

My Rival's Finger-Ring

"Then you positively refuse to stand up against me? The match is void?"

"Exactly, I'll pay the forfeit," I replied, after a moment's pause of hesitation. Conscious of staring, incredulous eyes, I was not going to allow anyone to grasp how keen was the mental struggle. Hardest of all to bear was the broadening sneer of Jago Ponson, this swaggering wrestler from Southern America, who had haunted my public performances and been so eager to make a match for three bouts, choice of styles to be mine.

"Very curious! Then these representatives of the public are to understand that, after accepting my challenge, you think it wisest to withdraw? You will not wrestle with me under any terms whatever? Rather a pity you did not save these gentlemen the trouble of advertising their purse of £500. Not precisely a sum to be snapped up every day—except by men in the first flight; and I understand you are comparatively fresh from the Dales, while I am—what you call over here an unknown quantity. Well, gentlemen, all is over!" The huge, sneering, swarthy fellow turned with a theatrical wave of his beringed hand. "Mr. Jim Lockyer prefers to elbow me out of his sensational rush to the world's championship!"

"Quite right; for once I take a pleasure in breaking my word," I said it between set teeth, threw down the pen finally, and was upon my feet.

A moment of stupefied silence, broken by the rather icy voice of the chief sporting editor, in whose sanctum we faced each other.

"H'm! Mr. Lockyer is fully entitled to his decision, even though expressed in a manner scarcely complimentary to the newspaper and proprietors I represent. There is a mystery, but not one for us to probe. At the same time the public is exceptionally interested, and some explanation of the fiasco will assuredly be expected. Shall we be believed if we say that Mr. Jim Lockyer, notoriously modest as capable, hardly realizes his market value, and is distrusting his own powers in the present case?"

Ordinarily cool, I felt my neck flame as Jago Ponson's deep-throated laugh followed that sarcastic pause. The truth of it, the inner meaning of my dramatic refusal that day, surged up, and then on the wall opposite seemed to flash two vivid pictures: the poster that was to announce my match with the giant from Southern America, and that had seemed likely to crown my fame, and beside it the pale, imploring face of a woman—Kitty's face. No! I would keep my silence. I could not expect them, as men of the world, to credit a single syllable.

I pointed to Jago Ponson. My voice sounded thick and unreal. "I shall contradict nothing that this man chooses to say outside. I have a reason, but not one for the public ear. Some other day—not far distant, perhaps—I may take up his challenge."

A minute later I had stepped from the handsome building. Five hundred pounds and a side stake—thrown away! Was I mad? I could throw him, I had felt sure from the first, despite the vague talk of his toadying supporters. I had disliked the man instinctively, especially as he avoided coming to direct grips with other performers of proved ability anxious to test him; but I wanted money. I wanted Kitty! No one knew, not even her father, who watched so jealously to prevent his daughter losing her heart to any man not approved by himself; but I meant to marry Kitty.

I was mad—yes! In the rush and roar of the street I paused. I heard the echo of Jago Ponson's laugh still; the crowd seemed to stare with contemptuous curiosity. Go back and sign the contract—yes! Crush him, and lay the cheque for £500 at Kitty's feet! And then I felt my fingers close upon that slip of paper in my pocket. With a thrill I strode away, only to pause again in the first quiet doorway and realize again the strange words Kitty had penned. Just in time they had reached me.

"Jim, darling, if you love me, do not—"

A big shadow fell past me. I swerved, to meet the sinister eyes of Jago Ponson. Had he followed me to drive home his taunts with a purpose? His swarthy face leered close. "Something good there? Ha, ha! So we are to meet again—even if not on the boards to a crowded house!" "We may yet, if your claims are not proved spurious in the meantime. Good-day!"

I went to stride on. Next instant, if that crushing grip on my shoulder went for anything, I realized at least that the man possessed brute strength of a rare order. His hot breath was puffed in my face.

"You're a cur! a coward! The news shall stir up more excitement than the match would have done—trust me!"

