. She had half-dreaded, half-expected this, but the blow was no less crushing now that it had fallen, and she could see from the grim expression on Copley's face that he meant every word he said. She had read of similar situations in novels, but they had sounded cold and unconvincing, and little like the real thing now that she was face to face with it.

"You would never do it," she faltered.

"By Heaven, I would!" Copley cried. "Ah, you do not know what manner of man I am. Why, when you look at me like that, instead of melting I grow all the harder. I must make you my wife. You little know the sacrifices I have made to bring this about. I never thought that I could be a fool

for the sake of a woman. I could almost laugh at my own folly, but it has become part and parcel of my very existence, the only object in the world that is worth attaining. Well, it is no use talking, for I could go on in the same strain all night. It is for you to decide. You can please yourself whether your father is turned out of house and home, or whether your prosperous and happy future – "

"Prosperous and happy future," May echoed scornfully. "The words on your lips sound like blasphemy. It seems almost incredible that a man with any sort of pride should stoop to such a trick as this to force a woman to marry him, when, from the bottom of her heart, she loathes and detests him."

Copley jeered.

"Oh, go on," he said. "Let it come out. Treat me as if I were dirt under your feet. But you will think better of it before a week has passed. Tell your father what I have been saying to-night, and talk it over with him. Perhaps he will be able to persuade you better than I can. Let us go back to the billiard-room."

May turned coldly away, but her eyes were dim, and all the world seemed slipping away from beneath her feet.

CHAPTER X

CONFESSION

FIELDEN was not enjoying his game of billiards. It was a favourite game of his, and one which he had not had much opportunity of exercising lately, but he would have given something for an excuse to get out of it. The reason was obvious why Raymond Copley had made an excuse to get May out of the room. His instinct told him what was going on, and if he had had any lingering doubt on the subject it would have been dispelled by the most casual glance at Sir George.

For Haredale had lost all geniality. He became silent and depressed. From time to time he glanced anxiously towards the door. If such a thing were possible to a man of his position, and with a record like his, it might be said that he looked as if he had been committing some crime and was in deadly fear of being found out.

There was no longer room for hesitation in Fielden's mind. There was a conspiracy between Sir George and Copley against May Haredale's happiness. Fielden was boiling. It seemed incredible that a man like Sir George could deliberately become a party to such a scheme as this. And so the game went on, with two people at least not taking the faintest interest in it. Then the door opened and May Haredale entered.

Fielden shot a swift glance in her direction. He saw how pale her face was, how rigidly haughty and set were her features. There were traces of tears in her eyes, but so far as Fielden could see he had no cause to despair. Whatever had been said or done, Copley had not gained much. His face showed that. Defeat was written all over it. He was not the man to put up with disaster without showing it, and Fielden knew in that moment that so far, at any rate, things had not gone well with his host. Sir George saw it, too, for his jaw dropped, and he turned almost a guilty face towards Copley. For a moment there was an awkward silence.

"It is getting very late," May said. "Don't you think we had better be going?"

Haredale looked at Copley as if waiting for a lesson.

"It is not so very late," he remarked.

"Well, it seems so to me," May said. "Besides I am very tired. I am sure Mr. Copley will excuse me."

Copley murmured something more or less appropriate. He was not used to taking the trouble to disguise his humiliation.

"If you must go, you must," he said. "I'll come round after breakfast and see you to-morrow morning, Sir George. I have something important to say to you. Perhaps you will be there, too, Mr. Fielden. I fancy I can put something in your way. I want some one to take a general superintendence of my stables. Sir George tells me you are thoroughly up to the work, and that I can place every confidence in you. You seem to be the sort of man I am looking for, and, though I am interested in racing, I have very little time to spare to look into the details."

It was hard work to return thanks for this ungracious speech, but Fielden managed it somehow. He was feeling strangely elated, and hoped that nothing of his emotions found expression on his face. He was glad enough to find himself at length seated in the brougham with his friends on the way back to Haredale Park. It was a singularly silent ride, for May never spoke a word the whole time and Sir George was ill at ease. When they reached home May turned to Fielden.

"I hope you will excuse me a moment or two, Harry," she said. "I have something to say to my father. It won't take many minutes. Perhaps you will wait for us in the library. I think you will find everything you want there."

Sir George stood nervously in the hall shuffling from one foot to another. It seemed to take him a long time to get out of his overcoat. He turned to May testily.

