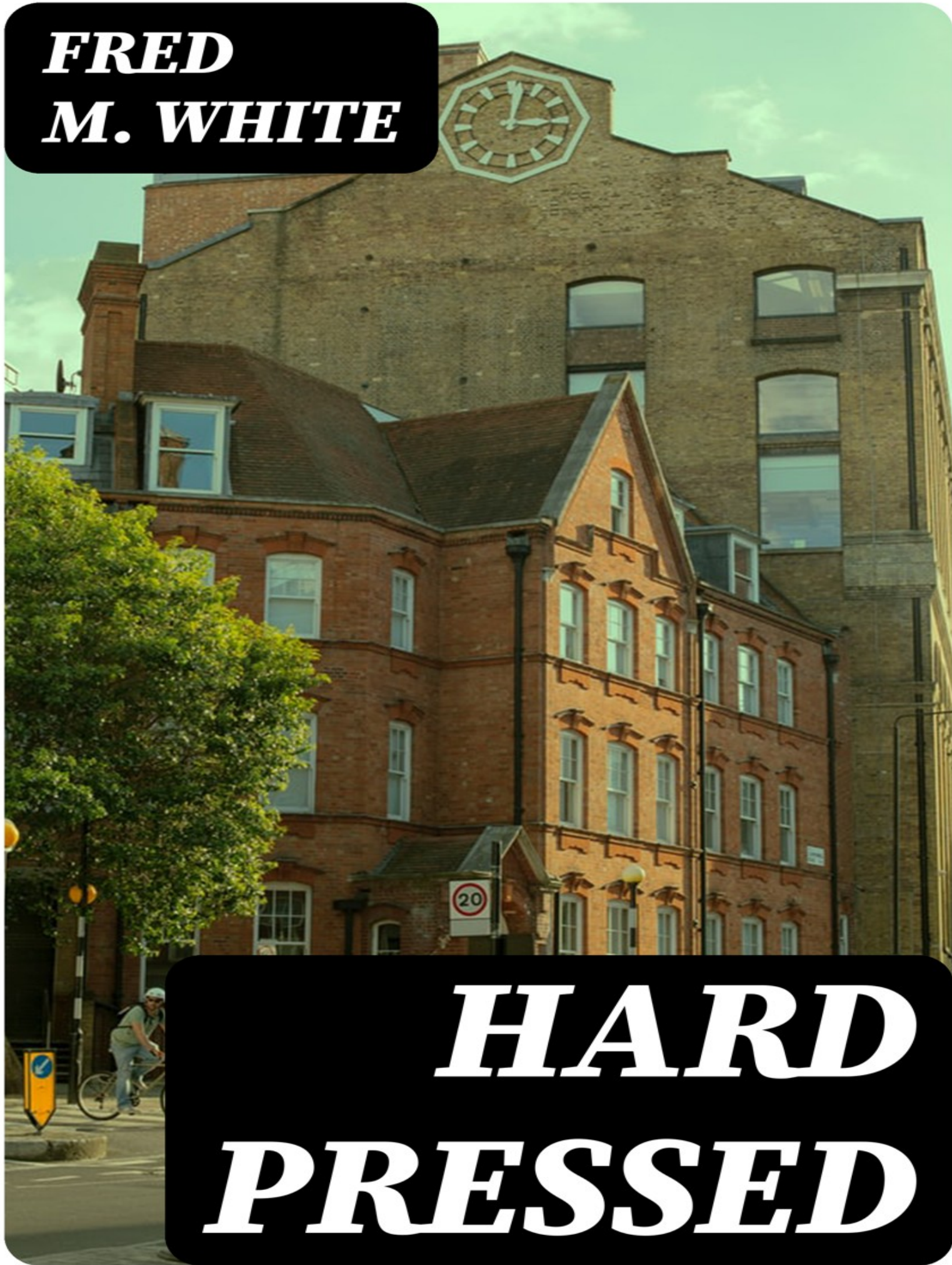


***FRED
M. WHITE***



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Fred M. White

Hard Pressed

EAN 8596547223504

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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CHAPTER I

A MODERN SPORTSMAN

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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

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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 tomorrow, 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

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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

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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."