My arm had swung up, but he was

strolling away, people pausing to glance back at his breadth of limb. Pook! The fellow was typical of a bullying, blustering class, that would soon be discredited by the wrestling fraternity. What was it that old Mathieson, Kitty's father, had seen in the man to tolerate and even appreciate? It seemed only a few months since I had seen Mr. Mathieson, an old athlete himself, introduced to this loud-voiced exponent; and on the spot I had somehow doubted the bone-fides—

Kitty's mysterious note! What could it mean?

"Jim, darling, if you love me, do not sign to wrestle with Jago Ponson. I dare not say more, even if I could. Let the match go, I entreat you. If you hesitate, think of the woman who loves you for yourself, and not for fame or money—Kitty." I crunched for the scrap of paper. I would know at once. She would be crossing the park on a daily errand just about dusk—the only time I could be sure of seeing her without fear of discovery. In less than an hour I was there, watching breathlessly every figure on the gravel paths. There she came at last, her face pale and troubled. And now I had drawn her back into the shadows of some trees and gripped her little hands, and was searching the startled brown eyes.

"Don't ask me," she whispered at once. "I could not tell you why I wrote that. Some day you will understand. To-day you must trust a woman's instinct. Thank Heaven, you have done so!"

"But—but why bar the man I fear least of any I ever met? What can you possibly know of him? Foreign reports of triumphs are nothing. You can only have heard your father or myself refer to him casually as an uncracked nut. Surely I may know?"

"Trust me," she repeated, strangely quiet. "Don't match yourself against that man, whatever happens. Promise!" And a sudden determined impulse took me.

"I'll promise," I said, "if you will break through your fear of a stern refusal and let me ask your father's consent to our being married. Why not? You loathe this secrecy; why should he object, if I can support you honorably? Why should I not speak out, Kitty?"

"You don't know him as—as I do," she whispered. "He would step between us instantly. He—he—"

It trailed off. It was one more bit of misery, maddening to a man who wished to prove himself worthy of her.

"Nonsense!" I laughed. "How can we judge him if he does not dream of the truth yet? I say yes—I'll go straight back to you, and speak to him as a man. Then we shall know how to act. I have a perfect right to ask; I claim it—now!"

She was awed, silenced. It was just dark as we reached the house, and my own heart was beating heavily at the thought that to-night might decide all. A light had just blazed out in the upper sitting-room. Kitty's hand shook upon mine.

"He has come home. The servant is out, but I can let you in, if—if you must. Go straight up the stairs and knock at the door facing you. No; I will wait out here. Think twice, Jim, before you say a word that cannot be recalled!"

Just the touch of her lips on my cheek, and then the key had turned. I went up the stairs without a moment's pause, merely noting vaguely that the appointments were nothing but the strangest meagre and shabby. And then of a sudden I stood stone-still. Mr. Mathieson was not alone in that room. A hum of voices came through; and one—could I be dreaming it?—was the slow, significant voice of the man I had faced but two hours ago. It was Jago Ponson, the seventeen-stone wrestler, who claimed to have thrown nine-tenths of the Western Hemispheric picked men. Here!

"And so there it stands," came his deep sneer. "I'm still hoping to get the match on, by pricking his pride in public. I'm a man of my word—and you're a man buried in debts. I've no ready-money here, as I told you, although I have property on the other side that will make your girl a rich woman some day. That stake of £500—and more, if possible—I hand over to you if I can marry your girl. And I'm square, but deadly when balked."

"She wouldn't listen, quiet and lovable as you see her," came old Mathieson's dull, hopeless voice—the voice of the tempted man. "I owe far more than that, but she wouldn't—"

"She would! I liked her at sight, and she knows it; only your influence is wanted. I imagine it's a fair and good business offer. Why, your little financial crash means her misery into the bargain. Doesn't want much reflection!"

"But why must it be with Jim Lockyer? There are scores of wrestlers—"

The deep, sneering laugh broke in. "Quite so. That's another little affair altogether. I could get 'on' with plenty, but that was the only good purse going just now that suited me. You see, the critics fancy him, and defeat would be rather a good lead-off for Jago Ponson. Why? This Lockyer's a coming man, don't forget, and there'll be a startling 'gate.' Something more, if you care to hear it. You've been blind; my eyes peeled almost the moment I landed here and saw your girl. He's after her. Exactly—this same Lock-

yer. For that and other reasons he's the man I want to bring down. He meets her in secret. Suppose he ran off with her? That means another blow for you, doesn't it? I don't do things like that, I'm square!"