"Surely, there is nothing you have to say to me to-night," he said. "It will keep till to-morrow."

Without reply May turned towards the drawing-room and Sir George followed. He closed the door carefully behind him. She crossed to the fireplace and stood facing her father. Her face was firm, though her lips trembled slightly, and the task before her was by no means a pleasant one.

"I hardly know how to begin," she said. "It is so difficult for me in my unfortunate position. I have never ceased to regret the death of my mother, but I cannot remember feeling the want of her so much as I do now. I suppose you can guess what happened to-night. You know what Mr. Copley said to me."

Sir George shook his head. His attempt to appear unconcerned was so grotesque a failure that, in spite of her unhappiness, May could not repress a smile.

"You are very transparent," she cried. "You make a bad conspirator, father. You know perfectly well what happened to-night. You know why we were asked to dine with Mr. Copley. He has done me the honour to ask me to be his wife. Now don't pretend to be surprised, because Mr. Copley had your full sanction; in fact, he told me he had discussed the matter with you more than once."

"And you accepted him?" Sir George asked eagerly.

"We will come to that presently. Now let me ask you a question. Suppose that your position was as good as it was twenty years ago, that there were no mortgages on the estate. In that case, what would you have said to Mr. Copley if he had expressed a wish to become your son-in-law? You wouldn't have turned him out of the house, because we don't do things like that. But your reply would have been no less unmistakable. You would have made Mr. Copley feel the absurdity of his ambition. He would never have been asked to come here again. Now isn't that so?"

Sir George shuffled about uneasily.

"Other times, other methods," he answered. "You see the condition of things is quite altered. Really, some of our best women marry rich men who have nothing particular to boast of in the way of pedigree. I can call a dozen cases to mind."

"Yes," May retorted. "And I can call a dozen cases to mind where you have expressed the strongest indignation with parents who have encouraged marriages of that sort. You have stigmatized the thing as a sale. Why, you refused to shake hands with Lord Middlebourne when he told you that his daughter was going to marry young Blackley. Yet, in the face of all this, you entered into a conspiracy with Mr. Copley, a conspiracy which you must know would be fatal to my happiness."

"You, you didn't refuse him?" Sir George gasped.

"Refuse him! Of course I did. I hope I did not say too much. But I let him know that the thing was impossible. I told him that in no circumstances could I become his wife. I have felt that this was coming for some time, and I blame myself for permitting things to go so far. Mr. Copley took it very badly. He lost his temper. He threatened me. He even went so far as to say that, unless I thought better of my reply, he would turn us out of Haredale Park."

Sir George turned a white and anxious face towards his daughter.

"Did he say that?" he asked hoarsely.

"I have already told you so. But, of course, this is ridiculous. You would never have been so foolish as to place yourself in the power of a man like Mr. Copley. It is very well to know such people, and I daresay you have found him useful in business. But as to the rest – Why do you look at me like that? You don't mean to say that his story is actually true?"

Sir George seemed to have some difficulty in speaking. When at length the words came they were free enough.

"It is true," he said. "My dear child, you must not blame me unduly. I have been terribly unfortunate of late. Everything I have touched has gone wrong. I am almost afraid to look at my betting book, and if the Blenheim colt does not win the Derby, then I shall be something worse than a pauper. You don't know what hopes I build upon this. If it comes off all right we shall be rich and prosperous. But it has been an awful struggle to keep my head above water so far, and when Copley

offered to help me in an open-handed way, I dared not refuse. Of course, I had not the least idea then that he had given you even more than a passing thought. It never occurred to me that he was lending me this money merely to have a hold upon me, and I thought it possible you might care for him. There is always the chance – "

"Oh, you didn't. I cannot believe you would ever think so meanly of me as that."

"Well, I don't know," Sir George said, stung into retort. "Anyhow, it is unfortunate that Harry Fielden should come back just now."

The hot blood flamed into May's face.

"That is unjust and ungenerous," she cried. "In any case, my reply would be just the same. I never did care for anybody but Harry Fielden, and I never will. You know that. There is not the slightest chance of his ever being in a position to keep a wife. But we are talking in a circle. I am more than sorry to hear what you say, but if the worst comes to the worst we shall have to dispose of everything and leave Haredale Park. For nothing shall induce me to marry Raymond Copley."

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