A spell of eloquent silence. Craning there, I could picture old Mathieson staring into the swarthy face, hesitating to ally himself and his daughter to a man whose scheme seemed unfathomable, and then came his husky voice:—

"You're sure of what you say? I suspected it. Five hundred for my promise, you say? But—but how if you lost the match? What possible guarantee—"

"I shall not lose," were the last strange, slow words I caught. "You won't understand; you needn't try; leave it to me. I shall win the first two falls. Put every farthing you can raise upon Jago Ponson for that match!"

And then I was creeping back down the stairs, perfectly cool and calm now. Kitty stood out there, watching the lighted window. I spoke just the few quiet words.

"I have not seen him, dearest. Say nothing; be surprised at nothing. Trust me, as I was willing to trust you!"

An hour later I had sent two telegrams, one to the office of the "Sporting Tribune" and another to Jago Ponson at his club, challenging him to meet me at the office, with a view to business only.

He came. Satisfied that he was serenely delighted, I said nothing except that reflection and a glance at the evening papers had changed my mind. When Ponson carelessly inquired if I had chose to back my chance for a private stake of £200 a side, I appeared to hesitate uneasily, and then closed with the suggestion in a seeming spasm of bravado. Next morning all the newspapers announced that, after preliminary hitches, Jim Lockyer from the Dales had been formally matched against Jago Ponson for the best of a three-bout contest under Cumberland rules.

What the public did not know was that it was to be a wrestle for a wife!

A fortnight to go. The days passed in seeming quiet, but the struggle was already in progress secretly. Day and night my rooms were watched and my movements tracked, but I was forewarned and gave no chance. What it all meant, the inner truth of the scheme, did not reveal itself until the night before the contest.

I was alone, when there came a ring at the bell. Ponson himself, with his seconds, came to confer upon some trivial point. Balked so far, had he hoped, as a last resource, to introduce some drug into my food? I watched narrowly. No, go. I saw the giant's sinister face go yellow. He had gripped my hand and held it for a moment. A strange thrill of prescience ran through me as I felt that tiny prick as of a needle-point. By a mighty effort I kept my countenance, and the door closed upon them. I stared at my hand, but could see nothing. Yet I was certain. There was a doctor living close by. I sprang out—just in time.

A swift examination through a magnifying-glass, and then his lancet had cut from the flesh one microscopic drop of a subtle Chilian poison, the effect of which would have been to deaden my volition for a space of at least forty-eight hours. I was saved by a margin of seconds. The tiny needle-point in Ponson's ring had done it. Coincidentally, too, next morning's papers stated that the odds against my winning were lengthening inexplicably, and that Ponson's party were wagering immense sums upon their man. I could afford to smile; my own seconds were quietly absorbing those same odds on my behalf. Yes! I kissed Kitty's pale lips that night with a supreme conviction that our love need not be kept a secret much longer!

No need to describe in detail all the excitement concentrated that night of nights into the space of a few minutes. Almost everyone knows what happened and how fatefully certain it seemed to the vast audience that I had met my Waterloo in Ponson, "The Western Terror." Had not the rumors of my breakdown been circulating all that day? Did not Ponson, as he strode on to the carpet, look the incarnation of contemptuous triumph, while it was marked that my appearance went to justify the rumors that I feared the result?

Yes, up to the very crucial moment. And then—what a transformation electrified the audience! As the whistle thrilled out and we shook hands, I looked once into Jago Ponson's face. He was smiling. Then, in the utter silence, he played almost carelessly for the neck-lock—played as a cat might do with a mouse. He had got it already; a twist of his huge trunk and I was down. He half paused, turning with a smile as that gasp went up from the crowd. And then—then, in a flash of time, as the papers said, the tables were turned. I was on my feet as by a miracle, and had my opponent's vast bulk swaying sideways across my hip. He struggled desperately, horribly, seeming to realize his mistake; the merest instant would do it.

I thought of Kitty—of the fellow's vile machinations to win her by tempting her father; I thought of the prize at stake. And then, with an effort that I could never equal

again, I had swung him high in space and dashed him down to the mat. He fell face uppermost with a crash. Both shoulders had touched and were pinned down; but that did not signify. He lay quite still, white, dazed, incredulous. When at length the whistle sounded his seconds were seen to be whispering wildly. A minute more, and it was announced that Jago Ponson refused to contest the remaining bouts—and Jim Lockyer had won. The mad shout that went up—may I never forget it!

But what was all that to the moment when my dream was realized and I stood face to face with Kitty's father, and placed in his trembling hands the cheque—most concrete proof that my love for his daughter was equal to a sacrifice? He stared stammered; he could not believe; but a few words and a silent hand-grip showed him how near he had been to giving up his girl to a scoundrel in veneer.

Yes, we were doubly happy that night. For it was like the real dawn of our love after long darkness.

And so I wrestled for my wife. And so I won her!—London Tit-Bits.

EVICTED BY A GHOST.

Liverpool Excited Over Manifestations in a Haunted House.

Not being able to support its terrestrial fame, a modest ghost, whose weird pranks have created a sensation in the neighborhood of Islington, Liverpool, England, has mysteriously vanished.

The "spook" evidently made its arrival a few days after four girls, three of whom are named Moran, left their mother's house and took up their residence at 99 Field street, off Carver street, Islington, about five weeks ago. The house is situated in the middle of a row of tall three-story dwellings, each of which is only one room deep except on the ground floor, where there is a back scullery. Winding stairs lead from one floor to another.

The maidenly quartette left their habitation each morning at six o'clock to go to work in the neighborhood, returning to dinner and to tea. Two days after taking the house they were greatly perplexed on returning home at mid-day to find a large mirror, which had been left on the face downwards on the kitchen wall in one of the bedrooms, lying on the floor. It was replaced, but at noon next day the girls trembled to see the looking-glass again hiding its face on the hearthrug.

Then other familiar objects in the house became possessed with evil spirits. When the door was opened some unseen influence closed it, sometimes slowly, sometimes with an elastic-like spring, frightening the girls terribly.

The ghost began to manifest itself in nocturnal visitations. Dreadful rumblings kept the girls awake through the long dismal night. At such times shadows flitted over the ceilings, and the girls hid their white faces under the blankets.

Two of the girls were sitting reading just over a week ago when the apparition presented itself to one of them. The next door neighbor, a working man, declares that not a pedestrian was within a hundred yards of the house, but the girls sprang out of the doorway with alarmed faces, shrieking "The ghost!"

One of the girls swore that the phantom had passed in front of her; another states that she was scrubbing the stairs when a flat iron sans handle, which was last placed in the kitchen fire-grate, came tumbling inexplicably down upon her from above. It was followed by the shuffling of feet.

At last the terrorized quartette removed their goods and chattels at midnight, and went to live with a relative. Thousands of people went nightly to see the haunted house, and stones were hurled through the windows, but it was not even then believed that the ghost had been laid.

At last a wager was made by a man named Hugh Morgan that he would enter the place and tackle the hobgoblin. By this time the agents, Messrs. Sykes, of Brunswick road, had boarded up the front windows, but Morgan went behind and forced an entrance by smashing another pane. His investigations were not complete when a policeman appeared on the scene and arrested him. He is still in gaol.

The scare has not yet subsided, and many visitors go nightly to inspect the house.

HELPED BY NATURE.

It was in the far West. "How's times?" asked the tourist. "Pretty tolerable, stranger," responded the old man, who was sitting on a stump. "I had some trees cut down, but the cyclone levelled them and saved me the trouble."

"That was good."

"Yes, and then the lightning set fire to the brush pile and saved me the trouble of burning it."

"Remarkable! But what are you doing now?"

"Waiting for an earthquake to come along and shake the potatoes out of the ground."

She—"A clock is different from a man." He—"In what respect?" She—"When it strikes it keeps on working."

PEOPLE WALK ON GOLD

SUN-PARCHED DESERT BASIN IN CALIFORNIA.

The Most Valuable Low-grade Gold "Mine" Known to Geologists.

Leave the Southern Pacific Railway at Yuma—a road in Arizona—follow the wagon-town sixty miles north, and you will at last emerge from mountain passes into a great natural basin in Southern California. This is the Picacho Basin—the only place in the world where people literally walk on gold.

For here, exposed on the sands, in quantities incalculable, is the greatest thing on earth, bar health and love. Here Mother Earth is spotted on the surface with that metal of yellow glint for which nations war, for which men fight as if for life.

On the sands of this dreary, sun-parched desert-basin is the gleaming goal of Gain—gold, all gold, under foot wherever you step, in a mountain-rimmed place six miles in circumference. Here, indeed, is the largest and most valuable low-grade gold "mine" known to geologists.

But as the gold is right on the surface, why does not someone go there and pick it up? Because, first of all, the owner of that basin is the only person who has a right to pick it up; second, because, after one has picked up some ten tons or so of sand, he has picked up with it only about four cents worth of gold. And to separate that four cents worth of gold from the ten tons of sand costs

MORE THAN FOUR CENTS.

Hence the gold is safe from the "pickings" of the stray "miner." Any thief is welcome to all the gold he can steal in that El Dorado. After such a robber had picked up ten tons of sand, having brought ten carts for the purpose, he would have to haul the leads a distance of sixty miles to the nearest ore-mill, in order to get the gold—all for the sake, as has been said, of four cents. Meantime, any one of his ten carts hitched to his ten carts would have eaten, in a single meal, more than four cents worth of hay or oats.

Still the gold is there, dotting the surface with millions of glinting specks, all as plain to the eye as the millions of dancing points of sunlight on the surface of the sea on a calm day. Who treads there treads upon wealth with every step, exasperated by the thought of gold, gold everywhere, and not a farthing available.

The most extraordinary fact about this gold "mine" is that it is owned by one man—a Californian named King. He has attempted to "mine" his gold on a small scale by every known mining method; but each experiment cost a sum of money greatly in excess of the value of the amount of gold obtained. In the least costly of his trials he secured twelve cents worth of gold

FOR EVERY \$5 EXPENDED.

All Mr. King's hopes now lie with a scientist in Washington, who is developing a wonderful "mining pipe," through which sand is poured, the pipe itself being lined with a chemical preparation which attracts every particle of gold contained in the sand. Thus, as the sand drops rapidly through the pipe in a thin sheet, the golden particles fly out from the sand and adhere to the lining of the pipe, attracted thereto just as particles of steel would be attracted if the sand contained steel instead of gold, and if the pipe had a magnetized lining.

A further remarkable fact about this place, is that Mr. King obstinately and persistently refuses to sell his claim. Millionaire mining-men and still richer syndicates have offered him fabulous sums for his basin of gold. But, being a rich man himself, Mr. King feels that he can afford to decline, as he has, even the most alluring offers to purchase. He says: "Some day I will myself find a way to win that gold. Or, if I fail, my son will continue the experiments—until some member of my family will finally awake to find himself the richest man on earth."

EMPEROR'S SAUSAGE MAKER.

Feeding the German Emperor is no light task. Despite all that is said about the Kaiser's Spartan habits, there are few monarchs who keep more elaborate tables.

He has no less than four chefs—Schliedenstucker, a German; Harding, an Englishman; an Italian and a Frenchman—so that he can have his meals for the day served in the style of whatever nation he may happen to fancy.

Each of these chefs has his staff of a sistant; while, in addition, there is an individual who may safely be described as "sausage maker to the Kaiser."

His Majesty is very fond of the huge white frankfurter sausage, and has a supply of them made fresh every day in his own kitchen. When engaged in manoeuvring his army on a big field day these frankfurters and bread washed down with lager beer invariably form the Kaiser's lunch.

In addition to all these cooks there is a special staff to prepare meals for the younger of the princes and the princesses, who are not allowed to partake of the rich dishes the elder members of the family indulge in.